

### Cambridge Conservation Forum discussion seminar on trade in wild birds

International trade in wild birds, primarily for pets, has attracted attention and criticism from those concerned with wildlife conservation and animal welfare. Such concerns led to the effective closing down of the US market for wild birds in 1992, and the debate has intensified recently with calls for the European Union to act likewise (see <http://www.worldparrottrust.org>). On 4 March 2005 the Cambridge Conservation Forum (<http://www.cambridgeconservationforum.org>) hosted an afternoon discussion seminar on the subject of 'Pets, pathogens, and parrots in peril: should the wild bird trade be banned?' involving UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre, TRAFFIC, the World Parrot Trust, the IUCN Sustainable Use Specialist Group, BirdLife, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee, and Fauna & Flora International. The meeting was chaired by Martin Fisher, Editor of *Oryx*.

In recent years, several million wild birds are thought to have been internationally traded annually, of which *c.* one million were CITES-listed species (and subject therefore to reporting requirements). International trade has been decreasing, and the proportion of birds from 'managed' (primarily captive-bred) sources increasing. Current estimates indicate that the domestic or international cage-bird trade represents a threat to around 10% (117 species) of globally threatened birds (habitat destruction being the major threat), with domestic trade probably larger than international in at least some producer countries. Above a quarter (*c.* 2,600) of the world's bird species have been recorded in international trade, and 1,560 bird species are listed in the CITES Appendices. The majority of reported trade in CITES-listed species has involved seed-eating passerines of the families Fringillidae, Estrildidae and Ploceidae with, in addition, *c.* 180,000 wild-caught CITES-listed parrots (Order Psittaciformes) traded annually.

The EU is the major consumer market for wild birds (over 90% of trade in CITES-listed species), and regulates import through a variety of trade controls that are significantly more restrictive than CITES obligations. For instance, import of any CITES Appendix II-listed species requires an import permit, issued only if the EU's Scientific Review Group is satisfied that trade will not prove detrimental to the wild population. The EU may

suspend trade in a species from a particular country at any point if it has concerns regarding sustainability.

Debate at the seminar revolved around the sustainability of current trade, the effectiveness of existing and proposed trade controls, and the potential for trade to yield incentives for conservation. On one hand, it was argued that little information was available on many traded species, current EU controls were inadequate and unresponsive to available science, a complete import ban would effectively stop illegal and unsustainable trade, and income from traded species to local people was typically minimal relative to alternatives. On the other, it was argued that most trade involved non-threatened species, current case-by-case bans and import quotas protected threatened species, 'blanket' bans were unnecessary and ineffective against illegal trade, and sustainable use of wild birds could and did support local livelihoods and yield incentives for habitat and species conservation. At issue too were questions of North/South equity. Concern was expressed that banning the wild bird trade would shift the economic value of wildlife from the wild-bird exporting South to the captive-breeding North, while others claimed that the current trade exploited southern resources because the majority of profits were made in the North. Non-conservation concerns were not discussed extensively at this meeting, but include concerns for animal welfare and the risk of infectious disease to agriculture and humans. This controversy was not resolved in an afternoon, and is likely to continue through the halls and forums of the EU for some time in the future.

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### Threatened Species Initiative funds conservation projects on behalf of Venezuelan animals and plants

Located at the northern tip of South America, Venezuela is one of the 17 megadiverse countries of the world. Andean, Amazonian and Caribbean plants and animals overlap in 916,000 km<sup>2</sup>, less than 1% of the surface of Earth's terrestrial ecosystems. In contrast to Venezuela's exuberant biodiversity, human and financial resources

for developing and implementing effective conservation strategies are seriously lacking. Established in 2003 by the Venezuelan NGO Provita, in collaboration with Conservation International Venezuela, Fundación Polar, Wildlife Trust, and the British Embassy, the Threatened Species Initiative is a small grants programme focused on research and education projects on behalf of threatened plants and animals, carried out by undergraduate and graduate students, as well as established researchers or institutions. A fundamental motivation behind the Initiative is to provide an incentive to young researchers to devote their energy to conservation. Ultimately, the Initiative expects to supply the building blocks for a new generation of conservation professionals, while generating basic data for improving the status of threatened species.

The Initiative has been growing steadily since its creation 2 years ago. The first 13 grants were given in January 2004, totalling a little over GBP 10,000. In its second year, the Initiative funded 22 projects, reaching over GBP 20,000. In January 2006 the total is expected to be at least GBP 30,000, assisted by a GBP 11,000 grant from the British Embassy in Venezuela.

Although individual grants rarely exceed GBP 1,000, a little money can go a long way. For example, *Atelopus cruciger* (Amphibia: Anura) is a small, yellow and black frog endemic to Venezuela. Extremely abundant in the past, the last known specimens are from the mid 1980s. In 2003 Celsa Señaris of the Museo de Historia Natural La Salle won a grant to assess the status of the species in the wild. She and her team rediscovered the species and are now in the process of preparing a conservation plan for the only known wild population of *A. cruciger*.

Rafael Ortiz (National Centre for Phylogenetic Resources, Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources) and Francisco Herrera (Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas, IVIC) are working on the establishment of *ex situ* populations of five species of threatened trees: two tropical black walnuts (*Juglans venezuelensis* and *Juglans neotropica*), two palms (*Ceroxylon ceriferum* and *Bactris setulosa*) and *Talauma venezuelensis* (Magnoliaceae). Ortiz and Herrera are surveying locations where these species are or were known to inhabit, and are collecting seeds. Seedlings are grown and cared for at the National Centre for Phylogenetic Resources. In addition to establishing groves in protected areas, botanical gardens, and other selected locations, a threatened trees park is to be created at IVIC, open to the public. One of the species involved in this effort, *J. venezuelensis*, was considered extinct until recently rediscovered in El Avila National Park. Several new populations have now been established in the park and elsewhere.

Margarita's blue-headed conure *Aratinga acuticaudata neoxena*, known locally as *ñángaro*, nests exclusively in the mangrove forests of La Restinga National Park, on the island of Margarita. Currently, the population numbers *c.* 100 birds, and is subject to intense poaching pressure to supply the local pet market. Complementing a broad educational project with principal support from the Loro Parque Fundación of the Canary Islands, Spain, María Alejandra Faría (BioInsula Program, Provita), in collaboration with the National Parks Institute and local stakeholders, coordinates an innovative research/surveillance effort carried out by a team of parabiologists. Known as 'biomonitors', the team is composed of past poachers who now guard nests round-the-clock during the breeding season.

Marine ecosystems have also been the object of several projects. One of these, led by Ainhoa L. Zubillaga, a graduate student at Universidad Simón Bolívar, was able to detect high densities of elkhorn coral *Acropora palmata* in Los Roques National Park, located 100 km north of the Venezuelan mainland. This is one of the few sites in the Caribbean where *A. palmata* has recovered from disease epidemics and other factors that threaten coral reefs throughout the region.

As with all capacity building efforts, the Threatened Species Initiative is a long-term endeavour. Awardees have demonstrated that improving knowledge about threatened species may be one of the most effective conservation actions available. Especially in biodiversity-rich countries such as Venezuela, where first hand natural history knowledge is extremely scarce, simply looking for threatened species in the wild reveals that in some cases the situation is not as dire as it originally seemed. Investing in small research projects could both strengthen the contingent of conservation workers and help improve the status of threatened animals and plants.

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### Students brave wildfires to document rare bird nests

Team members of the BP Conservation Programme's Conservation of the Araripe Manakin Project took a defensive stance for conservation recently while trying to document the reproductive cycles and determine the incubation periods of an extremely rare and Critically Endangered bird, the Araripe Manakin *Antilophia*

*bokermannii*. As wildfires raged around them in the Chapada do Araripe region of Brazil, the young researchers refused to leave the area where seven nestlings of this threatened bird were located. The discovery and documentation of the Araripe Manakin's nest and eggs was a first for science, 8 years after the project's team leader, Weber Silva, discovered the species.

It is believed that there are less than 250 individuals in existence. Unfortunately, they inhabit an area that has recently become prime real estate. The slopes of the Araripe chapada (plateau) provide cool and refreshing respite to the region's typically intense heat, and are quickly becoming popular sites for new vacation homes. Silva has hypothesized that the species' reproductive cycle was intimately linked with springs that are prevalent throughout the region, and because of this, signs of a healthy population could serve as a welcome indicator of a healthy watershed. During the team's expedition a total of 18 nests were found, although survival rates were low due to the fire and common predators such as marmosets and opossum. Nevertheless, the team is the first to document the entire reproductive cycle and determine the incubation period of this extremely rare bird.

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### Student Conferences on Conservation Science: now there are two

The annual Student Conference on Conservation Science in Cambridge, UK, has been reported in previous issues of *Oryx*. The sixth conference of this series was held in the Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge during 22–24 March 2005 and, in an exciting new development, the first of a sister conference series with the same name was held during 16–18 March 2005 at the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences, Duke University, USA.

The Cambridge conference was attended by 143 postgraduate students from 41 countries and about 70 other people from international and national research bodies, conservation agencies and NGOs in the Cambridge area. Students presented 35 talks and 64 posters about their work, and there were plenary lectures by Mohamed Bakarr (World Agroforestry Centre, Kenya), Nigel Leader-Williams (DICE, Kent, UK), Chris Thomas (York, UK) and Graham Wynne (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, UK). The Duke conference was attended by 127 postgraduate students from 20 countries. Research students presented 35 talks and 28 posters and there were plenary lectures by Paul Ehrlich (Stanford, USA),

Stuart Pimm (Duke, USA), Daniel Simberloff (Tennessee, USA), John Terborgh (Duke, USA) and David Wilcove (Princeton, USA). Both of the conferences also featured a range of workshops on practical skills important to graduate students run by experts from both academic and conservation practice backgrounds.

The organizers of the two conference series are working together closely with the aim of ensuring that the opportunity to attend these useful events is available to as many young conservation scientists as possible throughout the world. Bursary schemes are available in both series to assist a limited number of selected students with travel costs and other expenses. It is hoped that, by having two parallel series, the number of students that can participate can expand without the disadvantages that accompany large conferences. It is expected that the new Duke series will attract more delegates from the Americas than the Cambridge series, but there is no intention to have exclusive geographic catchment areas – indeed it is hoped that many students will participate in both series during their studies. The next conference in the Cambridge series will be held during 28–30 March 2006 and the next Duke conference during 15–17 March 2006. For further details see <http://www.zoo.cam.ac.uk/scs/> and <http://www.nicholas.duke.edu/scs/>

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### Conservation and management of the Gobi bear

The Gobi bear is found only in the Gobi desert region of southwestern Mongolia, where temperatures can vary by over 80° C during a single year. With scant vegetation, little food, cover, or water, this small, pale bear has managed to eke out a living in these barren hills in apparent isolation for thousands of years.

There is no agreement about the bear's taxonomic status. It is variously described as a unique species *Ursus gobiensis* or subspecies *U. arctos gobiensis*, or aligned with various neighbouring subspecies of brown bear including *U. a. pruinosus*, *U. a. isabellinus* and *U. a. arctos*. What is generally agreed is that the bear is severely threatened; it is listed as 'very rare' in the Mongolian Red Book and is included on Appendix I of CITES, to which Mongolia is a signatory country. A population viability analysis performed in 1998 suggested that the bears will most likely go extinct in 15–20 years, but the data used in the

model is questionable and population estimates vary by a factor of at least 2, ranging from less than 20 to over 40. The bears face numerous threats, ranging from lack of food and water to inbreeding and fragmentation of the few remaining breeding adults. The region where the bears are found is now a Strictly Protected Area but is also used by local people and their livestock, and the bears may face numerous human-induced threats ranging from overgrazing to lack of access to water sources and direct persecution.

Because of the critical nature of the situation, an international workshop was held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia on 2–3 November 2004 to develop a plan and set of activities to save the Gobi bear. A total of 75 participants were involved in the workshop, including 10 international experts, national experts, Ministry of Nature and Environment personnel, park staff, NGOs, and local environmental specialists.

Immediate workshop recommendations included: (1) Continue and improve existing supplementary feeding efforts, including improving nutritional standards for pellet feed and increasing the number of feeding stations, sites, and times of year for supplementary feeding. (2) Determine the status, distribution, movements, habitat use, feeding ecology, and causes of mortality of remaining bears using observations, transects, camera traps and satellite collars; include training of national staff in all methods. (3) Combine data collected from (1) and (2) with environmental data collected by remote sensing into a GIS database for use in future management. (4) Determine the genetic status of the Gobi bear using laboratory analysis of hairs, scat, and tissue collected from the field, to determine future management opportunities; include training of national staff and increase in laboratory capacity. (5) Develop a comprehensive human dimensions programme; this includes improving ranger capacity, changing grazing practices, involving military personnel, investigating moving families from Ekiin Gol, and educating and involving local people in conservation of the Gobi bear.

If research shows that the Gobi bear is decreasing in numbers, more intensive conservation efforts can be considered: (6) If the Gobi bear is genetically similar to Tien Shan bears, consider introducing bears from the Tien Shan to supplement existing Gobi bear populations. (7) If the Gobi bear is genetically unique, consider the option of captive breeding, either in semi-wild conditions, in a captive breeding facility built in Mongolia, or in international zoos.

The lack of data about the Gobi bear, the critically low population and dismal forecasts for survival, the varied and potentially radical alternatives for conservation, and the social, political, and economic ramifications of

various initiatives make upcoming decisions about Gobi bear conservation a test case for critically low wildlife population management.

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## Arabian Conservation Workshop

The 6th International Conservation Workshop for the Fauna of Arabia took place at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife in Sharjah, UAE in February 2005 and was attended by over 70 regional and international experts. These annual workshops are sponsored by Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Authority and assess the current status of species in priority taxonomic groups, carry out Red List assessments and recommend appropriate action. This year's working groups considered Arabian canids, eagles and vultures, and freshwater invertebrates. The last topic developed work carried out at previous workshops on freshwater fish and amphibians.

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## New and improved internet resources

One significant outcome of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (an intergovernmental conservation treaty signed in 1971 in Ramsar, Iran) was the development of the Ramsar Sites, or Wetlands of International Importance. Managed by Wetlands International, the *Ramsar Sites Information Service* (<http://www.wetlands.org/RSDB/>) provides concise information about each Ramsar Site and allows examination of over 1,300 internationally important wetlands from 138 countries. The website also offers basic and advanced search options, clickable maps, graphical analyses, and downloadable publications.

*The American Bird Conservancy* (<http://www.abcbirds.org/>) is a nonprofit organization working to conserve wild birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. The organization's website provides the Bird Conservation Directory, a searchable directory of contact information for professionals engaged in bird conservation throughout the Americas, and the downloadable Birdwatcher's Guide to Global Warming.

*Plant Diversity of Central French Guiana* ([http://sciweb.nybg.org/science2/hcol/french\\_guiana/index.asp](http://sciweb.nybg.org/science2/hcol/french_guiana/index.asp))

from the New York Botanical Garden's Virtual Herbarium, is part of a larger project designed to document the fungal and plant diversity of central French Guiana. The website provides engines for basic searches as well as detailed searches with fields for scientific names, collector, location, and more. Specimen records can also be browsed by a Families list.

The *African Elephant Specialist Group* (<http://iucn.org/themes/ssc/sgs/afesg/index.html>) operates under the auspices of the Species Survival Commission of the IUCN. The Group's website contains a number of downloadable Human-Elephant Conflict Reviews and Case Studies, African Elephant Status Reports (from 1995, 1998 and 2002), and a section of Tools for Elephant Management and Research. The website also includes current and back issues of *Pachyderm*, a peer-reviewed, scientific journal focused on management and conservation issues concerning Asian and African rhinos, as well as African elephants.

From the South African National Biodiversity Institute, *PlantZAfrica.com* (<http://www.plantzafrica.com/>) presents information about plants native to southern Africa and related topics. The website exhibits an extensive array of plant profiles representing a portion of the over 22,000 different species of seed plants indigenous to southern Africa. The profiles are listed alphabetically by scientific name and contain images, descriptions,

and references. The website also offers a section on Vegetation of Southern Africa.

From Conservation International, this *Biodiversity Hotspots* (<http://www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/Hotspots/>) site was relaunched in 2005 with completely updated information, as presented in the new book *Hotspots Revisited*. The updated website features profiles of more than 30 ecologically important areas of the world. Hotspots are categorized under South America, Africa, North and Central America, Europe and Central Asia, and Asia-Pacific. In addition to regional profiles, the site offers a number of resources such as a Terrestrial Vertebrate Species Database, a Glossary, Maps, and related References.

Since its inception in 1994, the *Wildlife Protection Society of India* (<http://www.wpsi-india.org/wpsi/index.php>) has been providing support and information for authorities who are combating poaching and the escalating illegal wildlife trade, particularly in wild tigers. It has now broadened its focus to deal with human-animal conflicts and provide support for research projects. The website provides information about the activities of different Programmes including the Tiger Protection, Endangered Species Protection, Research for Conservation, and Legal Programmes. The website contains Tiger Poaching Statistics, a map of Tiger Reserves in India, and a collection of related links.