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Indignant Australian cockatoo is subjected to blood test for parrot fever.

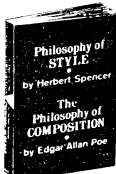
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CONSERVATION

Amazon parrot raid

A craze for pet parrots in the United States is threatening jungle economy and ecology

by Christopher Weathersbee

The commercial import of parrots for many years was forbidden by the Public Health Service. Those psittacine birds sold in pet shops in the U.S. either were those able to breed in captivity, such a budgerigars, or were those few smuggled out of their native lands and past U.S. Customs.

The reason for the ban was parrot fever, psittacosis, a highly communicable disease that spreads as easily to man as it does among birds and which often is fatal to both. Psittacine birds are the favored host of the disease, yet pigeons can carry it. One infected bird could pass the disease on to flock after flock of pigeons and chickens and lead to an epidemic.

It has been found that some 90 species of birds can carry psittacosis, including turkeys, pigeons, ducks, chickens, pheasants, finches and other fowl. A bird with psittacosis may die, but also may show only slight illness, ruffled feathers and lethargy. The same range of disease occurs in humans, who may exhibit what looks like a case of influenza or who may die from pneu-

monic disease characterized by high fever, headache and cough.

Thus it was imperative that the disease organism be kept out of the country. Since an apparently healthy bird can be a carrier, a total ban was necessary. Only personal pets could come in after exhaustive tests and quarantine.

The ban has been lifted. In September 1967 the Department of Health, Education and Welfare announced that as a result of the development of a special treatment for captured wild birds, such treated birds would be allowed in. The treatment involves isolating the parrots in centers outside the United States, feeding them antibiotic-laden feed for 45 days, then observing them for another 45 days for signs of disease.

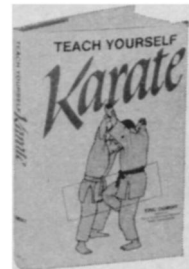
As soon as the ban was lifted a stream of South American birds began moving into this country. Now pet shops are selling the novelty as fast as they can get them in, even though prices range up to \$50 and average between \$20 and \$30 apiece. A buyer for F. W. Woolworth, a chain which

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Amazonian macaws bring top prices.

does a significant portion of the nation's pet selling, says demand is fantastic and the birds can't be captured fast enough to satisfy it.

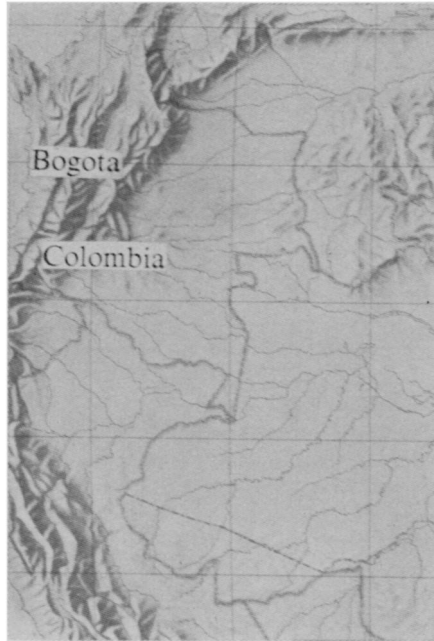
Apparently they are being captured fast enough, however, to threaten the stability of the Amazonian ecology and the economy of the Indians who do the capturing.

Until recently there were only three centers in the world equipped to hold parrots long enough to feed them the special diet and observe them. Two are in Edinburgh, Scotland, and one is in Bogotá, Colombia. The latter is operated by Hartz Mountain Products, Inc., a major U.S. dealer in pet food and supplies. Recently HEW has approved several more treatment centers.

The South American parrots are collected in the forest by Indians, who bring them to the nearest riverbank. There they are purchased for a few cents by buyers who cruise up and down the river until they have a boatload. The survivors of the boatload are sold to the Bogotá center or abroad.

One of the things that has conservationists upset about the parrot trade is that there may be very few such survivors. It has been estimated that for every live bird sold in an American pet shop, 50 have died. Many are killed during collection, either by rough handling or in order to reach the coveted young. Many more die in cages waiting for the buyer at the river, and the toll continues after the entrepreneur has acquired his charges.

Thus to satisfy a demand for 10,000 pet parrots (in the neighborhood of the number imported in the past year) as many as half a million birds may have been destroyed. Quite apart from



Colombian jungles supply parrots.

the aesthetics of such waste, removal of this many of a particular living organism from its environment can upset the balance of nature drastically.

Unfortunately, whether it will or not in the case of Amazonian parrots cannot be judged. There have been few ecological studies of the area, and none complete enough to tell how the various species of parrots fit into the total picture.

Conservationists admit they are reacting emotionally to the sudden surge of parrot imports. But they point out that in the past suspicion of the impact of a mass market on wild animals has been well-founded.

Ostriches were almost exterminated when their plumes were fashionable, as were snowy egrets. The continuing market for exotic furs, now booming, has reduced many great cats to the status of rarities, incidentally whetting the fur market's appetite even more.

Dr. Maria Buchinger, head of the Latin America desk of the Nature Conservancy, says the parrot trade is only a part of a general assault by American pet buyers on tropical American wildlife. She says the only effective way to dry up this trade is to regulate imports.

Export of many species from many Latin American countries already is illegal, in fact. But the continuing good market in the United States insures that smuggling will be profitable. Most South American governments cannot mount the massive police effort that would be needed to stop the illegal export of animals.

Thus even though caymans—a kind of crocodile—cannot be taken legally from Colombia, thousands are slipped

out. Once in the United States and out from under Colombian jurisdiction, they are sold openly as alligators. Dr. Buchinger says such traffic would end if import and resale of illegally taken animals were stopped, in terms of police work a relatively easy task.

The answer, as is so often the case in situations where an ecology is in need of protection, may not necessarily be a total ban. There are even situations in which judicious thinning of a population may turn out to be beneficial.

But the problem appears to be that the hunters invariably precede the ecologists, and hunting, or some other environmental alteration, becomes depredation before information can be developed to help determine a safe level of population thinning.

What the ecologists seek in the jungles of Colombia is a chance to study the ecology before more than the parrots fall victim to unforeseen side effects of the current fad. These can plague human as well as wildlife populations, and in Colombia this appears already to be the case.

Dr. Buchinger, an Argentinian, says a side effect of the animal trade is the subversion of the backwoods Indians' economy. What happens, she says, is that the buyers will patronize a particular section of the river while the parrots are plentiful there.

For a few months or a couple of years some of the Indians will earn a tiny amount which they nevertheless consider good, easy money. In the meanwhile they will neglect to maintain their farms and other traditional means of living, so marginal as a rule that they can stand little neglect.

Then the birds become scarce from the overhunting and the buyers move on, leaving the Indians with neither crop, cash income, savings nor any long-run benefit from their collecting.

Robert Neeley, a former hunting guide in Colombia who now refuses to take anything but photographic parties, says such disruption of tribal affairs, plus the consciousness that foreigners are hunting out vital native game supplies, has made many Indian chieftains ardent conservationists. There are still enough Indians who fall prey to temptations, however, to keep the animals coming out of the jungle.

Neeley says most of the parrot traffic is in lorikeets, small, fairly common birds. Macaws, the largest and most colorful of the South American parrots, are not traded as much; they are scarcer and reputedly more difficult to handle. However, he says, they bring top prices and are easily available to Indians since they nest in accessible hollow tree stumps.