



## Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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### Letter to the Editor

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#### **Songbirds need to be protected from human greed**

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) is as equally concerned as the National Task Force (NTF) agencies at reopening Malaysia's international borders. The opened borders will certainly entice poachers to return to the Malaysian jungles and help themselves to our wildlife heritage. This may spell doom for the country's many endangered wildlife particularly our songbirds which are in high demand.

The Common Hill Myna, a widespread species throughout much of Asia has seriously declined in Southeast Asia and in particular Indonesia. Other species at risk are the oriental magpie robins which are heavily targeted for the pet trade and the straw headed bulbuls. Many of these birds are in high demand by Indonesia with their own Indonesian bird species disappearing from their home range, thus the need to continue poaching for these songbirds in Malaysia. The trafficking of these birds in sheer numbers highlights the rampant bird trade in Indonesia. It was stated in the Mongabay report in July 2020 that the 'trafficking of thousands of songbirds highlights rampant trade in Indonesia' where smugglers managed to ship more than 7,000 birds, including wild-caught songbirds by air from Sumatra to Java, proving the country's weak enforcement against the deeply entrenched bird trade.

In Indonesia, this trade is all about money and status. People buy rarer birds and most raptors do so for status. Catching and selling wildlife means 100% profit to the poor folks. It is a good income for them with practically zero risk of being arrested. It makes them look significant to others on Facebook as they are someone whom people look up to. As for the well-off traders, they trade in wildlife because of the good income as well as to impress friends.

Only a number of songbirds are legally protected in range countries and fewer still are protected at international levels. Often enforcement of laws is totally lacking for legally protected species. Legally cases that are not tried very well often take a long time to investigate and are ignored by the prosecutors. Punishments are usually low and the conviction rate for environmental crimes is still very low.

Of greater concern is the cruel fate meted out to these songbirds just for their melodious song. As victims of the illegal pet trade, these birds are cruelly captured from their natural habitats and are bound to live a life in captivity. These birds suffer physically and mentally and they often die shortly after being captured as a result of stress.

Birds that survived the capture are crammed into cages with many birds together. Many of them would consequently die from the extreme distress that they suffered in captivity before reaching their place of destination. Hence, it is time to end the trade in songbirds.

CAP calls on authorities to beef up enforcement against poachers and notorious traders. The amended Wildlife Act may come into force later this year to allow the department to mete out harsher punishments but without enforcement, poachers will still escape punishment.

The Wildlife Department must be provided sufficient allocation of resources to enable them to carry out

checks against poaching activities.

The existing relevant regulations must be improved and a regulatory framework has to be formulated for registered breeders, these breeders should be monitored to prevent them from laundering wild-caught bird species. Some form of deterrent punishment such as a mandatory jail sentence must be imposed on all bird trappers as well.

Patrol units can work with the local communities to identify hotspots of birds capture for better law enforcement and anti-poaching actions. We have noted that bird trapping is occurring daily and is not limited to prized birds but any avian specie that can fetch a price throughout the country. We propose that such activities can be reported through a nationwide hotline set up to address the problem.

Unfortunately, there are no easy solutions to this problem as regulatory policies are either difficult to implement or poorly understood by policymakers. Nonetheless, we urge relevant authorities to overcome these hurdles with strong policies and work with non-governmental organisations to curb such illegal activities.

Besides bird trapping, development is one of the reasons that wildlife habitats are destroyed.

People should also be educated about respecting other lives including birds and their right to be free. One way of doing this is by highlighting the cruelty and the danger of decimating bird populations by trapping these birds. The benefits of birds in pest control should be highlighted to rural folks.

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