

Intelligent birds deprived of their freedom in a horrifying inhuman way

by Mehd Halaouate

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The story of the Yellow-crested cockatoos stuffed in water bottles reached as far as any news can reach. Even Time Magazine couldn't let this item of information go unnoticed. Smuggling and trade in wildlife is a common practice in Indonesia and in many other countries but still many people have no knowledge of such, thus the surprising effect of this story. If there is anything good resulting from this horrible act of cruelty against wildlife, it will be the wide exposure of this story. So many people that care about the animal world showed their disgust when they saw the photographs of these beautiful birds in that unimaginable state. Not only is smuggling such intelligent creatures illegal but being undertaken in that manner was just unacceptable.

For me, I personally felt really sick. I have been around and seen smuggling attempts conducted in many ways but never this cruel.

I decided right away that I wouldn't let this go. I had to follow up on the story so I gathered as much information as possible about the origin of these birds, the journey they took and how the confiscation took place, what triggered it.

I travelled to East Java to the zoo where the birds were kept, Maharani Zoo. The manager of the zoo was awaiting my arrival and took me straight to the birds. It was overwhelming for me to see eight beautiful cockatoos all happy and alert. Two of them were even showing off by raising their long sulphur crests and doing a funny walk, a cockatoo walk. What I realised straight away is that these birds were not Yellow-crested cockatoos (*Cacatua sulphurea sp.*) but Medium Sulphur-crested cockatoos (*Cacatua galerita eleonora*). It is unfortunate that all the media had incorrectly identified the birds, but this doesn't make the treatment of these creatures any less horrifying in any way.

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6 of the 8 surviving cockatoos - © Mehd Halaouate – World Parrot Trust

To see these birds in good health and active after all that they had been through just made me more certain that I would do all that I could to help give them the best care possible. Deep down I just wanted to stay close to them and make sure that they were well-cared for but after talking with the two vets that were taking care of them, I knew that they were in good hands. These people were as appalled as I was about the way these birds had been treated.

I knew that there was a male Eclectus parrot among the confiscated birds but the cockatoos had taken took all my attention. One of the vets then informed me of this parrot and where he was. I stood for a few minutes in front of a beautiful totally green parrot standing his ground as if he was telling me, “There is nothing you can do to me worse than what I have already been through.”

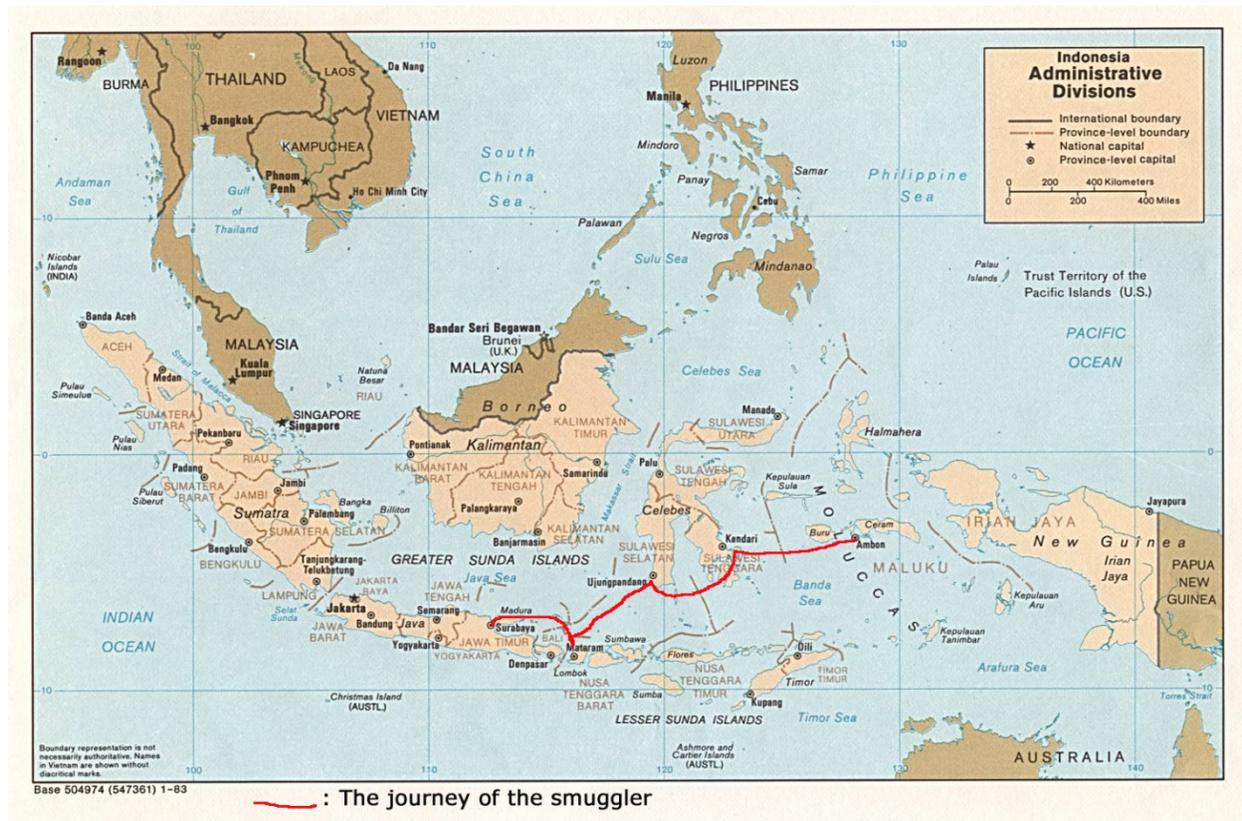


The male Eclectus parrot – © Mehd Halaouate – World Parrot Trust

After spending time with the birds it was time to meet with the staff at the zoo to talk about the future of these survivors.

I was first told the story of this smuggling attempt. The birds were acquired on Ambon Island in Central Maluku. On this island the only cockatoo species that used to be found in good numbers in the forest there is the Moluccan cockatoo. There are no other cockatoo species in this location, so these cockatoos had come in from other islands. There are plenty of transport possibilities between Ambon Island and the Aru Islands, south of Papua. The Medium Sulphur-crested cockatoo is found on Aru and Kai islands where the species were introduced.

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After 4 days and 4 nights at sea with a few transit stops along the way, the ferry arrived in Surabaya. It was pure faith, miracle or just simple luck that the birds were found. During the transit time, the smuggler came off the ferry with the Eclectus male on his shoulder. He was ignorant of the laws of the country about capture, trading or transporting wildlife such as big parrot species without permits. The police at the harbour arrested him straight away, and some of the passengers, seeing this arrest came forward and informed the police officer about the possibility of there being more birds still on the ferry. They had heard screeching sounds from 2 big bags. When the police opened one of the bags they found the bottles with the cockatoos stuffed inside.

Upon inspection, 10 birds were already dead and the police were amazed to find 11 birds still alive. The forestry department was called and these cockatoos and the Eclectus were transported straight to their office in Surabaya city. Two birds were in bad shape and didn't survive for much longer. After the authorities had gathered the necessary proof and taken some photos, the birds were transported to Maharani Zoo for testing and some urgent care.

The next day another cockatoo was too weak and also could not survive all the stress. Eight cockatoos and the male Eclectus remained alive and kicking. Eleven, over half the cockatoos being transported, had died..

This zoo has been the center where all confiscated wildlife ends up for rehabilitation. I was informed that just a few months before my visit, 20 Sulphur-crested cockatoos were delivered to

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the zoo after been confiscated in the same harbour. The previous year a smuggler was caught with some *Tanimbar corellas* or cockatoos (*Cacatua goffini*) on his way to Jakarta.



Tanimbar corellas or cockatoos (*Cacatua goffini*) - © Mehd Halaouate – World Parrot Trust

The manager of the zoo informed me that because of all the confiscations and the wildlife that is delivered to their doorstep, their budget is very stretched and they struggle to care for all these beautiful creatures that have suffered from such horrible treatment. They really need some support to cope with all these unplanned extra costs.

I promised that I would do all I could to provide them with some relief funds and to assist in any way possible. I explained that there are many people that would be more than happy to give a helping hand towards any effort to rehabilitate and provide the best care possible for the survivors of the inhuman way such wildlife is treated.

There are still good-hearted people that see wildlife as having rights equal to those given to humans as members of our planet. Any abuse towards them is abuse towards all of us.