

Parrot trade 'potential disaster' for native birds

Parrot breeders have suggested that exotic birds should be imported legally to curb the smuggling trade, but biologists say this would be a disaster.

In October 2002, a case of parrots suffering from an exotic psitticine (parrot) pox hit headlines throughout New Zealand. The virus is spread by contact between parrots and by biting insects like mosquitoes.

At that time, MAF Biosecurity responded to the outbreak by isolating the contaminated aviaries and eradicating the disease.

Forest and Bird remains concerned, however, that diseases like parrot pox could

spread to populations of wild introduced parrots (such as rosella) and from there to native parrots. An assessment by MAF shows that the parrot pox virus could cause the extinction of kakapo as well as causing significant mortality for other native parrots including kaka, kea and kakariki.

The trade in exotic parrots was suspended in July 1997 and no new permits for importing have been granted since then.

Smuggling still poses a significant threat to biosecurity. In November 2002, smugglers Roy Nichols and Scott Piggott were convicted for their role in the illegal



Red-fronted parakeet at nest hole.

GEOFF MOON

importation of 26 parrot eggs in March 2001. After the conviction, Jockey Jensen who heads the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Special Investigation Group, warned that the smugglers had potentially exposed New Zealand's native bird populations to pests and diseases.

The suggestion of reopening the legal parrot trade in response would bring potential disaster, however, according to Dr Mick Clout, who is chair of the IUCN's Invasive Species Specialist Group and a senior lecturer at Auckland University. 'It would create another route for disease transmission and would make detection of an illegal trade even more difficult.'

Parrot pox is not the only disease that could attack native parrots. In February 2000, the Department of Conservation released a report listing 24 avian diseases that could impact on native parrots, and a further 65 diseases of concern that could impact on native birds other than parrots.

Dr Clout considers the risk to wildlife from disease is unknown, but potentially

serious. He believes wild introduced parrots around New Zealand should be screened to check for psitticine pox and other diseases.

'In Hawaii native birdlife has been devastated by disease, notably avian malaria,' he says. In 1826, the introduction of the southern house mosquito to Hawaii resulted in the spread of the malaria carried by introduced birds. This has contributed to the extinction of at least 10 native bird species in Hawaii and threatens more.

Other diseases of concern for native bird health in New Zealand include Newcastle's disease, fowl plague (also known as avian flu) and budgerigar herpes virus.

Dr Clout says that although predation by introduced species, especially mammals, will continue to be a major threat in New Zealand, it is unlikely that any new predators will be introduced.

'The risk of new diseases arriving is much greater,' he says. 'What we need is no parrot trade at all. The risk is too great.'

— GEOFF KEELY is Forest and Bird's biosecurity officer.

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