



Let the songbirds keep singing

AS THE ASIAN SONGBIRD CRISIS CONTINUES TO IMPACT HUNDREDS OF SPECIES ACROSS THE REGION, AN ALLIANCE OF CONSERVATION ORGANISATIONS IS DETERMINED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THEIR PLIGHT – AND TO THEIR FUTURE

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Shipped in their tens of thousands in cages, crammed into plastic water bottles, eggs strapped on vests or birds tied to legs of passengers boarding an aeroplane – these are some of the scenarios in which trapped birds are transported illegally to feed the global cage-bird trade.

The result of this age-old practice is that one in 20 threatened and near-threatened bird species are being trapped for domestic and international trade, with many being closer to extinction. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Southeast Asia. The region has had a long history of bird trading, as songbirds are prized for singing competitions, parrots and birds of prey are sought after as pets, passerines (or smaller birds) are used for merit release, particularly within the Buddhist culture, and waterbirds are consumed as food.

Songbirds in particular have taken a massive hit from this trade, involving millions of birds annually and hundreds of species. The pastime of keeping birds or competing in bird-singing competitions has had a severe impact on many of the region's songbirds, especially in the Greater Sundas (comprising Brunei, western Indonesia, Malaysia, southernmost Myanmar, Singapore and south Thailand), which is home to more than 850 species of birds with high levels of endemism. TRAFFIC's surveys revealed that from 2014–2017, more than 86,000 birds were recorded for sale in markets in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Of these countries, Indonesia is considered a hotbed: almost 23,000 birds were recorded over five days in Central and East Java and 19,000 in three Jakarta markets

over three days. While open trade continues, authorities in the country have carried out a string of seizures. Between November 2018 and March 2019 alone, more than 16,000 birds were seized from just two towns in Indonesia.

JOINING FORCES

While the scale of the problem seems dire, various efforts are underway to tackle this problem across Southeast Asia. The Asian Songbird Trade Crisis Summit was organised jointly by TRAFFIC, Wildlife Reserves Singapore and the Cikananga Wildlife Centre; this first-of-its-kind event in October 2015 brought together more than 35 experts on birds in the Greater Sundas region to prepare a plan for saving its more threatened species from extinction. As a result, a comprehensive Conservation Strategy for Southeast Asian Songbird Trade was launched in 2017.

The Strategy's recommendation for the region's current 28 most threatened species includes improved enforcement, greater education and community outreach, establishing and expanding conservation assurance colonies and further taxonomic research. Importantly, the Summit was the impetus for the creation of the Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group within the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Species Survival Commission (IUCN SSC) – of which TRAFFIC is a member and a coordinator – dedicated

solely to preventing the imminent extinction of songbirds threatened by unsustainable trapping and trade. TRAFFIC is actively working within the region to monitor trade and assess trends against legal and policy framework, and is working with a wide range of partners to try to turn the tide.

The Summit also paved the way for innovative partnerships to be forged to address this problem in a strategic and coordinated manner. Among them is a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between TRAFFIC and EAZA, particularly to further objectives under EAZA's *Silent Forest Campaign*. The Campaign focuses on the Asian songbird trade and aims to address and mitigate the ongoing crisis by providing resources, scientific know-how and funding to prevent Asian songbird extinction. The MoU also commits both parties to share knowledge and expertise on a range of issues covering captive-breeding and illegal sourcing of specimens, with the ultimate aim of preventing illegal wildlife trade and species extinctions.

This collaboration also allows both organisations to further the aspirations of EAZA's Position Statement on songbird trafficking, working closely with partners such as BirdLife International and the IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group.

This is just the start of a very exciting journey to save Asia's most threatened birds. Watch this space!

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