



## Tougher laws to reduce wildlife trade 'not enough and can backfire'

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Western conservation groups are seeking stricter law enforcement to tackle a trade in endangered wildlife, but an Oxford University researcher warns that this is not a 'silver bullet' solution. He highlights the case of the Bali Starling in an article published in the journal *Oryx*. In that case, bringing in tougher laws created unexpected outcomes – they helped make the Bali Starling more popular among bird keepers in high society. He believes this contributed to the bird's extinction in the wild in 2006. Initiatives need to be more flexible and creative, he suggests, arguing that local conservation groups should be given more support as often their solutions take into account the realities on the ground.

Dr Paul Jepson, from Oxford's School of Geography and the Environment, examines three different conservation approaches, spanning 30 years, aimed at protecting the Bali Starling (*Leucopsar rothschildi*). He showed that a traditional protection and law enforcement approach that outlawed ownership of the Bali Starling in the 1980s and 1990s increased rather than reduced demand for wild-caught Bali Starlings. The bird became a popular gift among the elite of Indonesia, who gained more status by owning the bird because the relevant Indonesian government agencies felt they could not crack down on the elite.

Leading conservation groups take a different view to Dr Jepson. At the 2014 London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade, they pressed governments worldwide to ensure greater efforts were made to enforce the law against those involved in the black market.

Dr Jepson questions whether the international conservation groups' strong-arm approach is effective, arguing that a case-by-case analysis might be needed. He highlights two initiatives from the Balinese and Javanese communities which involved a relaxation of the strict laws governing the trade of Bali Starlings. First, in 2003, a zoo (Taman Safari) and a bird-breeder association (Indonesian Ornithological Society) set up a network of breeders among the owners of Bali starlings on the island of Java. By introducing a 'crowd-breeding' model, it transformed the Bali Starling into a species whose price and source of supply were publicly known. This lessened the status of keeping such birds and thereby reduced their profitability to black market suppliers. This model required licensed breeders to donate some of their Bali Starlings for release into Bali Barat National Park. The first such release marked Indonesia's hosting of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Bali in 2008.

The other initiative was on the neighbouring Indonesian island of Nusa Penida. A local Balinese conservation group released captive-bred starlings on the island in 2006 in spite of opposition from an international conservation organisation and Indonesia's state conservation agency. Critics tried to block the plan, saying any such release would contravene a strict interpretation of the law as the island was outside the birds' native zone. Eventually, however, the Governor of Bali intervened. The starlings were given to a local temple as a ceremonial offering before they were released. This gave the Bali Starling status as a 'sacred bird', affording them protection under customary laws. The released starlings established a breeding population on Nusa Penida; by 2009, with the third-generation offspring of these

release birds currently flying free on the island.

Dr Jepson commented: 'I do not want to denounce the international approach seeking tighter law enforcement, but this case study shows we should not oversimplify how we respond to the problem of the wildlife trade. There is a growing body of evidence that shows more nuanced approaches are sometimes needed to fit with the local social and political realities and we should tailor solutions on more of a case-by-case basis.

'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.'

For more information, contact the University of Oxford News Office on +44 (0)1865 280534 or email: [news.office@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:news.office@admin.ox.ac.uk)

#### Notes for Editors:

- The paper, 'Saving a species threatened by trade: a network study of Bali Starling *Leucopsar rothschildi* conservation', by Paul Jepson will be published in the journal, *Oryx*, on Monday. The paper can be freely accessed for three weeks at <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayIssue?jid=ORX&tab=firstview> (<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayIssue?jid=ORX&tab=firstview>)
- Dr Jepson was head of the BirdLife-International Indonesia Programme from 1991-1997. During this time he had overall responsibility for the Bali Starling Conservation Project in Indonesia. His doctoral thesis was on protected area policy and politics in Indonesia and he has written widely on wildlife trade.
- Images of the bird are available on request.