

Is Parrot Conservation Needed?

by Marc Johnson, Founder & Executive Director,
[Foster Parrots](#)

One of the myths often heard by those who breed exotic animals for the pet trade is: "If I wasn't breeding these animals my children and grandchildren would never have the chance to see them." Selling exotic animals for profit in the pet trade does nothing for the conservation of any species but for many endangered animals like tigers, whose numbers in the wild are dangerously low, some scientific breeding program, in conjunction with a massive ecosystem conservation effort for future reintroduction, may be the only hope of their continuance on this earth. This may also be true for several species of parrots with highly specialized habitat, dietary, or nesting needs, but many parrot species are thriving amongst human communities.

The myth that we need to breed them in captivity in order to "save" them is one myth that is being debunked every day all over the world. In fact, it is the very pet trade itself that is probably most responsible for the desperate situation many parrots find themselves in today, and sadly, the pet trade is still at work in places like Guyana, one of the largest legal exporters of parrots in the world.



Orange-winged Amazons overlook a Trinidad village from the Monastery Tree.
(Photo by Marc Johnson)



Amazons perch on a rooftop in Georgetown, Guyana.
(Photo by Marc Johnson)

Many species of parrots are adapting and finding that our agricultural efforts are perfectly acceptable habitats to the unfortunate point where many hundreds of thousands are now considered pests and killed. In Australia, cockatoos, by the hundreds of thousands, are killed, and in Trinidad, local farmers are shooting Orange-winged Amazons, who raid their cash crops. Demands by an ever-growing human population for housing, agriculture, and industry will, in time, threaten ever-growing areas that parrots call home, and many species of parrot will not be able to adapt; but many more will find that our world suits them just fine. Just like the birds in our backyards — hawks and cardinals — parrots will adapt and become successful at surviving

alongside us. There will always be parrots in our world.

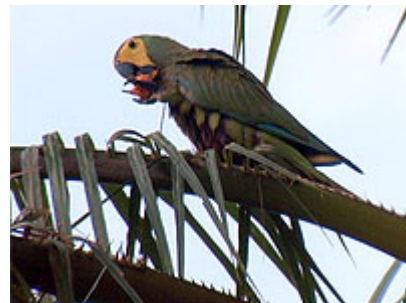
And now here we sit, pontificating from our easy chairs or luxury cars on the need for others to "save the rainforest" and the animals in them. After having destroyed much of our own wilderness, we now feel it is much easier to shoot a wolf, buffalo, or cougar than

to build a fence. We have always taken the "easy way out" and now we want the rest of the world to "do the right thing"? It is truly time for us to put our money where our mouths are, get off the couch, and do something. If one considers the billions spent in the pet trade it is truly a shame to think that just a fraction of that money could preserve the wilderness wherein our interests, the parrots, live. All of them.

OK, so we aren't going to somehow magically get everyone to stop spending their money on exotic pets or supplies overnight, but maybe we can, over time, get them to realize that seeing a parrot in the wild is worth so much more than having one in your living room and that the forests are where they truly belong.

To this end there is a solution, a solution that very nicely offers viable options to most, if not all of these quandaries — ecotourism. In ecotourism there lie economic opportunities for the local people, a reason to protect the natural assets, and, above all, the opportunity for many of us to see and understand the true majesty and joy of a wild parrot living a life of freedom. Conservation of ecosystems, the intricate webs of living creatures and plants, should be a viable consideration, but it is going to require that instead of — or in addition to — just sending a check to your favorite conservation organization, we must go to the places where there are efforts afoot to save these, as Dr. Charles Munn calls them, "nature fortresses." By doing so, we will not only support the efforts of local and like-minded people, but we will return home with a story that can never be told by a parrot in a cage. We will return as ambassadors for the wild parrots, for all parrots. Visiting the rainforest changes you, it changes the way you see parrots. It will make you understand the injustice of a captive bird. It changed me. I could not return after having seen the wilderness of the forests only to wonder if they would survive. I felt that I had a responsibility; I could not turn my back on what I saw without trying to do something. Could you?

My opportunity to contribute to the conservation of parrots in the wild came after several trips to Guyana with my good friend Brian Cullity. Guyana is a country rich with vast untouched rainforests and a sparse population located on the coast with many Amerindian villages scattered across its 83,000 square miles. We were fortunate to meet several people, including Damon Corrie, Paul Farias, and member of the Guyanan parliament, Shirley Melville, who all are not only concerned about saving as much wilderness as possible, but also in preserving their Amerindian culture. An agreement to stop the trapping of parrots was made in exchange for help developing an ecotourism-based income for the village of St. Ignatius. The nearby Kanuku mountain range (elevation 1,600 feet) is home to a clay lick, Harpy Eagle nesting sites, Howler Monkeys, Jaguar, and Cock of the Rock, and plans



A Red-bellied Macaw feeds on palm nuts near the proposed ecotourism base lodge site in the Kanuku Mountains near the village of St. Ignatius, Guyana.

(Photo by Marc Johnson)

are now underway to build a base lodge with two or three overnight shelters in the mountains where visitors will be able to take 1-, 3- or 5-day hikes. For those not wishing to take the strenuous hike into the mountains, there are many varieties of parrots near the proposed base lodge site. Flocks of Red-bellied Macaws can be found each morning feeding off palm nuts offering some great photo opportunities as they are quite used to humans passing by. We are hopeful that enough people will visit this site in southern Guyana to not only allow the village to continue without the income derived from trapping, but also to encourage other villages to develop their own ecotourism ventures. So...get off the couch! Go away! You'll be a different person when you get back and you will have contributed to saving wild parrots.

Cost of a digital camera...\$300.00; a plane ticket and eco-tour...\$1500.00; the memory you will carry with you for the rest of your life after seeing a parrot fly in the valley below you...Priceless.

Marc Johnson is the Founder and Executive Director of [Foster Parrots](#), a captive parrot rescue, adoption, and placement organization just south of Boston, Massachusetts.

Editor's Note: Please remember that wild parrots and captive parrots are genetically identical. Captive parrots were born to be wild and live free like the birds described in this article. It is impossible to address issues of avian welfare without acknowledging the diverse and contrasting challenges presented by conservation, species survival, exploitation and companionization of parrots by the pet trade, and our responsibility to provide the best quality of life captivity can offer those who will never live as nature intended