

'In my opinion....':

is a regular feature in *PsittaScene*. Here we include submissions on whatever pertinent issues you would like to see discussed. What issues do you think our members would be interested in? Contact us at uk@worldparrottrust.org with suggestions or submissions.

Is captive breeding for the pet trade really 'responsible aviculture'?

By GINA KORNBLITH, WPT member, The Netherlands

My submission for "In my opinion" resulted from a debate on the WPT email list on keeping parrots as pets. It is MY opinion and takes other views in account only to the extent that they have influenced my thinking; I do not claim to represent any one's ideas but my own.

The WPT is opposed to the trade in wild-caught birds and is working to end it. However, parrots continue to be bred in captivity, mainly for the pet trade. I believe that we are failing to promote responsible aviculture if we do not question the consequences of this practice. The following reasons help to explain my view:

1 Parrots have become all the rage as pets and can be bought as merchandise by anyone with the money and a whim to have one. This casual demand has led to "factory production," reports of euthanasia of unwanted birds (www.parrots4ever.org), and overflowing parrot refuges and adoption services.

There is a glut of parrots on the market, lowering prices and making them disposable consumption items. Parrots are "big business" and people lose sight of the fact that each individual parrot is a sentient living being with a right to quality of life.

2 Wild-caught parrots have been kept in captivity at least since ancient

Greek and Roman times. In recent years more and more species are being bred in captivity but, with a few exceptions, no one would say that they have become "domesticated." Parrot-like birds appeared at least 35 million years ago, thus they have an infinitely longer history of evolving to survive in the wild than in captivity. Even second, third and later generation captive-bred birds are still "wild" in the sense that they have not adapted to being kept in captivity. In a letter to the Avian Welfare Coalition (www.avianwelfare.org), veterinarian Todd Wolf wrote, "These are wild animals and many of them adapt very poorly to life in captivity. This misadaptation manifests as a

huge array of behavioural problems." We may comfort ourselves with the thought that a parrot in a cage with food provided for him so he doesn't have to go looking for it and who has no need to be ever on the alert for predators is grateful for these boons, but until a parrot can tell us how he experiences this from HIS standpoint, we cannot attribute our feelings to him. Many parrots in captivity find the stress of boredom intolerable and they resort to maladaptive behaviours to 'cope' with such alien conditions. Hence we commonly see self-plucking and other serious behavioural 'problems' in companion parrots. Parrots have evolved to cope

with the stresses they encounter in the wild, but many do not have the ability to cope with the stresses of captivity. We do know that birds instinctively hide signs of sickness or disability as long as possible. In the wild this is adaptive because a bird that looks sick or disabled is more vulnerable to a potential predator. This may also be a factor in captivity - birds who don't appear stressed, may be so. In research with penguins in the wild a heart monitor in an artificial egg was placed in the penguin nest. When the researchers approached the nest, the bird's heart rates increased before any visible signs of distress were apparent.

3 Dolphins, the great apes, and the crow and parrot families are the animal groups whose intelligence, as far as we know, most approaches human intelligence. Of all these groups, only parrots are kept in large numbers in captivity, often in conditions which cause them terrible physical and psychological damage.

4 The combination of their high intelligence and their behavioural needs as wild birds make parrots very difficult, if not impossible, to maintain in captivity in conditions that are physically and mentally healthy for them. As a very minimum, the following must be taken into consideration:

- Mental requirements: parrot intelligence



- Physical requirements: flight, chewing, foraging, varied diet, humidity
 - Social requirements: a flock, a partner
 - Medical requirements: diseases due to improper breeding, housing, feeding
 - Longevity - usually outlive their owners
- 5 Ignorance of parrot requirements, and/or the inability or unwillingness to try to meet them means that the vast majority of pet parrots are kept in substandard to deplorable conditions. Even the wealthiest most benevolent owner can only go so far towards creating a safe, stimulating, varied environment that even modestly begins to approximate the parrots' natural habitat. And how many wealthy benevolent caring owners are there? Most parrots end up in a cage with an inadequate diet, with insufficient exercise and little or no social interaction. In short, an abbreviated life. They are capable of, and have a right to, so much more.
- 6 Because it is so easy to acquire a parrot without having the knowledge of their special needs, the birds will almost invariably experience many problems. And when problems begin, the bird is either dumped at a refuge or passed from one owner to another, sometimes numerous times throughout its life. Common problems for the owners include noise, mess, destruction of furniture and aggressive behaviour. Problems for the parrot include plucking, self-mutilation and stereotypic behaviours. Parrot refuges already have to turn away parrots every day because they cannot keep up with the numbers coming in. Many of the birds arrive in deplorable physical and/or mental condition and need expensive and extensive professional veterinary and behavioural care before they can be rehomed (www.fosterparrots.com). Too many parrots are bought "on impulse" and when the buyers find out what they have gotten themselves into, the bird is dumped or re-enters the market. The prevalence of professional parrot behaviourists and books and articles dealing with these issues shows how widespread such problems are. The existence of some "parrot behaviour consultants" who still use out-dated cruel methods is an indication of woeful ignorance, and/or the desire for a "quick-fix". The appearance of these problems to one degree or another in the majority of parrots kept as house pets is a clear sign of the birds' abilities to cope with captive conditions.
- 7 As with most markets, that for parrots is money driven, and when "market research" shows that there is a bigger premium for "cuddly hand-reared baby

parrots," there is an increase in the "production" of such birds. Research has shown, however, that it is just these babies who grow up to be adults with the most problems. They seem not to know whether they are bird or human, or something in between. Their socialization and coping skills are sadly wanting, leading to screaming, plucking, biting and self-mutilation (Low, Rosemary. The importance of parent reared parrots. *PsittaScene Vol 13 No 1, Feb 2001 12-13.*). Furthermore, research by avian vet Harcourt-Brown indicates that in the nest with their parents, chicks are tightly packed together and are largely immobile. Removing them from the nest for hand-rearing results in mobility that contributes to structural defects in their bones.

- 8 As long as there are parrots in adoption services and refuges that need homes, it seems at the very least superfluous to have more parrots being bred for a market which is already over-supplied. Education about parrot keeping is needed to reduce the number of parrots going to inappropriate homes. We also need publicity about adoption possibilities in

order to provide good homes for homeless parrots.

The relationship between people and animals has been changing for as long as there has been human/animal interaction. As someone dedicated to bird welfare, I feel it is time that we take a serious look at our relationships with parrots and how we use them at present. Breeding parrots may be rewarding for those individuals who do this, but parrots do not exist to please us. Rather, the onus should be on us to address issues of welfare more honestly and openly, even if this requires a radical change in thinking and acting. Perhaps the only responsible aviculturists are those dedicated to the rescue and rehabilitation of "unwanted" birds. We should be supporting these people far more than we do at present.

Author's note: I would like to thank the members of the WPT on-line forum whose well-thought out contributions to a lively discussion on this topic helped to modify and clarify my ideas on this subject. And special thanks to all those who are out there working now for the welfare of present and future parrots.



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