

## From Parrot Rescue to Ecotourism

By Karen Windsor

Wednesday, June 6, 2007

Foster Parrots, the largest non-profit parrot rescue and sanctuary organization in the Northeast, has been providing parrot rescue and advocacy for many years. We have nearly 200 unwanted parrots in our sanctuary in Rockland, MA. We sometimes arrange adoptions, but we are forced to turn away or “wait list” at least a dozen calls a week. The life-long care of a parrot defies the ability of the vast majority of people who purchase one as a pet. Parrot rescue organizations across the country are dealing with a serious problem of unwanted and abandoned parrots. This crisis will not abate until people understand just how unsuitable these animals are as pets. More people will need to appreciate the magnificence of parrots as wild animals by viewing them in the wild. It is with this goal in mind that Foster Parrots launched “Project Guyana”.

Guyana, on the northeast coast of South America, is famous for its rich biodiversity and intact natural resources. More than 90% of its rainforests and savannahs have remained untouched. Animals native to Guyana include primates, such as Howler monkeys, spider monkeys and capuchins, as well as giant anteaters, capybaras, giant otters, black caiman and jaguar. The parrots that drew us to this beautiful, unspoiled place include Green Winged macaws, Blue and Gold macaws and endangered Scarlet macaws. Several other species of Amazons, conures, and hummingbirds are abundant.

Guyana is very beautiful, but, tragically, it remains one of two countries in South America that still allows trapping and exporting wildlife for the pet and zoo trades. It not only exploits its own wildlife, it serves as a funnel for the illegal trapping and exporting activities of other South American countries. Guyana is sparsely populated. Wildlife continues to flourish in remote areas, but the country has nonetheless suffered a significant decline in the numbers of parrots, mammals and reptiles.

Wildlife exporting is a lucrative business, but it does not really help the indigenous people who are the experts upon which the trade depends. When Amerindian villages become involved instead in the business of ecotourism, which generates income from the protection of animals and habitat rather than through destruction and exploitation, local people benefit in many ways. Ecotourism utilizes their expertise as wildlife guides and enables them to become conservation stewards rather than merely low wage trappers. This is our best hope for protecting wild animals, preserving the cultural heritage of ancient peoples and saving the worlds last unspoiled places.

In developing countries, where everyday survival needs often supercede animal welfare issues, it is difficult to impart value to native parrot species beyond the price they bring in the market. Conservation groups such as Foster Parrots in Guyana, Tropical Nature in Brazil, and the Indonesian Parrot Project, have learned that actively involving villages in protection efforts not only introduces new economic alternatives, it also develops pride in local biodiversity and in local species and inhibits the pet trade.

Trapping has already taken a toll on many wild animal species in Guyana, as it has in most other tropical countries, although nothing decimates wildlife more than loss of habitat. Until recently, an unstable political situation rendered Guyana virtually invisible to international corporations. Today its lumber, metals and minerals are being widely sought, and it is standing at the crossroads between industrial revolution and natural resource conservation.

Maipaima Eco-Lodge, located in the Rupununi region of southwestern Guyana, was funded by Foster Parrots, Ltd, and received its first ecotour group in September 2005. Other Guyanan ecotourist destinations are Rewa Ecolodge, funded by Conservation International, Rockview Lodge in the village of Annai, and Karanambu Ranch, where orphaned Giant Otters are rehabilitated for release. By developing a network of ecotourist destinations, conservation groups hope to make it more economically attractive to preserve this beautiful country than to decimate its natural resources.

We are working to reconnect people with the true magnificence of parrots as wild animals. We feel that our love for these extraordinary creatures can be best expressed by protecting their freedom, by creating reserves where they can be observed in nature and by helping to support the preservation of their natural habitat.



Green winged macaw  
overhead at Mapaluna  
Ecolodge in southern Guyana

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