

Complexities of the Amazon bird trade

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The author of a ground-breaking report from TRAFFIC – an organisation studying wildlife trade – presents some surprising and worrying insights into the trade in South American birds.

If you asked most people which nation exported the most Amazon parrot species in the past 20 years, I'm sure most would answer with the name of a South American country – perhaps Peru, Ecuador, Colombia or Brazil. But the rather surprising answer is South Africa.

The reasons for this unexpected finding are examined in *Bird's-eye view: lessons from 50 years of bird trade regulation & conservation in Amazon countries* (Ortiz-von Halle 2018), a report I was commissioned to write by WWF-US on behalf of TRAFFIC, an organisation that specialises in studying wildlife trade and whose South America office I managed for a number of years.

The study documents the history and dynamics of the bird trade in the Amazonian countries of Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Guyana and Suriname. It paints a picture of high levels of exploitation of the region's birdlife, particularly in the early years of the 20th century when countless millions of birds were trapped for export.

In a brief period before World War I, a single London merchant imported 400,000 hummingbirds and 360,000 other birds from Brazil. In 1932, some 25,000 hummingbirds were hunted in that country's state of Pará and sent to Italy to adorn chocolate boxes. After commercial airlines became operational in the region from the



1 Wild-caught Blue-and-yellow *Ara ararauna*, Scarlet *A macao* and Red-and-green *A. chloropterus* macaws in a facility near Paramaribo, Suriname, awaiting export (Arturo Hortas/TRAFFIC).



2 South American psittacids for sale in a pet shop in Thailand (TRAFFIC). In the foreground are Blue-and-yellow *Ara ararauna* and Red-and-green *A. chloropterus* macaws, plus Red-lored Parrot *Amazona autumnalis*.

3 Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* in cage (TRAFFIC). In the 1980s, up to 10,000 Hyacinth Macaws were captured, many of them laundered through countries where trade was still legal and ending up in captive-breeding facilities.



mid-1950s, hundreds of thousands of live birds were exported as pets from across South America.

The high levels of exploitation inevitably led to severe declines in some species – in particular some of the large and attractive macaws, such as Indigo (aka Lear’s) *Anodorhynchus leari*, Hyacinth *A. hyacinthinus* (Fig. 3) and Spix’s *Cyanopsitta spixii*. Unsurprisingly, to stop the loss of their natural heritage, many governments in the region chose to impose blanket bans on exports.

The illegal bird trade

In 1967, Brazil became the first country in South America to ban the commercial sale of wild animals, replacing demand through captive-breeding programmes as an economic alternative with low conservation impacts on wild populations. But with Brazil’s national wildlife trade ban installed, illegal wildlife trade was simultaneously initiated in South America.

Thus, while there was a disappearance of birds for sale on the streets of many countries, much of the trade went underground. Peru, both as recipient and source of wild bird species from and to its neighbours, is currently the biggest regional challenge, although Brazil continues to have a serious problem with internal trade of songbirds, despite stringent law-enforcement efforts. An average of 30,000–35,000 birds are confiscated there each year, a number that has not significantly varied in the last 15 years. Many of these birds are destined for ‘songbird competitions’, where spectators bet money on the outcomes of how many songs or phrases a bird will sing in a set time period. The activity is also popular and legal in Guyana and Suriname, and with expatriate communities living in the USA, Canada and Europe: regular seizures of songbirds, particularly seedeaters *Sporophila*, take place in these countries as a result.

In the 1980s, up to 10,000 Hyacinth Macaws were captured, many of them laundered through countries where trade was still legal and ending up in captive-breeding facilities where production costs were lower than in Brazil. And with populations of Hyacinth Macaws seriously depleted in their native range, conservationists have had to embark on ambitious yet highly successful programmes to restore the species in the wild in Brazil. Meanwhile, the Philippines has become the world’s main exporter of Hyacinth Macaws.

It is also apparent that one of the rather perverse outcomes of trade bans has been that some Amazon countries effectively abandoned the possibility of legally and competitively producing and exporting their wildlife. Brazil