Back to Nature

Throughout the country of Brazil, a growing number of people and organizations have been releasing parrots and other birds which have been confiscated from trade. In some cases, these are relatively common species such as the Blue-fronted Amazon (*Amazona aestiva* - left), and in other cases the species are globally threatened such as Red-browed Amazons (*Amazona rhodocorytha*) and Gold-capped Conures (*Aratinga auricapilla*).

The two biologists interviewed here, Carlos Yamashita and Vincent Kurt Lo, along with their colleague Luiz Francisco Sanfilipo, have spearheaded much of this work as part-and-parcel of enforcing trade laws in Brazil.

Carlos and Vincent have been friends with each other and with the Trust for decades. Their innovative and committed work on behalf of the birds of Brazil has positioned them as leaders in the effort to rehabilitate and release confiscated birds - getting these charismatic native species back to nature.

Support for this work was made possible by generous donors to WPT's FlyFree program.

>> www.parrots.org/flyfree

◀ In March 2010 Blue-fronted Amazons from the Brazilian Wildlife Center Associação Bichos da Mata (ABM) were released in southern Brazil in the seasonal wetlands known as the Pantanal.

Insights from Carlos Yamashita

Translation by Soraya Lysenko

How and when did you get involved in working with confiscated birds?

Even though I have lived since childhood in the city of São Paulo, I always enjoyed being in the field, among wildlife. Since I was young I have done volunteer work with birds and traveled as much as I could to observe them in the wild.

Working with confiscated birds is part of my work as an employee for the Brazilian environmental agency – IBAMA (Instituto Brasileiro de Meio Ambiente e Recursos Naturais Renováveis), where I have been working since just after graduation from Universidade de Brasília in the early 80´s. After 3 years as the Director of the National Park of Pantanal, I coordinated a new program banding migrating birds in Brazil. The program was to study the bird's migration and help in their conservation and still exists today. In 1987 I left the program and began work in several conservation programs and law enforcement. The aim of those programs was not only to enforce conservation laws but also to analyze the status of the species, their biology and the best way to manage them in wild. Some of the most significant projects focused on populations such as the Hyacyinth (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*), Lear's (*Anodorhynchus leari*) and Spix's Macaws (*Cyanopsitta spixii*).

Do these confiscated birds come from individual's homes or from shipments?

IBAMA is a federal entity and therefore, its focus is on birds confiscated as part of illegal shipments. Depending on the season and region the number of birds tends to be very high. However, in Brazil we have several different levels of public entities in charge of enforcing the environmental policies of the state and the cities. In the case of individual birds at homes, the state and local police will confiscate a bird when it is reported to them.

How long does it take to get a healthy bird ready for release?

It will depend on the species. For example, passerines may take less than a month, up to 3 or 6 months. On the other hand, the rehabilitation of a macaw will take at least 3 months or even years depending on the bird's feather condition and health.

Are you able to keep tabs on the birds after release? Do they tend to stay close?

Most of the birds will stay close to the release aviary for a certain period of time. According to what I have seen so far, I would say that 20% start to explore the area and roost outside the aviary immediately after the release. Some leave the area immediately.

Monitoring and keeping tabs on released birds is a very difficult and expensive process. We officially started releases in 2005 by launching a technical protocol with the minimum requirements for the creation of a release area and for the actual releases. In that same year, IBAMA coordinated the release of birds of several species to an area in Bahia (northeast of Brazil). Since then, IBAMA is trying to keep accurate data on the releases and their results.

It is also important to mention that one of the requirements of the technical protocol is that each of the release areas has to send regular reports to IBAMA reporting the number of birds released and tracking data.

Are releases a useful tool for both endangered and common species?

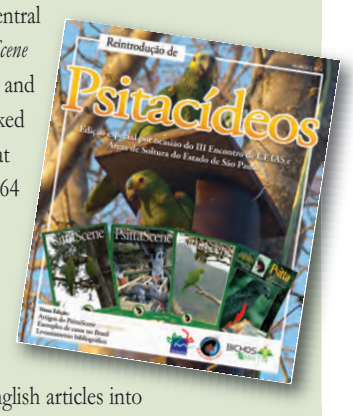
Intensive trapping of the most commonly traded species (*Amazona aestiva, Amazona amazonica, Ara ararauna*) can lead to "empty forests". In view of that, why not "fill in" those forests by releasing confiscated parrots?

Also, releasing "common species" is a good way to develop methodologies that can be employed for endangered species. Through these procedures we can learn more about the biology of the species – their habitat, the environment, landscape improvement, the demography, colonization, extinction and other factors that may impact their survival.

IBAMA meeting São Paulo

On March 8th 2010, the wildlife authority for the state of São Paulo (IBAMA SP), Associação Bichos da Mata (ABM) and the World Parrot Trust (WPT) held a workshop in São Paulo to bring together all those involved in rehabilitating and releasing parrots to present their work, and share their knowledge and ideas. Much of the day focused on the specific methods used to rehabilitate and release birds as well as the monitoring of the bird's survival and reproduction after release.

From the WPT were our Brazilian representative, Andre Saidenberg, and Director, James Gilardi, who presented the work of FLYFREE partners in Indonesia, India, Africa, and Central America. The *PsittaScene* team (Joanna Eckles and Karen Whitley) worked with Andre to format all the content for a 64 page publication of articles on releases and related topics. Andre took on the monumental task of translating all the English articles into Portuguese in time for the meeting.



In all, the meeting was extremely well attended with many stimulating exchanges throughout the day. Opportunities were explored to develop initiatives of this kind for new species in new areas.

▲ A crowd assembled prior to the release of the Amazons, including the head of IBAMA and Head of Tourism for the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso. Araras Ecolodge (owner in center facing L) played a key role in making the release a success.

◀ A pair of Blue-fronts at the release site in the pantanal. Some of these birds have been in rehab for 8 years and strong bonds have already formed among pairs like this one.

▼ After release, birds adjust to their new surroundings. Notice the antennae from a radio collar on the bird on the left. The other bird clearly displays the temporary non-toxic ink used to enable visual tracking after release.

Have infectious diseases been a problem for the confiscated and released birds?

Infectious diseases among confiscated birds are caused by poor nutrition and bad sanitary conditions and cause the rehabilitation of the birds to take more time and cost more. Treating the bird properly will control the diseases in general. It is a matter of making a choice between treating or other methods, like euthanasia. In my view, euthanasia is a way of closing your eyes to an important problem – an easy solution that may not work for long-term. Losing individuals through euthanasia may have strong impacts on the species that are survivors of a long evolutionary history.

Parrots do have a very complex ecological history and most of the Neotropical species are very local, meaning that most of them are very specialized in terms of food as a consequence of their habitat. They are relics of a paleoclimatical and vegetational succession. They have lost their habitat due to human pressure and faced a strong decline in their population due to trapping.

Considering the disease question for the released birds, I imagine Hyacinth, Indigo and Glaucous Macaw flocks foraging on the ground in the savanna landscape shaped by Giant Sloths and Mastodons, beetles feeding on Megafauna manure that contains large seeds, bacteria, algae, viruses plus the "pristine" fauna of nowadays. In such a very complex environment, parrots have survived many waves of diseases that appeared and disappeared in the long run – and the birds are still among us.

My conclusion is that diseases are an important consideration but have to be balanced against the good potential that releases have to increase the metapopulation that works as a source of parrots. Furthermore, releases can also call attention to habitat restoration.

Parrots are long-term tree seed predators and among them, few species are grass or herb seed predators. Living in a successional phase vegetation for a long term, parrots belong to long time evolutionary radiation as seed predators and therefore they have an energetic high cost. At least, we need to have some respect for those old inhabitants of the planet.

Can you foresee releases of any new parrot species in Brazil?

Releasing birds depends on the availability of release areas. Many important factors must be taken into consideration for each species. Does the species occur in that particular area? Is the area protected? Is there cooperation of the owner and local population? Even for a common species like the Blue-fronted Amazon, selecting a release area can sometimes be difficult.

We will work to release any of the species in captivity if the right release area can be found. This is especially true for some endangered species like the Vinaceous Parrot (*Amazona vinacea*) that lives in highland of mixed forest of Brazilian Pine. In this particular case we have birds ready to be released but so far we haven't found a good area for them.

Trade of goods had been part of humanity and that's also true for the New World: the Mayan, Anasazi trails, South America pre-Incaic city-states to Inca Empire, Inca trail, Aruak/Caribean through dugout canoe colonization of what is currently called the Caribbean Sea from the Orinoco River to South Florida.

Considering that trading activities led humans to populate every single corner of the globe, we can find interesting interactions between parrots and mankind, some of which are positive. Human-made palm groves in the ancient site known as "Black Earth" are now occupied by Hyacinth Macaw (Southern Amazonia and Paraguay basin) and by the Blue-throated Macaw (*Ara glaucogularis*) in the Llanos de Mojos. The human sites benefited both species. Human colonization has also had negative impacts, as with the Red-fronted Macaw (*Ara rubrogenys*). During the Inca Empire almost all creek areas were transformed into crops and the macaw's feeding site disappeared in the dry valley.

Humans can work as "regulators" – good or bad – and it depends on us which choices or ethics we are going to make or follow for the future of the parrots that have a very long history to teach us.

Endangered Blue-throated Conures ▲ (*Pyrrhura cruentata*) from the Atlantic forest near Rio de Janeiro. A group released in the 1970's were the first confiscated parrots ever returned to the wild in Brazil. Another release is currently being planned.

WPT's Brazilian representative Andre ▶ Saidenberg tracks three radio-collared Amazons post-release. Knowledge of the survival and movements of released birds is invaluable to the success of future programs.

Rehabilitated birds progress through ▼ multiple stages of learning and conditioning and eventually into the pre-release aviary at ABM.

Insights from Vincent Kurt Lo

Translation by Andre Saidenberg

How would you summarise the problem of trade in Brazil?

Brazil is a privileged country with many native parrot species. However, Brazil is currently unable to protect this rich biodiversity. We have been witnessing constant poaching of some of the severely endangered and endemic species such as the Red-browed Amazon (*Amazona rhodocorytha*), Red-tailed Amazon (*Amazona brasiliensis*) and Vinaceous Amazon (*Amazona vinacea*) among others (page 11). Although one cannot see the immediate impact of these captures because population censuses may show population stability, the implication for future generations is a silent threat.

Poaching is affecting the recruitment of younger generations and these populations are ageing. Without our notice they are getting closer to collapse due to the absence of younger individuals. We hope that another example such as the Spix's Macaw is not going to be necessary to exemplify this crisis. Partnerships with experienced NGOs of other countries, like the World Parrot Trust, are welcome and necessary to turn this problem around.

How do the Brazilian government and NGO's work together on this problem?

Only government authorities can confiscate illegal wildlife. Unfortunately the government rehabilitation centers don't have the capacity to receive and rehabilitate the enormous volume of confiscated parrots. Just in the Sao Paulo state more than 30,000 wild animals are confiscated every year in addition to 80,000 in other parts of the country. A great number of these are parrots. Therefore NGOs are important both in receiving confiscated animals but also for those that are found injured or delivered by citizens. Unfortunately environmental authorities in Brazil have not yet made the release of confiscated animals a priority.

Do the local people get excited about parrots being released near them?

Many landowners are aware of the importance of releasing parrots back into nature and they have been very supportive even if they know the parrots might attack their crops. They like to give interviews, and are very proud when environmental authorities visit their properties. Release areas must be carefully chosen and the landowners must be contacted in advance to make sure they don't rely on crops for most of their profits. Usually there is great involvement of the landowners, relatives, and neighbours to protect the released birds, and report sightings of birds or poachers. IBAMA, as an institution, is a strong symbol that attracts attention and media reports.

Have there been problems with released birds getting shot or trapped?

Shooting cases are rare. Most frequently we deal with people capturing the birds as pets. On a few occasions released birds have been captured because they were still getting acclimatized with their surroundings and still had not completely lost their "pet traits". However, supporters of the release project have denounced these actions and the people responsible.

In Brazil, how well known are these rehabilitation and release efforts?

The vast majority of the population knows it is illegal to keep wild animals. However, there are no strong incentives to release confiscated birds and news about the rehabilitation and release efforts is not widespread. Releases occur mostly due to local or personal initiatives of a few technical staff, rehab centers, and NGOs in a few states. There is not a national policy to motivate and develop releases.

Rehabilitation and releases in Brazil still suffer many barriers and prejudice. These efforts lack resources or very basic structure most of the time. There is little consistency in procedures and some confuse releases with the introduction of invasive species. There has also been strong pressure in the last few years by veterinarians over an excessive fear of spreading disease.

We have an urgent need for greater involvement from universities and zoos. While releases are an important conservation and awareness tool, the general public is unaware that they are a possibility. People who own illegal wildlife often state that their animals cannot survive in the wild. Some magistrates accept this argument and decide to leave the animals with the people who are actually breaking the law, without knowing about the possibility of rehabilitation and reintroduction. Poachers are also unaware of these projects.

▼ Sun Conures (*Aratinga solstitialis*) are another endangered species among many at ABM. These birds have the potential to be released in the Brazilian state of Roraima.

Do these efforts deter people from capturing and trading wild birds in Brazil?

Many efforts have had some effect including recent initiatives by São Paulo state, release areas created by IBAMA, reintroduction of endangered species, publishing results, compiling information in journals, and organizing meetings with staff from rehabilitation centers and release areas. There have been TV reports, more release areas being registered, people voluntarily delivering their animals for release, and more effective enforcement actions. However, returning animals to the wild is still a very slow process when you consider the number of confiscated animals.

Unfortunately, under Brazilian law, people involved in environmental crimes are rarely arrested. The maximum penalties are fines, but arrest is unlikely and therefore the criminal process is converted into community service. This ends up being an incentive to continue capturing and selling wild animals. Preventive education work is still necessary to deter people from desiring wild animals as pets. There are not strong incentives for environmental awareness programs by the environmental department from the Brazilian government, which end up fighting only the consequences and not the primary cause. We are trying to develop a campaign to fight the wild animal trade but this is only through the personal initiatives of a handful of staff technicians. This is why we need partnerships with NGOs and private institutions.

I would like to congratulate the World Parrot Trust for your special concern for this fascinating family of birds – the parrots – and for your support of projects in many countries. This work goes beyond international boundaries in a common goal of protecting parrots. It unites countries and professionals of different disciplines to alert authorities, media and the public about the need of each individual to do their part – not buying wildlife, denouncing the illegal trade and creating incentives for watching birds in their natural habitat.

These stunning Vinaceous Amazons (*A. vinacea*) are slated for release in the Atlantic forests – possibly in the same area as the *Pyrrhura cruentata* (p. 9).

Except for the Blue-fronted Amazons, all of the species in these pictures are globally threatened and were confiscated in trade shipments. These Red-tailed Amazons (*A. brasiliensis*) are being rehabilitated for release south of São Paulo.

ABM has already successfull released over 100 Red-browed Amazons (*A. rhodocorytha*) and their methods are slowly being implemented on a wide variety of species in Brazil and abroad.