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Associate Professor for Biology
Department of Biology
Andalas University, Indonesia

Email: editorjinh@jinh.org

Dr. Carl Traeholt

Programme Director, Southeast Asia
Research and Conservation Division
Copenhagen Zoo, Denmark

Email: ctraeholt@gmail.com

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COVER PHOTO: Jakarta's Pramuka bird market illuminates both rich cultural roots and a monumental conservation challenge
© Carl Traeholt, Copenhagen Zoo.

GUEST EDITORIAL

Songbird trade crisis in Southeast Asia leads to the formation of IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group

Chris R. Shepherd¹ and Phillip Cassey²

¹ Monitor Conservation Research Society (Monitor), Box 200, Big Lake Ranch, B.C., Canada V0L 1G0

² School of Biological Sciences, University of Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia

Corresponding author: Chris R. Shepherd, email: chris.shepherd@mcrsociety.org

Wildlife trade is one of the most important underlying causes of biodiversity loss. In Southeast Asia, massive growth in the wildlife trade is potentially threatening hundreds of species, and pushing many to the brink of extinction (Wilcove et al., 2013). Of the approximately 850 species of birds native to Southeast Asia, 52 are currently assessed as being Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Wildlife trade is expanding quickly, and at current rates of over-harvesting and habitat conversion it has been estimated that one-third of Southeast Asia's bird species will be extinct by 2100, with at least 50% of these representing global extinctions (Sodhi et al., 2004; Sodhi et al., 2010).

One group of birds threatened by the trade, perhaps more so than any other, are the passerine songbirds. Within Southeast Asia, and especially in Indonesia, the demand for songbirds as pets, and for songbird competitions, is enormous and involves hundreds of species and millions of individual birds each year (Chng et al., 2015; Chng and Eaton, 2016). Bird markets can be found in most major cities and towns throughout Indonesia, with some of the world's rarest songbirds openly for sale. Although the demand for pets and songbird competitions are the main drivers behind the trade, in some parts of Southeast Asia songbirds are also harvested for consumption as food, and for use in traditional medicines. Increasingly, songbirds are also traded online.

Sadly, less charismatic and smaller-bodied species,

such as the songbirds, have received little scientific or conservation attention, and many are vanishing. Some species have become so near to extinction that a mere handful remain, with some only known now from captive specimens (Eaton et al., 2015). The Straw-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus zeylanicus* is a prime example. It is now extinct throughout most of its former range, and is currently confined to Singapore, a few localities in Malaysia, and possibly a few sites in western Indonesia, with the primary cause for this decline being the demand as cage birds and for singing competitions in Indonesia (Shepherd et al., 2013; Bergin et al., 2017). The Rufous-fronted Laughingthrush *Garrulax rufifrons*, endemic to the island of Java in Indonesia, is in even greater trouble. This species is all but gone from the wild, having only been observed in one location over the past 20 years, again due to trapping to meet demand within Indonesia (Collar and van Balen, 2013). Without intervention, species like the Straw-headed Bulbul and the Rufous-fronted Laughingthrush may vanish from the wild completely.

However, there is hope. In September 2015, in response to the urgent need for action, a group of dedicated people (researchers, practitioners, conservation leaders) came together in Singapore for the first Asian Songbird Trade Crisis Summit, hosted by Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS). During this summit, a Southeast Asian Songbird Working Group was formed, and commenced planning for a conservation strategy.

In 2016, the Conservation Strategy for Southeast

Asian Songbirds in Trade; Recommendations from the first Asian Songbird Trade Crisis Summit 2015 held in Jurong Bird Park, Singapore 27-29 September 2015 was published. Among other things, this plan included a list of priority species in need of urgent actions to prevent them from extinction, and laid out a number of recommendations and action points to enhance conservation efforts. It also called for the establishment of an official IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group, to officially represent the Southeast Asian Songbird Working Group and lead the conservation planning and decision making.

In February 2017, a second summit was held, again in Singapore, bringing experts together to share updates on developments since 2015, and to discuss opportunities including campaigns by zoos and behavioural change strategies to reduce

the unsustainable demand for wild birds. Central to these discussions was the implementation of the Conservation Strategy for Southeast Asian Songbirds in Trade. One of the recommendations from these summits, and the Strategy, was to better formalise the working group, and in May 2017, the IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (ASTSG) was launched, committed to preventing the extinction of any of Southeast Asia's songbirds threatened by illegal and/or unsustainable trade, and ultimately to reverse the decline in these species.

The ASTSG is tasked with the implementation of the Strategy, and ultimately to prevent any of Southeast Asia's songbirds from further decline or extinction, and to recover these species. The ASTSG focuses on a number of priority themes, led by vice-chairs, including: (i) trade monitoring



Figure 1. Jakarta's infamous Pramuka bird market remains one of the main bird trading hubs in Southeast Asia. Thousands of illegally caught birds are traded here every month.

and policy interventions; (ii) ex-situ conservation breeding programmes; (iii) education and community engagement; (iv) genetic research; and (v) in-situ research on wild populations. Furthermore, the ASTSG will provide updated information and recommendations to BirdLife International to aid in future IUCN Red List status assessments, and will encourage publication of information on key taxa and related trade and policy issues.

The ASTSG is ultimately aimed at guiding conservation and research efforts, informing national and international laws and policies, raising awareness and reducing demand. The formation of the ASTSG is an essential step towards effective conservation of Southeast Asia's songbirds, but the real work now lies ahead.

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Both authors are members of the IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group. Chris R. Sheperd was heading the TRAFFIC office in Southeast Asia for many years, before returning to Canada two years ago to start up "Monitor".

The logo for Monitor Conservation Research Society features the word "monitor" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The letter "o" is stylized with a white bird silhouette inside it. Below the word "monitor" is the text "CONSERVATION RESEARCH SOCIETY" in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font.