

Tough laws 'not enough' to stop endangered wildlife trade

May 5 2015, by Jenna Iacurci



Credit: cbpix / Fotolia

The international wildlife trade is a major threat to various endangered animals across the world, but as western conservation groups seek stricter law enforcement over this practice, new research finds that tough

laws are "not enough" to stomp out the trade.

For example, in the case of the Bali starling bringing in tougher laws backfired and actually made the bird more popular among wealthy elite.

According to new findings published in the journal *Oryx*, sometimes the solution may not be as simple as making the wildlife trade illegal. Scientists should be looking to local people who know the realities on the ground and can therefore get better results.

To better understand how to stomp out the endangered wildlife trade, lead author Dr. Paul Jepson, of the University of Oxford, examined three different conservation efforts over the last 30 years to protect the Bali starling ([Leucopsar rothschildi](#)). This species went extinct in the wild in Bali, Indonesia, in 2006.

According to Jepson, the enactment of stricter wildlife laws in the 1980s and 1990s led to the bird becoming a popular gift within Indonesian high society. By owning such birds, members of high society appeared to be above the law and the Indonesian government felt it could not act against people of such a high status. Though tough laws were supposed to help protect the Bali starling, it seems they in fact contributed to the species' demise and extinction in the wild before its reintroduction in 2008.

In 2014, at the London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade, conservation groups pressed governments worldwide to make [illegal wildlife trade](#) a more serious crime. However, Jepson believes that, as was seen with the Bali starling, this solution could backfire.

"Calls for stricter enforcement and trade bans represent a straight-forward solution that appeals to politicians and citizens alike. However, the complexity of the wildlife trade issue can be lost in the emotion of conservation campaigns," he said in a statement.

Instead, he recommends relaxing enforcement of the laws on wildlife trading - a trick that has been successful in the past.

For instance, such was the case in 2003 when the Taman Safari zoo and the Indonesian Ornithological Society, a bird-breeder association, set up a network of breeders among the owners of Bali starlings on the island of Java. Their "crowd-breeding" model transformed the Bali starling into a species whose price and source of supply were publicly known. Consequentially, this undermined the status associated with owners of these birds, as well as the profitability of black market suppliers.

Also, another successful initiative is when a local Balinese conservation organization released captive-bred starlings on the neighboring island of Nusa Penida in 2006. But before they were released, the Governor of Bali gave the starlings as a ceremonial offering to a local temple. This meant the bird now had a sacred status and thereby offered them protection under customary laws.

What's more, the released starlings established a breeding population and by 2009 third-generation offspring of these released birds were flying free on the island.

Although the new study isn't trying to badmouth tough laws, it does highlight the importance of taking all factors into consideration when trying to protect endangered species.

"I do not want to denounce the international approach seeking tighter law enforcement," Jepson stressed, "but this case study shows we should not oversimplify how we respond to the problem of the [wildlife trade](#). This study adds to a growing body of evidence that shows sometimes more nuanced approaches are needed to fit with the local social and political realities and we should tailor solutions on more of a case-by-case basis."

Provided by Oxford University

Citation: Tough laws 'not enough' to stop endangered wildlife trade (2015, May 5) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-05-tough-laws-endangered-wildlife.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.