

Aviculture and Threatened Species - Finding a way forward

Threatened Species Commissioner Meeting Summary

Canberra 14/12/2017

On December 14th a group of aviculture representatives - Sam Davis, Gary Fitt, Graeme Phipps, Steve Sass and Simon Degenhard – met with the Acting Threatened Species Commissioner (TSC) in Canberra to raise awareness of the possibilities for private aviculture to contribute actively to conservation breeding programs focussed on high priority threatened bird species. The Aviculture and Threatened Species Group involves several leading aviculturists across Australia who are jointly developing arguments to support the case for private aviculture to participate in conservation programs.

By all accounts the meeting was a success – all we could have hoped for - a terrific start. The TSC is well placed to open doors leading to broader understanding of our amazing skills, experience and the extensive resources at our disposal for successfully breeding rare and endangered species. The wide-ranging discussion in the meeting covered options for aviculture to contribute to recovery team efforts, to work with state government threatened species efforts, and the need to overcome obstacles with some other stakeholder groups who don't yet see the value that aviculture can bring.

After the initial pleasantries, the five representatives provided an overview of their experiences including thoughts on a way forward.

Gary Fitt (the Scientist) focused on science based initiatives. The privately funded Save the Gouldian Fund is an exemplar, but Gary noted the expertise, infrastructure, passion and commitment that private aviculture could bring to bear on some of the top 20 birds on conservation lists. An amazing stem cell based advanced reproductive technology proposal to dramatically increase Orange-bellied Parrot numbers was outlined, including a request to uncover why this proposal has not progressed despite considerable interest internationally. Such frustrating experiences - low interest/involvement/respect domestically with high interest/involvement/respect internationally - arose a number of times during the meeting.

Simon Degenhard (the Publicist) focused on international projects. His work publicising the expertise of Australian aviculture via AviaryLife magazine and his vast connections to the world's most significant avian collections is crucial in upholding our highly regarded status in world aviculture. All our avian publications and products are highly regarded internationally, and this has and continues to be a catalyst for international partners seeking our expertise and offering assistance with our recovery programs. For instance, at the meeting Simon announced an ACTP contribution of \$200K to assist with Western Ground Parrot recovery efforts via the WA Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions.

Sam Davis (the Organiser) spoke of the desire for aviculture to engage with recovery efforts and some of the stumbling blocks he has encountered in recent years. Our knowledge is sought internationally (the Smithsonian led Red Siskin Initiative, for example), we are working alongside university research efforts (projects with Macquarie Uni, Western Sydney Uni and ANU are underway) yet we experience ongoing difficulties infiltrating the conservation and threatened species effort in our own country. The detailed knowledge aviculturists have of the species they keep will surprise recovery teams – and not just regarding captive breeding. We're volunteers with a passion for the birds we breed. Many of the best of us spend all day observing and tweaking

husbandry - these are real experts and they're itching to be involved. To share their knowledge, to refine husbandry, to be part of captive breeding recovery efforts here in Australia.

Graeme Phipps (the Zoologist) has a long and distinguished history promoting the obvious benefits private aviculture can contribute to threatened species efforts. Graeme has seen a long line of action plans, recovery programs, species management goals, etc. come and go over many decades. There is one thing all these long winded well-meaning documents have in common – they do nothing whatsoever, if nothing practical is actually done. Action, unsurprisingly, means doing something, something practical to help the birds we care for and care about. Graeme has the practical qualifications to train avicultural leaders to manage studbooks, perform Population and Habitat Viability Analysis and Assessment workshops, to use modelling to arrive at measurable and consensus options for the recovery of species. These internationally respected methodologies are open to all - private aviculture can and should do all this.

Steve Sass' (the Ecologist and Bird Park owner) presentation at the meeting made it clear he is definitely in the thick of it, and on a daily basis. Steve's professional ecology work involves assessing the effects of development and other influences on threatened species whilst his lifelong passion for aviculture and more recently development of "On the Perch" gives him a broad view of the overall threatened species effort and how aviculture can assist. It appears, On the Perch's recent proposal supported by aviculture, to work with Red-capped Plovers as analogues of the threatened Hooded Plover was rejected without due consideration. Was this yet another example where aviculture's expertise is not recognised by some other influential threatened species stakeholders?

Much past frustration is a result of other major stakeholders' inability to understand, accept and engage with aviculture or consider alternative strategies. Stakeholder's in the conservation area have proven to be hard nuts to crack. Much is due to ignorance of what we offer, some appears due to simple bigotry and some due to a desire to protect their turf. The meeting endeavoured to find a way forward, practical assistance from the TSC office to assist our voice to be heard. We also explored a range of strategies and projects where we can go it alone, running our own projects in parallel to existing programs.

Recommendations for the Threatened Species Commissioner to explore include...

1. Inclusion of private aviculture representatives on recovery teams. We setup a working group to appoint/invite avicultural experts with specific experience with the specific species or its analogue. The detailed knowledge aviculturists know of the species they keep will surprise recovery teams
2. Facilitate meetings with state based programs, such as NSW OEH Saving Our Species. Meetings similar to this meeting are needed to raise awareness of the possibilities and explore a way forward.
3. Assistance, where possible, uncovering why a number of projects and offers have been unsuccessful. In particular, projects and offers of assistance outlined by Gary Fitt, Graeme Phipps and Steve Sass during the meeting.

The Threatened Species Commissioner has committed to...

1. Consider and respond as to how the TSC office can assist private aviculture to move forward.
2. A new TSC, Dr Sally Box, has recently been appointed to commence late January 2018. Signal our intentions to Dr Box, including an overview of this meeting.

The Threatened Species Commissioner has already established a priority list of 20 bird species which are the focus of Federal government conservation efforts (<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/20-birds-by-2020>) and a key outcome from the meeting was a suggestion from the TSC that we consider a specific targeted species in the Threatened Species Strategy and explain how private aviculture was well placed to contribute to recovery, as a way of clearly illustrating our skills. Much work has already been undertaken and is ongoing to identify species where we have a definite role to play. There are many possible species to consider and we welcome input from everyone.

Many thanks to the office of the Threatened Species Commissioner. This was just the first of what we hope will be a series of planning and engagement meetings. Together we can find a way forward - for the birds.