

A bright future for songbirds

THE SILENT FOREST CAMPAIGN HAS COME TO AN END, AND CAN RIGHTLY CELEBRATE ITS SUCCESS – BUT ITS FOUNDERS ARE DETERMINED THAT THEIR EFFORTS TO SAVE ASIAN SONGBIRDS WILL GO ON

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It seems that songbirds have become part of the conservation agenda for good; over the past decade, several dozen excellent publications documenting various aspects of the Asian songbird crisis have appeared. Even so, songbird conservation in Asia has struggled to gain the attention needed to make an impact. It takes more than just good research papers to get real attention and funding for what is often thought of as a fringe group of animals within the zoo and conservation communities.

An informal working group within EAZA, under the Songbird TAG, has dedicated much time to this subject since 2009. Deliberately kept small to remain effective, we initially operated under the title ‘Working Group for the Conservation of Asian Songbirds Threatened by Trade’. Meeting mostly twice annually, we struggled to get institutional support and participation, but we were reluctant to develop a more formal structure in case we got bogged down by bureaucratic procedures.

The group was heavily involved in the first Songbird Crisis Summit, held in Singapore in 2015, and we then realised that we needed to define the roles and goals of the group in relation to other entities. This proved rather difficult, as the same few people tended to be involved in all the different activities and roles.

The 2015 Songbird Crisis Summit triggered two important developments. First, it gave real momentum to the formation of an IUCN specialist group, which was formally approved as the Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (ASTSG) in 2018. Second, it stimulated the idea of applying for an EAZA conservation campaign on songbirds threatened by trade.

Before the two-year Silent Forest Campaign started in 2017, the working group adopted the new name



Threatened Asian Songbird Alliance (TASA), remaining an informal grouping under the TAG to be more visual in the EAZA landscape. Initially, the application to run a campaign for songbirds met with little enthusiasm. The EAZA Executive Office (EEO), Conservation Committee and zoo educators’ community all expressed reservations about how ambitious and measurable the proposed campaign targets were. Fortunately, the campaign core group included very experienced zoo educators, and the negotiations resulted in a set of modifications that gave everyone the courage to double the fundraising goals, and the application was duly approved.

SETTING GOALS

The primary goal of this campaign, with pre-selected *ex situ* and *in situ* projects within the Asian region, was fundraising. We were humbled at the level of commitment of participating institutions and were amazed and delighted when donations swept past our ambitious €400,000 target

and resulted in more than €525,000 being invested in Asian songbird conservation during or just after the campaign. A small amount of pledged funding is still pending. Regular updates from all the funded projects can be found at www.silentforest.eu.

The targets in terms of the number of individual EAZA institutions participating in the campaign were also met and surpassed, with 193 EAZA institutions participating. Of these, 150 registered within the first year of the campaign. Additionally, 53 non-EAZA organisations signed up.

One important component of the campaign has been the EAZA Position Statement on Songbird Trade. This is a formulation of intent on behalf of all EAZA Members, and we are convinced that all EAZA Members who have insights into current trade practices will support and endorse it. In the near future we must be even more self-critical in regard to sourcing songbirds and other animals when there are alternatives.

In meetings with the Environment



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to make their Silent Forest installations long-term or even permanent.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The EEP Committee approved the name change of the EAZA Passeriformes TAG to 'EAZA Songbird TAG' as of 6 January 2020, linking the TAG even more explicitly to the campaign that brought attention to this fantastic and diverse group of birds.

Meanwhile TASA has now adopted the name 'Silent Forest Working Group' and taken over the campaign logo and website. The roles and mandate of this group need to be redefined to complement the international effort being undertaken by the ASTSG. The focus will primarily be on the European region and involve EAZA population management, monitoring regional trade and cooperation with European environmental authorities, sharing and exchanging information and maintaining fundraising activities. Decisions on the allocation of funds raised by the working groups are deliberately handed over to the ASTSG in order to have a transparent and independent process. In the future a structured application process will be established.

The expenses and manpower needed for the media management and content procurement of the www.silentforest.eu website are kindly covered by the zoos involved in the Silent Forest Working Group. The educational resources developed by zoos and offered to participants in the campaign have become open source and are freely available to anyone wishing to do environmental education on unsustainable and illegal songbird trade. The merchandise will, however, no longer be available. Importantly, fundraising will continue with the same EAZA account for at least another five years. Donations should always be marked 'Silent Forest' and projects will be selected in accordance with priorities determined by the IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group. Please also see www.asiansongbirdtradesg.com.

We warmly thank all the supporters of the Silent Forest Campaign, which ended in 2019. You have all helped to achieve amazing fundraising results and put songbirds firmly on the EAZA conservation agenda.

Ministry in Indonesia in late 2017, it became clear that we also have deficiencies in the legislation and enforcement of the regulations in place to protect songbirds in Europe. As we wish to work on common problems and functional solutions with scientific authorities and enforcement agencies in Indonesia, this also includes doing our homework in Europe. We cannot afford for EAZA institutions knowingly or unknowingly to be involved in the very activities we are campaigning against elsewhere.

The purchase or exchange of wild-caught songbirds imported into the EU, where large commercial shipments have been banned since 2006, is not ethically consistent with the aspiration of modern zoological institutions. Illegal imports are frequent and unacceptable. In most cases, the capture of songbirds is either unsustainable or illegal; if the species are protected in the country of origin, the export of them is illegal. The entry of such shipments into the EU is not only illegal but also unethical and, due to the absence of any kind of quarantine measures, unsafe: birds are moved from the most uncontrolled mixed wildlife and domestic animal markets in Asia and arrive on public display in crowded bird markets in the UK, Netherlands, Germany and Italy within 48 hours. It is clear that this practice cannot be condoned; apart from the obvious breaking and bending of rules in the EU, there are cases in Asia of people going to prison for attempting to traffic birds for the international market.

The EAZA Position Statement on Songbird Trade has been a useful component of EAZA's ongoing lobby work in Brussels and has even been

adapted and modified into an IUCN motion for the upcoming IUCN World Conservation Conference, urging nations and stakeholders to support and initiate stronger songbird conservation measures. The recently formed EAZA Working Group on Wildlife Trade will surely also promote the understanding and tackling of these issues and will have Silent Forest core team members amongst their membership as well.

Silent Forest core team members have also started several initiatives for collecting data on the international songbird trade. These data will be an invaluable resource for future songbird regional collection plans (RCPs) and as a source of documentation for political decision-makers e.g. by listing more negatively affected species on CITES or on a higher appendix and generally for improving regional legislation and enforcement.

In the past two years many initiatives have sought to improve husbandry and population management for songbirds in EAZA institutions, including a first RCP session in the new integrated style. Furthermore, a first Long-term Management Planning workshop was carried out for the Emei Shan Liocichla (*Liocichla omeiensis*). Three best practice guidelines were published, and more are coming soon; in addition, several new EEPs are now starting their work.

The many Silent Forest and songbird exhibitions, theme days and additional education materials from zoos throughout Europe have all contributed to a greater public understanding of the work that zoos support, and in particular of the conservation commitment that EAZA institutions have. It is encouraging to learn that so many zoos have decided