



Opinion article

THE RELATIVE ETHICS OF KEEPING BIRDS, PARTICULARLY PARROTS IN CAGES IN COMPARISON TO OTHER FORMS OF ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

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I hope to examine the following issues and see where they stand in terms of ethical concerns

- Keeping birds in cages as pets
- Keeping chickens in a cage
- Keeping dogs and cats indoors or on a leash
- Keeping fish in an aquarium
- Keeping horses, cattle and other draught or meat producing animals in an enclosure singly or in groups

From a very broad standpoint, they are all very similar. However if we dwell a bit deeper and look at some of the finer nuances involved in all these issues; I think you can notice some very subtle and stark differences.

Let me elucidate my thoughts and opinion on each of the above issues.

First **Keeping birds in cages**: The term birds covers more than 10000 types of animals with varying physical and psychological characteristics. Similarly the term cage can also mean anything from a 1 foot diameter rounded cage to a 10 feet long one; generally the larger ones tend to be called aviaries.

So the ethical aspect of keeping birds in cage, in relative terms, is dependent on the type of bird and the size of the cage. In my opinion, keeping a small flock of zebra finches and even breeding them is relatively much more ethical than keeping an African Grey Parrot or Umbrella Cockatoo alone in a 3 feet long cage.

Of course if someone adopts an absolutist rather than a relativist approach one would say that all types of caging birds is bad or good depending on whether you are pro pet keeping or anti- pet keeping. But an absolutist position, based purely on a personal conviction rather than a reasoned argument cannot allow a room for dialogue. This is because policy decisions either at a micro level of say a village or at a global level is seldom based on personal convictions. My argument therefore is that some bird species, even if they are captive bred are highly unsuited to being in captivity. In fact probably the converse is true- when you take the whole class of Aves: Of the 10000 odd species, only few are adapted well to a life of confinement.



When you take the wild bird trade into the equation, the ethical situation is even starker considering that the wild bird trade has contributed to the decline of so many species.

Here too, parrots are exceptionally vulnerable; the proportion of threatened parrots is much higher than other families of birds which are traded like Fringillid or Estrildid finches and Mynas.

Keeping chickens in a cage

When we compare the factory farming of battery egg chickens, to the caging of birds, they definitely pose a very similar ethical problem. What the chicken is being subjected to is one of the most unethical acts of humanity. I would say that keeping a well maintained aviary of Estrildid waxbills, even for commerce, is far more ethical and worthwhile pursuit than the conventional farming of chickens.

However keeping chickens in a cage and keeping parrots in a cage, especially the larger ones is not a fair comparison when it comes to ethics. This as most parrots are much more complex birds in terms of cognitive ability and it is extremely tough for the average person to provide an enriched environment for parrots than it is to do for a chicken.

So, yes, when taking sheer numbers, the number of chickens physically abused by humanity is far worse than the number of parrots. But, keeping an individual chicken as a pet in a cage or a few chickens in a barnyard for eggs, is far better proposition than keeping a parrot in a cage because the cognitive development of the latter is possibly much superior. And keeping a chicken as a pet will not result in the tragedy of depressed and/or insane birds which indulge in selfmutilation as shown in many animal welfare websites and documentaries like notably "Parrot Confidential" [1] and "Parrots: Look who is talking!" [2]

Chickens would perhaps make much better and more eco-friendly pets than cats and dogs.

To dwell a little bit deeper in this issue - the only parrot species which is perhaps comparable to chicken is the budgerigar. They are also mass bred in factory-like conditions across the world in dark rodent infested, improperly ventilated rooms. In terms of physical abuse this probably comes very close to what chickens endure.



Keeping dogs and cats on a leash

Dogs and cats have lived around people for millennia and a leash does not restrict freedom in the same way that a cage does. But, this is actually not a fair comparison. In any case more people should be discouraged from keeping these mammalian carnivores as pets. Especially in the case of cats, as the recent draft threat abatement plan for feral cats background documents says: “Cats, that is *Felis catus*, are an important domestic companion animal as well as being a significant threat to native fauna. It is important for public debate that it is recognised that all cats are the same species and the categorisation of domestic, stray and feral are labels of convenience.”

So I would argue that the keeping of some medium sized parrots – say Color mutation Rose-ringed parakeets may actually be a better option than keeping a cat as a pet. These birds are not prone to problems like the larger cockatoos and macaws and they are also not extremely inexpensive like budgies or cockatiels and are less likely to be disposed because of the image they have unfortunately developed as ‘cheap starter birds’. Also since they have a slightly longer maturity cycle than the budgerigar the breeder has to put in more investment to get their returns in terms of time space and effort, which theoretically would involve better welfare standards.

Keeping fish in an aquarium

‘Fish’ is a generic term which covers huge paraphyletic taxa with 30,000+ species. So, here too, there are finer nuances to consider. If we broadly divide the commonly kept aquarium fish into two categories- the marine and freshwater- the former has posed more ethical challenges because of the use of cyanide in capturing fishes. Even in the case of freshwater fish, over exploitation for the aquarium trade has resulted in endangering a few species –notably the Denison barb *Sahyadria denisonii* from Western Ghats in Kerala India, which became endangered within a few years of being awarded the third prize in the new aquarium species category in Aquarama 2007, a global Pet Aquarium fish show. The more serious issue from the aquarium hobby which partly applies to some species of parrots (notably Rose-ringed and Monk Parakeets) is the spread of feral populations in the wild.

Consequently, while there are similar ethical issues between the keeping of parrots and keeping of fish, there are some fundamental differences too. Firstly, fish are not as cognitively endowed as parrots are and keeping a fish in a reasonably sized planted aquarium cannot be compared to keeping a parrot in a cage. This is so because the cage is not an attempted replication of the organism’s natural habitat whereas a well-designed aquarium could be a replication of the habitat of many fishes, particularly smaller freshwater pond and lake fish species. Second, most commonly kept fresh water aquarium fish have a potential lifespan of about 3 to 10 years. This is a span that an average pet keeping person can commit to without undue stress. And even if the



person is not able to commit the time required, s/he could give away the fish to another knowledgeable aquarist with little hassles. With parrots, the potential lifespan is much higher with even the small budgie capable of living 12+ years and transitions are seldom smooth – definitely for the bird and often not for the human caretaker too.

Keeping horses, cattle and other draught or meat producing animals in an enclosure singly or in groups

Again this may not be a worthy comparison, even though I agree that there are serious ethical violations in the farming of draught and meat animals. But, barring the pig, none of the draught animals or food animals matches the cognitive ability of parrot family birds, specially not the large cockatoos. However, from an ecological perspective, one can possibly compare the two. A flock of cockatiels in an aviary is probably going to have a lower ecological footprint than a herd of same number of cows. In a hypothetical scenario, if there was a 100 square kilometer patch of forest habitat in a country which harbors native parrots –say about 4 species. If this patch of land has a few villages in the near vicinity, where the locals sometimes “harvest” the nestlings and keep them as pets, but by and large keep the forest patch intact for their subsistence needs like firewood, construction material, etc., it would be better to maintain the status quo than to clear that patch of forest and convert it into a ranch of draught, dairy and meat animals. This is especially true if we are dealing with the smaller non charismatic species like Parrotlets which have a higher ability to withstand harvest, especially when done at a subsistence level by an insular native community. In fact, a good read on this issue is the book *Birds and People* by Mark Cocker who devotes a separate chapter to Parrots in Amerindian Culture.

But this is entirely different context from mass producing African Grey Parrots in a crowded urban aviary to sell the young ones as human bonded pets to the highest bidder. And then, uploading the videos on YouTube. This creates a huge demand and hence pressure on this species which has been the major cause of decline. Also especially for the African Grey and perhaps for many more species- the argument that all parrots available in the market are captive bred in the developed Western world does not hold water. Because even if the West has regulated their market very well and has stopped all smuggling, it does not necessarily stop the threat to the species in concern.

People keeping African Grey Parrots, especially in the West and uploading videos of birds with spectacular mimicry talent does not help the cause of saving the species in the wild. This is because it creates what I call a Ripple effect. While the West may have sealed its borders to smuggling, the demand for this species is worldwide and while the law is very good on paper in

countries like India, the law enforcement would be heavily burdened to maintain the integrity of the law. Hence a lot of smuggling of Grey Parrots can and does happen with destinations like India and countries of the Middle- East being the most popular destinations. My friend, Subin who was working in Saudi Arabia in 2015 sent me pictures of African Grey Parrots in the bird markets there. He said he had seen hundreds of African Grey Parrots there and it is highly probable that they were all wild caught. The suffering and sometimes death of these countless birds which has been captured by camera show that at least some of the moral responsibility of this tragedy rests on the shoulders of those who upload those “cute” parrot videos on you tube.



There is also the interesting argument put forth by some enthusiasts that keeping parrots in cages is justified because a large portion of humanity cannot afford to travel to see magnificent parrots like macaws, cockatoos, etc. This argument is fallacious because seeing a particular species of



wild animal, purely out of fascination is not a “Necessity” or a “Right” for human beings. Taking my own example, it has been a big dream for me to see the Hyacinth Macaw and the 3 sympatric species of large Ara macaws-i.e. Blue-and-Yellow, Scarlet and Red-and-Green- on a clay lick. But, as of now, it is not something I can afford. So, while I would definitely make a trip when circumstances are favorable, buying a captive bred Scarlet Macaw to keep in my drawing room would definitely not be the alternative solution to quench my desire.

Nor is foregoing the desire. The solution is to tone down your expectation according to your circumstance. For example, I went to the Western Ghats and saw the endemic Malabar Parakeet- which was also an awesome experience in its own way.

If for example aspiring eco-tourists from the USA cannot go to New Guinea to see the Palm Cockatoos, then they should instead settle for going to Mexico to see the Military Macaw.

Sources:

[1]

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