

Opinion article

On the conservation of cages

By Dr. Carlos B. de Araújo

In 1975 Brazil joined the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). At the time it was very common to see captive birds in Brazil, but somehow things changed and Brazil became an international environmental leader. As said by the German-Brazilian Ornithologist Helmut Sick in the 80's "*For several years now, a strong sense of responsibility has made Brazilian authorities feel that the maximum must be done for the conservation of nature*". There was also a big cultural change over this period, and keeping birds in cages was not as acceptable as it was before, immediately reducing the pressure on wild populations. With less people willing to raise captive birds, the number of animals captured in the wild also reduced. However, the straightforward relation between market size and wildlife harvesting has not lead to the prohibition of all bird confinement in Brazil, but why? There are actually a couple of arguments for maintaining birds in confinement, and in this essay I intend to show how misleading these arguments may be.

For sure, there are many excellent examples on how captive stocks may be used for wild population numbers and genetic reinforcement. But if a direct link to conservation management programs is not made, bird confinement is of little help. This point will be made clearer after the species concepts and the objectives of conservation are better explored. As defined by [Ernst Mayr](#): *species are groups of interbreeding natural populations that are reproductively isolated from other such groups*. A group of interbreeding animals may indeed be kept isolated from others in captivity, making the comparison with Noah's ark inevitable. However, an ecosystem is far from being a random subset of species, making unlikely to a random subset of species being capable to reestablish an original ecosystem. The amount of carbon

cycle depends, for example, on the amount of plants fixing it so that differences in producer-consumer ratio within an ecosystem would indubitably alter carbon balance. The interplay between biological processes such as predation, competition, pollination, seed dispersal, herbivory (among others) is actually what governs ecosystem dynamics, and these ecological interactions are key to attaining a balanced ecological environment such as proposed by the conservation agenda.

The Brazilian constitution mentions in *Article 225* that “*Everyone has the right to an ecologically balanced environment of common use*”. Brazil constitutionally focuses its conservation efforts within the environment, so that an environmental definition of species would work best. Such definition should go beyond the biological concept while incorporating ecological interactions. As outlined by [Van Valen](#) a species may be ecologically defined as how it uses its resources and how this use has evolved throughout time. Looking through ecological species concept, captive birds represent little more than a sample of its genes. This is especially true for those species such as parrots, in which behavior and ecological interactions are largely defined by learning, not genetically. Thus, arguing that pet populations insures conservation not only is a fallacy, but demonstrates profound unawareness of what are the objectives of conservation in the first place, and how these objectives should be attained.

Another classic argument for maintaining a captive stock is that it could supply individuals for the “unavoidable” pet market, reducing pressure on the natural environment. First, I must point out that the “unavoidable” argument has been historically used to justify barbarities such as slavery, gender inequality, and race discrimination. Second, we must all accept that culture does change, else we would still be living in caves and hunting for a living. That said, I believe pet market is actually causing an enormous environmental damage. IBAMA (Brazilian Environmental Agency) [recently found](#) a relationship between favorite pet species and the amount of individuals seized from illegal traffic, which makes a lot a sense. First, any individual decision to buy a pet depends on the observation of a pet elsewhere, in a friend’s house for example. One can only want what one has seen!

Second, wildlife markets are composed of sellers, who advertise how nice and joyful it is to own a pet. However, a seller will never tell a buyer how damaging the pet market can be. We should learn and follow past successes and work towards the reduction of captive populations (and market), not for their intensification. Pet market reduction leads to a straightforward reduction of harvesting pressures on wildlife populations. Why would someone harvest individuals in the wild, if no one is willing to raise and buy them? Finally pet owners must understand that even if they have legally acquired their pet (which is never a 100% certainty), it could encourage others to buy animals in the black-market.

There are many birds being openly sold abroad, such as in Las Ramblas, (Barcelona). But how adequate is for a Spanish (or any other foreigner) to be selling Brazilian biodiversity on the street? Is biodiversity a world heritage? As a humanist myself I think so. Then again, I must also agree with Senator Cristovam Buarque that if biodiversity is indeed a world heritage so is petroleum, gold, iPhones, and the responsibility to end hunger. Far beyond ownership, Brazil has a great responsibility over the conservation of this biodiversity, and I don't really think it is prudent to have someone profiting over Brazilian biodiversity while creating environmental pressures on native populations. Still, while acknowledging that [international market seems to absorb 30% of wildlife trafficking](#) we may not treat traffic as a Brazilian problem. Furthermore, we must not forget it was wildlife trade that endangered many, many bird species in the first place. We also must not forget the perversity of its logic: traffic hits where it hurts. The rarer the species (the most threatened), the higher its value in the black market, and the stronger the trafficking pressures. Spix's Macaws, for example, were extinct in the wild due to the same cage culture that now puts itself as their saviors. As already recognized by Helmut Sick in the 80's "*Hyacinth macaws has been exported 'legally' in great numbers to United States from Paraguay where it does not occur.*" Legal wildlife trade has [being used](#) by illegal dealers many times, and it still does, [up to this day](#).

It seems very difficult to explain what are the gains for Brazil (and why not the world) to maintain and defend the cage culture. When this practice is abolished from the world we will come closer to truly guaranteeing wildlife conservation. To conserve cages is ultimately to put in risk many bird species.





