

# BirdLife Position on the Import of wild birds into the European Union

*For external use. Adopted by the Birds and Habitats Directive Task Force on 1 April 2006*

*Updated and readopted on 12 April 2016*

## Position

BirdLife asks to maintain the ban on the import into the EU of all birds caught in the wild (Regulation 139/2013). EU BirdLife Partners consider that the international trade in all birds caught in the wild should not harm bird species and should only take place if it can be shown to contribute conservation benefits to the species concerned. We believe that for the EU to accept the import of wild-caught birds it should be clearly demonstrated, on a case-by-case basis, that strict criteria are met to ensure that:

- (i) the birds originate from science-based management programmes, guaranteeing conservation benefits for the species concerned.
- (ii) native biodiversity will not be put at risk by the accidental introduction of the imported species;
- (iii) the health of wildlife, humans or livestock will not be put at risk by their accidental introduction;
- (iv) the welfare of the birds traded is ensured and the risk of mortality minimised.

In addition, measures should be put in place to prevent wild-caught birds from being laundered into trade as 'captive bred' birds and the captive breeding centres should be monitored and reviewed. EU BirdLife Partners recognise the theoretical benefits to bird conservation from sustainable use and the potential economic benefits to local communities and developing countries from trade. However, we also believe that these criteria must be met if use is to be sustainable and the well-being of humans, livestock and wildlife in Europe is to be protected.

The evidence for the criteria mentioned should be provided by the exporting country. EU BirdLife Partners recognise that there may be exemptions for the import of a small number of wild-caught birds for approved scientific research, conservation or education purposes. Notwithstanding any of the above, EU BirdLife Partners fully support the strong implementation and enforcement of CITES both within the EU and globally.

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## Background

1. The international bird trade involves millions of birds. The trade is a contributory factor in the globally threatened status of some species and is implicated in population declines of others<sup>1</sup>, and often specifically targets rare species<sup>2</sup>.
2. In the EU the import of birds originating from the wild is primarily covered by the ‘Import of Birds Regulation’ (Regulation 139/2013 replacing 318/2007). The Imports of Birds Regulation bans all imports of birds caught in the wild from countries outside the EU, with the following exceptions
  - a. poultry;
  - b. birds imported for conservation programmes approved by the competent authority in the Member State of destination;
  - c. pet animals referred to in the third paragraph of Article 1 of the Directive 92/65/EEC, accompanying their owner;
  - d. birds intended for zoos, circuses, amusement parks or experiments;
  - e. birds destined for bodies, institutes or centres approved according to Article 13 of Directive 92/65/EEC;
  - f. racing pigeons which are introduced to the territory of the Union from a neighbouring third country where they are normally resident and then immediately released with the expectation that they will fly back to that third country;
  - g. birds imported from Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, and the Vatican City Stat
3. The Regulation allows only captive bred birds to enter the EU and only if these birds come from approved breeding establishments that comply with the conditions laid down in the Regulation. To date, there has been no comprehensive review of compliance with the requirements on the breeding establishments and the extent in which birds are correctly marked as captive-bred. There are no EU wide standards for foot-rings and no central registration, and this leaves room for laundering wild birds as captive-bred.
4. The Import of Birds Regulation is therefore broadly in line with the BirdLife Position, and should be maintained. Its implementation should be assessed and improved where necessary.
5. In addition, the trade of some 1 500 bird species is regulated under the CITES convention. Trade in species listed on Appendix I (154 species) is strictly regulated and excludes commercial activities; trade in species listed on Appendix II is only allowed under a system of permits with a requirement that quotas be based on non-detiment findings. CITES itself can impose sanction or quotas on countries that ignore recommendations resulting from reviews of significant trade. However, most species fall outside the protection of CITES, including most globally threatened species. There are little data available on the numbers or variety of these non-CITES species in trade.
6. It is legitimate to implement stricter measures than CITES. The EU has already implemented stricter measures for CITES species by implementing the Wildlife Trade Regulations (Regulation 338/97). This allows the EU to impose quotas or restrict imports for species of conservation concern. Despite these regulations, many species were in the past still traded into the EU in large numbers with apparently little knowledge of their population status or biology. Some species, such as the grey parrot, have

<sup>1</sup> Butchart, S. H. M. (2008) Red List Indices to measure the sustainability of species use and impacts of invasive alien species. Bird Conservation International 18 (suppl.) 245–262.

<sup>2</sup> Tella J.R. and Hiraldo F. (2014) Illegal and Legal Parrot Trade Shows a Long-Term, Cross-Cultural Preference for the Most Attractive Species Increasing Their Risk of Extinction. PLoS One 2014 9(9):107546.

continued to decline across much of their range, largely as a result of over-exploitation, in spite of numerous quotas and restrictions imposed by CITES<sup>3</sup>.

7. In 2013, less than 1 000 CITES-listed live (wild or captive-bred) birds were imported to the EU<sup>4</sup>. This is a sharp contrast with 2002 when more than 500 000 live birds were imported to the EU, of which more than 300 000 originated from the wild.<sup>5</sup> It is likely that this reduction in legal trade is also driven by the Imports of Birds Regulation.
8. It is sometimes argued that the wild bird trade is a valuable resource that potentially provides important income for the rural poor in exporting countries and incentives for conservation. However, there would appear to be no/little published evidence to show that habitats have been conserved to provide a 'sustainable harvest' of birds<sup>6</sup>, whilst there is substantive evidence to show that the trade has been implicated in population declines of a number of species<sup>7</sup>.
9. Importing wild birds would be at odds with the strict protection afforded to EU native birds through the Birds Directive and national legislation. In addition, there are issues associated with welfare (with perhaps 60% of birds dying between capture and the pet shop<sup>8</sup>); the introduction of diseases such as avian flu with its consequences for the health of native wildlife, humans and their livestock<sup>9</sup> and the introduction of invasive alien species<sup>10</sup>.
10. There are concerns that the Import of Birds Regulation will lead to the trade being driven underground with an increase in smuggling. However, the only available scientific evidence supports the opposite view. Studies on South American parrots showed that when the USA banned imports of CITES-listed birds in 1992, illegal nest take and trade also declined<sup>11</sup>.
11. The Commission needs to ensure that exporting countries demonstrate no detrimental effects of taking wild birds and clear conservation benefits for the species concerned rather than conservation organisations having to prove otherwise.
12. The position is not anti-trade, anti-sustainability nor anti-poverty alleviation. The interests of bird conservation, and the potential import of disease and alien invasive species permit the introduction of strict controls on the bird trade under the WTO rules, which include provisions to protect animal life and to restrict the spread of diseases. The ban on the import of all wild caught birds into the EU can be promoted as a measure to support the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and encourage exporting countries to enact fully its terms.

<sup>3</sup> McGowan, P. (2001) Status, Management and Conservation of the African Grey Parrot, *Psittacus erithacus* in Nigeria. CITES, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>4</sup> UNEP-WCMC (2015) EU Wildlife Trade 2013: Analysis of the European Union and candidate countries' annual reports to CITES 2013. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge. [http://euanalysis2013.unep-wcmc.org/files/2015/11/Analysis-of-EU-Annual-Reports-2013\\_Public1.pdf](http://euanalysis2013.unep-wcmc.org/files/2015/11/Analysis-of-EU-Annual-Reports-2013_Public1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> CITES Trade database, available on [trade.cites.org](http://trade.cites.org)

<sup>6</sup> Gillardi J.D. (2006) Captured for conservation: will cages save wild birds? A response to Cooney & Jepson. *Oryx* Vol 40 No 1 January 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Butchart, S. H. M. (2008) Red List Indices to measure the sustainability of species use and impacts of invasive alien species. *Bird Conservation International* 18 (suppl.) 245–262.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. McGowan, P. (2001) Status, Management and Conservation of the African Grey Parrot, *Psittacus erithacus* in Nigeria. CITES, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>9</sup> Karesh WB et al (2007) Implications Of Wildlife Trade On The Movement Of Avian Influenza And Other Infectious Diseases. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases*, 43(3) Supplement 2007, pp. S55–S59

<sup>10</sup> Carrete M. and Tell J.L. (2008) Wild-Bird Trade and Exotic Invasions: A New Link of Conservation Concern? *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. 6(4):207-211

<sup>11</sup> Wright, T. F. et al. (2001) Nest poaching in neotropical parrots. *Conservation Biology* 15:710-720.

**In conclusion:**

- There is evidence that indicates the Imports of Birds Regulation may have led to a significant reduction in imports of wild birds in the EU.
- There is little evidence that the wild bird trade is sustainable and significant evidence that it results in biodiversity loss and deterioration of the conservation status of the species concerned.