

## Conservation & Science

### Using Social Science To Tackle The Songbird Crisis

By Julia Migné (Chester Zoo, UK)

**Harry Marshall, PhD student from Manchester Metropolitan University and Chester Zoo Conservation Scholar, is examining the issue of overexploitation of wild birds as pets in Indonesia. He tells us more about his research and shares some insights from his first field season.**

South East Asia is currently facing a songbird extinction crisis thought to be driven by the huge scale of trade in wild birds in the region. In Java, keeping caged birds is a tradition deeply embedded in the local culture, although recent trends such as singing competitions for particular species are resulting in millions of birds being targeted to supply various forms of demand.



With a background in social anthropology and conservation, Chester Zoo Conservation Scholar [Harry Marshall](#) was drawn to study the social aspect of the trade. He explains:

“We’ve known for a long time now that the biggest drivers of population declines in wild species are generally human activity. However, recently people are starting to realise that it’s hard to make any difference in conservation unless you are working with people and looking directly at the interactions between humans and wildlife that cause such declines.”

Wildlife trade is one of the biggest drivers of biodiversity loss at the moment and understanding the underlying reasons pushing people to exploit wildlife is crucial to find ways to mitigate its impact. This is why Harry is examining the issue of overexploitation of songbirds as pets in Indonesia by focusing on the characteristics of the demand.

“People in parts of Asia keep birds as pets just as we keep cats and dogs but a crisis has been happening in the last twenty years because of different cultural practices coming into play. The accepted perception in the conservation community is that singing competition culture is driving demand for songbirds and is probably having the biggest effect on the crisis on the wild populations.”

In order to improve the sustainability of the songbird industry, Harry is assessing the volume and patterns of bird-keeping, identifying the cultural and socio-economic factors driving bird ownership across Java but also exploring the behaviour, perceptions and beliefs associated with the cultural

aspect of the songbird competitions. Collecting social data will then allow conservationists to identify suitable conservation interventions to reduce the negative impact that the trade has on wild bird populations. Harry adds:

“Perhaps people keep birds because they are losing their connection to green spaces. It’s been reported that one of the big problems is habitat degradation and landscape planning in Java and in Indonesia and so perhaps in areas that are more rural, people keeping birds would be less prevalent.”



To test this hypothesis, Harry conducted questionnaire surveys in both rural and urban areas in Indonesia. Using a survey he designed in the UK, he went out to Java and piloted the survey there with the help of a group of volunteers from the Atma Jaya University Yogyakarta. The group split up in small teams and tried to get up to 40 respondents in villages along a gradient of urban and rural areas.

The questionnaire asked respondents the kind of bird species they were keeping, the number of individuals they had for each species, the origin of the birds (wild vs captive-bred) and their motivations for keeping birds. The survey also allowed people to say if they agreed or disagreed with some key statements such as ‘is keeping wild-caught birds a good thing to do’ providing Harry with some insights on the psychological aspects of bird keeping.

“My feeling so far is that people seem to get whatever is available, they aren’t actually choosing! If it’s cheaper and they can afford it then they’ll go for that and usually, wild-caught birds tend to be cheaper than commercially-bred ones.”



Harry is currently analysing the data he collected and he intends to present and discuss the results with the local communities involved in the project. The theory behind his research is that by learning more about what local people’s perception of the trade and songbirds are it becomes possible to target specific behaviours and attitudes. This in turn allows us to work towards facilitating change and promoting more sustainable livelihoods.

“My project is essentially conservation social marketing, so we are using a mixture of techniques that’ll include workshops, and focus groups, to explore deeper into people’s perceptions. We would then be able to come up with a campaign that is relevant to the behaviours, perceptions and preferences of local communities.”

Harry Marshall is a PhD student from Manchester Metropolitan University and is supervised by Dr Nigel Collar, Dr Alex Lees, Prof Stuart Marsden and [Dr Andrew Moss](#).