

## **THE SPIX'S MACAW: LATEST NEWS**

### **ABSTRACT**

The Spix's Macaw (*Cyanopsitta spixii*), is one of the most threatened of extinction neotropical psittacine in the world. This bird is endemic of the "caatinga baian" (Savannah scrub vegetation predominant in Bahia State, northeast of Brazil), a narrow area in the valley of São Francisco River. Data provided by the researcher Paul Roth, who received the information from the local residents, demonstrated that this species was always rare, and that the population in the beginning of the century was approximately of 30 pairs or little more. However, in the last 50 years, and from the 70's and 80's, a relevant factor stood out; the capture of the birds to supply the illegal trade led the species to the virtual extinction in the wild.

Face to this situation, the second half of the 80's, some conservationists agencies, and the former Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento Florestal - IBDF (nowadays IBAMA) started discussing ways to try to recover the Spix's Macaws species. In 1990 the International Permanent Committee for the Recovery of the Spix's Macaw (CPRAA) was created, and the main objective was to establish a program for the recovery of the species. Since its creation, the Committee has been acting in two different fronts: the field and the captivity.

### **FIELD ACTIVITIES: SPIX'S MACAW PROJECT**

The search for remnant populations of the species resulted in the found of the single last wild specimen, a male that was living in the Curaçá region, Bahia state, and was paired with a female of Illiger's Macaw (*Propyrrhura maracana*), another species of Macaw that live in the same region.

During ten years, the Spix's Macaw Project studied this male not only to know about his biology but also to protect him. The bird was monitored by an information net coordinated by the field staff of the Project that counted with the important participation of the local residents. That way, it was possible to collect precise data about the movement of the wild male macaw, and strengthen the bonds with the local population. Parallel, the Project developed works to involve the community with issues such as the conservation of the Spix's Macaw, the habitat recovery aiming future reintroduction of birds bred in captivity, experiences of nests' management, translocation of eggs and nestlings and reintroduction.

Every year, at the time that preceded the breeding season (that is the peak of the dry season, between September and October), the male used to fly further (due to the shortage of food supplies), probably looking for food and/or places to set a nest . When this situation happened, it was more difficult to locate the male and it was common that at this time of the year, the field staff spent many days without seeing the bird. In this situation, the procedure adopted was to visit intensively the places frequented normally by the macaw and checking all the areas where the local residents provided any information.

In October 2000 a similar situation was happening, the wild remnant male of *C. spixii* had been seen for the last time by some members of the field staff in the evening of the fifth day of the month, in the farm where the female Illiger's Macaw used to spend the night.

This was not abnormal at that time of the year, except for a single difference: The Illiger's Macaw spent the night alone, what did not happen in the previous years.

Face to this picture, the following procedures were adopted:

- To go further and to add new members to the field staff: temporarily, some mateiros (cowboys) were hired to help in the searches. The staff was distributed through the places where there were greater probability of the macaw show up. Besides this, the places used by the wild macaw were intensively visited. All the information received were immediately checked.

- To search in the areas of Irrigation Projects: there were information that the Spix's Macaw had been seen at irrigation projects sites (different from those that he used to frequent normally). The field staff visited these places many times and distributed pamphlets calling the attention of the people to a possible presence of the Spix's Macaw in the area.
- To give preference for the search: it was given preference to the search for the wild Spix's Macaw in detriment of other Project activities.
- A survey of all the places where had been raining recently was conducted and they were visited by members of the field staff to evaluate the food supply offer.
- An attempt to follow the female Illiger's Macaw when she left the dormitory site in the morning was tried to know to where she headed to and if she by any chance met the male. However, this attempt did not succeed because when she arrived at a place where there were other macaws of the same species, it was not possible to distinguish her from the others.

The fact of the Illiger's Macaw be spending the night alone suggested three possibilities:

1. The male would have died, since it should be considered that the bird was twenty years old, at least, so old age for a macaw. During the ten years of study, there were uncountable accounts of agnostics meetings between the wild male and hawks. With the old age, the ability to escape from predators might have diminished.
2. The male might have changed the partner – less probable hypothesis, considering that psittacines are generally monogamic
3. The Spix's and the Illiger's Macaw might be foraging in sites very distant from the dormitory of the Illiger's Macaw, and out of the route normally used, therefore, the male might be spending the night near the foraging place and the Illiger's Macaw might be returning to the dormitory; this sounded reasonable, since the Illiger's Macaws are more faithful to the dormitory site than the Spix's Macaws, however, after some days the Illiger's Macaw did not return to the spend the night at the dormitory site anymore.

Until the time of his disappearance, the Spix's Macaw did not present any behavior change.

It was organized an ample search operation, financed by IBAMA, that involved the field staff and the local residents who were very familiar with the region and with the Spix's Macaw. Simultaneously to the search efforts, another staff continued to carry on the week monitoring, since there was a probability of the bird return to his original site.

Unfortunately and despite all the efforts made, the wild male of *Cyanopsitta spixii* was no longer seen and there were no news about his whereabouts.

The field staff continued the monthly monitoring, visiting all the old places frequented by the macaw and talking to the residents. The objectives of this procedure were to obtain information of probable sightings of the bird and to maintain the local community informed about the events.

The maintenance of the field activities was considered crucial during the last meeting of the Committee held in Brasilia in 2001, because this would sign to the local community that the Works for the conservation of the species would continue, independently of the situation of the wild male. With the proposal to reintroduce Spix's Macaws in Curaçá, this kind of work became essential for the success of the reintroduction Project.

During ten years of the Project, the Loro Parque Fundación was the main sponsor. However, in the meeting of 2001, the Foundation decided to do not sponsor the Project anymore. With the end of the financial resources, IBAMA assumed integrally the maintenance costs of the field activities.

In regard to the aforementioned, the Fauna General Coordination/IBAMA decided to suspend the field activities of the Spix's Macaw Project until the restructuring process of the Committee be concluded, and consequently, the situation of the Spix's Macaws kept in captivity that nowadays are out of the country be defined.

### CAPTIVITY ACITIVITIES

At the time of the creation of the Committee, there were 15 birds known in captivity in different places in the world, and it was essential that all the birds took part of the management program. That way, in sign of good will, the Brazilian Government declared that in extremely exceptional case, specimens of Spix's Macaws that took part of the Action Plan established by the Committee were not going to be confiscated. So, holders of Spix's Macaws were invited to participate of the program.

In 1993, An agreement was signed by the holders guaranteeing that the birds under their care were going to be managed in accordance with the rules and determinations of the Committee. With this measure, IBAMA expected to assure the end of commercial trade of Spix's Macaws, the management of the birds in captivity as a single population and the impossibility of birds' transference without the previous recommendation and/or acknowledge of the Committee. The management of Spix's Macaws in captivity initiated and from the genetic analysis of the birds, appropriate pairing were recommended and revised periodically by the studbook-keeper of the species.

However, some holders disrespected the agreement signed and transferred specimens of Spix's Macaws without the knowledge of the Committee. This happened in 1999, when Mr. J. Hammerli left the group and sold his stock to Mr. Roland Messer, who after being approved by the Committee, became a member in the same year and the birds were kept in the Management Program. Again, in 2000, Mr. Antônio de Diós transferred 4 birds for the Sheik Al-Thani, from Qatar, without previous consultation or knowledge of the Committee. The reincidence of the action caused an internal discomfort in the Committee, because it made evident the fragility of the Agreement signed.

Up to that moment, 50 birds in captivity were being managed by CPRAA. This birds are distributed as follows:

COUNTRY / HOLDER	Nº OF BIRDS	OBSERVATIONS
Philippines/Antônio de Diós	24	- Provided a female for Criadouro Chaparral to replace the female reintroduced - Committed himself to give five birds for the reintroduction when this procedure was recommended by the Committee
Switzerland/Roland Messer	18	Acquired the birds from Mr. Hammerli
Spain / W. Kiessling	3	Returned the ownership of the birds to the Brazilian Government
Brazil / Zoológico S. Paulo	2	The birds are propriety of the Brazilian Government
Brazil / Criadouro Chaparral	3	The birds are propriety of the Brazilian Government

There are ten other Spix's Macaws in captivity that are not in the recovery program for the species, these are:

- Supposedly six birds in Switzerland with Mr. Adolf Indermauer
- Four birds in Qatar, with the Sheik Al -Thani.

## COMMITTEE RESTRUCTURING

With the confirmation of the transference of the birds to Qatar and the disappearance of the wild male, An extraordinary meeting was summoned, and held in Brasilia, February 2001, to discuss new action strategies.

During the meeting, it was much discussed what would be the best way to conduct the situation. The attitude of Mr. de Diós was disapproved by the majority of the members, because as already informed, the decision to transfer the birds was taken without the previous recommendation and/or knowledge of the Committee, disrespecting the Agreement signed by him. It was decided that the continuity of the Committee was not possible in the way that it was structured because jeopardized the recovery of the species and the credibility of the members of the CPRAA, of the Institutions involved and of the Brazilian Government. So, the restructuring of the Committee was proposed. The Executive Vice-President, Iolita Bampi, present at the meeting and considering the governmental role of IBAMA as the Institution executor of the national policies defined by the Ministério do Meio Ambiente (Environment Ministry) decided that this restructuring was going to be conducted by the Brazilian Government, but would hear suggestion of the members.

The Restructuring Proposal was prepared based on the principle that the only way to carry on a serious and responsible work for the recovery of the Spix's Macaw was guaranteeing the sovereignty of the Brazilian Government on the destiny of the birds in captivity, that could be assured by the means of one of the following alternatives:

- 1) To return the ownership of the birds to the Brazil, signing "The Spix's Macaws, *Cyanopsitta spixii*, Ownership Return Agreement", stamped by the Legal Department of IBAMA; this document will be send by IBAMA to knowledge of the CITES Management Authority of countries involved.
- 2) Signature of the holders in the "Adhesion Agreement to the Management Program of the Spix's Macaws *Cyanopsitta spixii*", the document will be also signed by the President of IBAMA and by the CITES Secretariat, assuring to IBAMA/Committee the sovereignty on the destination of the birds.

The deadline for the holders present their position was February 2002, however, few members sent their contributions to the proposal, and the holders who maintain more specimens did not present the position officially.

With the objective to find a solution for the impasse, in May 2002, some specialists met in Brasilia, representatives from IBAMA and the International Affairs Ministry, to discuss the restructuring of CPRAA. The participants debated action strategies to be adopted aiming to receive from the holders their answer on the possibility of implementing the restructuring proposal. In this debate, the following actions were defined:

1. **Portaria Repeal (the legal and official document that set up the Committee)** – revoking the CPRAA and nominating IBAMA as the Institution officially responsible to conduct the negotiations and works for the recovery of the species;
2. **To send the Restructuring Proposal for the CITES Management Authorities from Philippines and Switzerland**, respectively, soliciting them to contact the holders in the sense of obtaining their answer to the restructuring proposal;
3. **To contact the CITES Secretariat**, soliciting their management along with the CITES Management Authorities of the countries involved to obtain from the holders their answer regarding the restructuring proposal;
4. **To send the Restructuring Proposal to the International Affairs Ministry**, soliciting that the aforementioned proposal be addressed to the Brazilian Embassies in the countries involved, in the sense that the embassies could act

along with the CITES Management authorities from Philippines and Switzerland to obtain the answer from the holders;

5. **To spread a retrospective summary about the Spix's Macaw Recovery Program**, informing about the restructuring proposal and the present situation, to be divulged at worldwide level (NGO's, Scientific Institutions, International Media).

The Portaria N°83, from July 15th of 2002, revoked the International Permanent Committee for the Recovery of the Spix's Macaw.

At this moment, IBAMA is expecting to receive news from the CITES Secretariat, the CITES Management Authorities from Switzerland and Philippines and from their respective holders, believing that are all aware of the seriousness of the species situation and that they are truthfully willing to revert it.

The future of the species now relies on the cooperation of the holders, since the majority of the birds in captivity are abroad and do not belong legally to the Brazilian Government. Without the unrestricted cooperation of the holders, it will be impossible to recover the Spix's Macaw species, and we will have to assume the tragic extinction of one more Brazilian species.

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