

# Birds perish as ownership row rages

Department accused of trying to prevent release of parrots

SHEREE BEGA

**A** PARROT conservation group says the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) could have "blood on its hands" for stalling a pioneering project that would return a company of wild-caught African Grey parrots, smuggled into South Africa, to their natural forest habitat.

Dr Steve Boyes, the director of the World Parrot Trust Africa, said officials in the department are "roadblocking" an export permit issued by the Gauteng provincial authorities to send the birds – in quarantine in Kempton Park – to a suitable release facility in Uganda, Rwanda or Tanzania where they will ultimately be released into the wild.

"In my mind, it's a threat to the welfare of the birds," Boyes explained. "It will mean a delay of another month or six weeks and we can't even afford two weeks more. The birds need to get on a flight out of South Africa and into an aviary where they can see sunlight, which they haven't for the past three months.

"They need to build their muscle tone and warm their bones and feel like they're in their natural environment again. Being in a concrete prison is not acceptable."

The drama centres on an original consignment of 161 African Greys, that a military patrol on the Mpumalanga border found stuffed inside three tiny crates in April. A group of

Mozambicans, travelling on foot, had tried to smuggle the birds into South Africa.

The birds were taken to the quarantine station in Kempton Park. Willem Grobler, a Limpopo-based parrot breeder, claimed they were his but couldn't prove ownership.

Boyes said: "Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) regulations are very clear about the fact that all confiscated wildlife becomes the property of the country into which they are being smuggled."

In early May, according to Boyes, Dr Lisa Montgomery, a state veterinarian at the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

(Daff), asked the World Parrot Trust Africa to take over "ownership" of the African Greys, explaining they would probably be euthanised if they could not be released into the wild.

"She requested we support all costs of feeding, disease testing, veterinary care, and quarantine, as well as make arrangements to have the parrots released back into a suitable release site. To save these parrots, we accepted, raised the necessary funds, and have been caring for them since," said Boyes, who revealed the trust had spent over R40 000 so far.

The trust had approached the governments of Congo-Brazzaville, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda – all countries where African Greys have gone extinct or locally extinct. "They are keen to have this iconic species, and it is important for



STRESSED OUT: African Grey parrots smuggled into South Africa need to be released into their natural habitat.

PICTURE: REUTERS

their economy. By last week, we had managed to secure three potential release sites and were gearing up for the release."

BidAir Cargo and 1time have agreed to support the costs of transporting the parrots in six large travel crates to the release country.

But Grobler is now ready to take the issue to court and his attorneys have written to Daff and the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Board (MTPA).

"They are mine, that's for sure, but I hope we can get finished and klaar with this," was all he would say yesterday.

Albi Modise, a spokesman

for the DEA, said it cannot issue a Cites export permit without the parrots being officially forfeited to the state by a magistrate or judge and only if the birds were obtained legally.

"Mr Grobler's legal representative approached MTPA claiming that Mr Grobler legally imported the birds into Mozambique and that the birds were stolen in Mozambique after import. It seems that Mr Grobler now wishes to take ownership of the birds.

"The case will most probably be brought before a court to make a decision on the fate of the birds..." Modise said.

But Boyes says the parrots, originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are "clearly the product of a smuggling operation. There is nothing that links the birds to the trader, beyond the boxes they were carried in".

He claimed that Sonja Meintjes, the deputy director of biodiversity enforcement at DEA, was roadblocking the process. "She almost makes it seem as if the trust obtained the parrots illegally. This doesn't make sense – we're not trying to sell them, we're trying to keep them alive and get them back to the wild."

The department noted more birds could die. "Further delays in getting the birds exported might cause more deaths among the group of already stressed birds, but unfortunately the legal aspects of such an export have to be adhered to before the birds can be exported," said Modise, adding that it was a perception that returning confiscated animals to the wild is the ideal solution.

"A growing body of scientific study of reintroduction of captive animals suggests that such actions may be among the least appropriate options for many reasons."

## Union urges Zuma to allay corruption fears

PRESIDENT Jacob Zuma needs to allay fears the country is fast becoming a "corruption-ridden banana republic", trade union federation Cosatu said yesterday.

"Allegations of corruption and the misuse of public funds are piling up," Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) spokesman Patrick Craven said in a statement yesterday.

"While we welcome the probes being made by (the cabinet) ministers like Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan and Human Settlements Minister Tokyo Sexwale, the president needs to allay fears that... we are sinking into a corruption-ridden banana republic," Craven said.

Cosatu welcomed Public Protector Thuli Madonsela's recommendations for Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa to discipline national police chief Bheki Cele for his role in securing two building leases.

It also welcomed Madonsela's recommendation for Zuma to take action against

Public Works Minister Gwen Mahlangu-Nkabinde for failing to co-operate with the investigation into the two building leases, as well as her role in ensuring the leases were signed off.

Cosatu wanted to know why ministers accused of serious offences did not follow their consciences and resign while the charges were investigated, rather than wait until they were dismissed.

Craven said Cosatu had previously called on Zuma to either assure the country that reports of gross misuse of public funds by Co-operative Governance Minister Sicelo Shiceka were untrue, or dismiss him.

He said the union federation was still awaiting a response from Zuma on how State Security Minister Siyabonga Cwele was unaware that his wife Sheryl was involved in drug smuggling.

"We hope that he will now swiftly respond to these questions and to the Public Protector's reports on the SAPS deals," Craven said. – Sapa

## Love letter arrives 53 years late

PITTSBURGH: A love letter written to a US college student in the state of Pennsylvania and proclaiming "love forever" finally arrived at its destination – 53 years late.

But the tender note penned in 1958 still waits in the mailroom at the California University of Pennsylvania as officials search for its intended recipient, Clark Moore, who is now about 70 years old and living in another state, said university spokeswoman Christine Kindl.

The letter, sent from Pittsburgh and postmarked February 20, 1958, arrived in the mailroom last week. The letter had been addressed to Mr Clark C

Moore, then a junior at the university, which was known at the time as California State Teachers College, Kindl said.

It included a return address, but little other information about the sender, who signed it: "Love Forever, Vonnie."

"It's very much the same type of letter students today might write to a boyfriend who's away at college. She ends by saying: 'I still miss you as much as ever and love you a thousand times more. Please write me real soon'."

The university hopes to deliver the letter to Moore and has received a few tips on his possible whereabouts, Kindl said. – Reuters