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Conservation Updates

Conversations on Conservation

The Ethics and Issues of Bali Starling Rehabilitation on Nusa Penida

By C. Kabryn Mattison

With studies suggesting that the Earth is currently in its sixth mass extinction, the conservation of biodiversity has arguably never been more important (CBD 2015). When I was a child, I was continuously in awe of the scientists I read about working in conservation. I saw stories of their struggles and triumphs and I would often think, “One day, I’m going to do that.” It was really that simple. I would grow up and just go ahead and save all Earth’s creatures that they hadn’t saved yet. I mean, what was taking those grown-ups so long? What was so hard about it? Didn’t everyone else want to save the animals too? Though the truth is, even the best conservation interventions by humans seem to fall short more often than not, “In a review of 168 bird species classed as critically endangered, (Butchart et al. 2006) identified only 16 for which interventions had prevented their extinction” (Jepson 2015). As a young conservationist I have recently been met head on by the challenges of politics, corruption, and ethics surrounding the preservation of our world.

The Bali Starling, *Leucopsar rothschildi*, is a magnificent white bird with an iconic blue “eye mask” that is endemic to West Bali, Indonesia, specifically Bali Barat National Park and is currently on the IUCN Red List as Critically Endangered. The

bird’s beautiful plumage along with its intelligence and charm have led to it becoming a rare and coveted prize around the world. For decades, the Bali Starling has been the center of huge debates over conservation methods and the international pet trade. The majority of Bali Starling conservation efforts have taken place in Bali Barat National Park. Years of captive birds being released in the park and then poached left the wild population between 15 and 55 birds in the years of 1990 to 2006 (IUCN 2015). Many international efforts between groups like BirdLife International, AAZPA and the Indonesian Government took place to save the species but, ultimately, most efforts were given up and the focus has remained on captive breeding (Jepson 2015).

Focus then changed to releasing birds on the remote island of Nusa Penida, southeast of Bali. In 2006, The Begawan Foundation provided the birds and funded the introduction and release of Bali Starlings on Nusa Penida. They employed Friends of the National Park Foundation’s founder and Balinese vet, Dr. Bayu Wirayudha, to oversee the breeding of more Bali Starlings on the island. Dr. Bayu headed the effort to implement an awig-awig, a traditional Hindu spiritual agreement signed by the heads of all 46 villages on the island. The awig-awig put the responsibility on local villagers to protect the Bali Starling and other na-

Bali Starling (*Leucopsar rothschildi*)
Credit: Colin M. L. Burnett



tive species from harm. This project is an extremely interesting example of a “bottom-up” approach to conservation, with the community leading the effort to protect a species. Conservation efforts are often led by a “top-down” approach headed by external organizations with good intentions but sometimes no true understanding of the cultural situation in the area they are working. This makes it difficult to plan successful and long lasting conservation measures. After the releases, independent counts in 2010 on Nusa Penida described seeing multiple “flocks” of starlings in the Ped area of the island and listed conservative numbers anywhere from 55-100 birds (Kenwick 2010). These numbers reflected that bottom-up



Author camping at Gamat Bay to survey for starlings. Photo courtesy of author.

approach was working brilliantly and could potentially alter the way the conservation community operates as a whole, changing the focus to community involvement instead of bureaucratic control.

In November 2015, thanks to the support of IAATE’s Conservation Grant, I began a twelve week stay on Nusa Penida with the understanding that I would work with Friends of the National Park Foundation in a collective effort to accurately estimate the current population of the Bali Starling on the island. Since 2010, FNPF has been the sole NGO working on Bali Starling conservation on Nusa Penida, managing releases and working with the community. FNPF Nusa Penida has received international donations supporting Bali Starling rehabilitation since 2006, but I was shocked to find that they have virtually no data or mapping reflecting this. During my time with FNPF I met other researchers who arrived on the island to help count the Bali Starling.

They expressed similar frustrations at the lack of organization and data available from the NGO that is said to be at the forefront of Bali Starling conservation. Other researchers and I were provided one map of possible nesting sites with no road information and several incorrect GPS locations, some of which were located in the ocean. FNPF staff and volunteers, despite confident claims to the media by Dr. Bayu that there are over 100 birds on the island, know the location of only six individual Bali Starlings. After monitoring the locations of the six known Bali Starlings with FNPF staff, I began to expand the search for more Bali Starlings to other areas around the island.

Using old population assessments and word of mouth as a guide, countless hours were spent driving back roads and camping at locations of interest. Each site was monitored for birds and locals were interviewed. It soon became apparent that most areas in previous studies listing Bali Starlings as

abundant now showed no sign of the birds (Sudaryanto 2014). Locals in the area reported not seeing Bali Starlings for months and when pressured, shut down or asked me if I was “the police.” New areas of interest found by speaking with locals resulted with no new sightings and, instead, information that insinuated poaching had occurred. Many local people spoke candidly about Bali Starlings being recently taken. Ex-FNPF staff stated that while monitoring at night, they encountered people under known Bali Starling nesting trees many times until, ultimately, the birds were gone.

A population survey was completed in December 2014 that listed at least 66 birds on the island (Sudaryanto 2014). Only a few months later, in early 2015, estimates by the Indonesian Forestry Department, BKSDA, were recorded at only ten birds. A count soon after, completed by The Begawan Foundation and Wildlife Reserves Singapore, observed only twelve birds and mentioned poaching

as a possible issue arising on the island. One of the researchers found rope hanging from a Bali Starling's nest site and the entrance to their nest forcibly enlarged (Halaouate 2015). Since the initial releases, the Begawan Foundation employed a local surveyor to conduct monthly counts on the island. The counts reflect a steady decline in numbers following the last assessment of 66 birds in December 2014 by Udayana University (Sudaryanto 2014). Bali Starling numbers steadily decline until mid 2015 when the counts were returning so low that they were discontinued (Begawan Foundation 2015). I leave my twelve-week evaluation of the Bali Starling population on Nusa Penida with a total of six individual birds sighted, and three others possibly sighted by locals during my time there. Within a year's time, four studies have now independently reflected less than 13 Bali Starlings on Nusa Penida.

Despite this, FNPF does not accept the new counts and still openly considers the population as viable, stating that poaching is simply a rumor. In 2008, when asked about the poaching issues in Bali Barat Nation Park, Dr. Bayu told *The Jakarta Post*, "It's easy work for the poachers when there are a lot of birds; we see the population grow and then overnight it collapses. Poachers can collect a lot of birds in a couple of days and make a lot of money" (Sertori, 2008). Could this possibly be the explanation for the sudden population crash on Nusa Penida? What was so openly documented as a successful and booming population of Bali Starlings has suddenly disappeared.

What about the community's spiritual agreement against poaching, the awig-awig? In 2014, a survey was done on Nusa Penida that listed the primary reason locals protected the Bali Starling as the awig-awig (Sudaryanto 2014). Has this changed? When I began to speak with locals about the awig-awig they presented contrasting views. Many locals spoke of a strong respect for the awig-awig. Superstitions reign supreme in the culture and many older locals believe that bad energy or "black magic" will find them if they break it. Though others I spoke with seem less convinced of its spiritual significance, with one local saying, "Awig-awig is just paper." With a wild caught Bali Starling potentially selling for up to ten times the average monthly income on Nusa Penida, it is hard to be surprised.

Many conversations with locals left me feeling that there was something missing, something that locals who had become my friends were leaving out. It is hard to document "feelings" in science. Intuition is extremely important, yet not trusted fully and always examined closely because of

implicit bias. Though, there were often moments where my gut told me there was much more to the story and details were not being fully shared. There were glances across the room, changed subjects and looks of pity towards "the girl who looks for Jalak Bali." But, those feelings, no matter how strong, are just instinctual tugs at our heart. We can only hope they help pull us in the right direction.

The Bali Starling's conservation story has many lessons to give and begs that tough questions be answered. I set off on this journey to learn about my field of study, even if the things I learned were not all sunshine and rainbows. It is possible to assume the Bali Starling's instrumental value and ecological role in its native habitat have long been altered since its initial poaching and population collapse in the 70's. When the rehabilitation of a species is no longer to restore its ecological role in the environment from which it is endemic but, instead, for the intrinsic value it has to humans, why do we continue? Is it morally acceptable to prioritize saving a species simply for the sake of saving it?

There is also an overlooked and touchy moral dilemma of how often conservationists find themselves as the indirect cause for the demise of species they hoped to protect. We have seen this with ICBP's (now BirdLife International) role in beginning the Bali Starling Conservation Campaign in Indonesia in the 80's, which led to the Bali Starling being a coveted prize among elites in government. "As a result of these events the Bali starling became the talked about bird among Indonesian high society with interests in wildlife. Ownership of rare wildlife has long been a mark of status amongst the Indonesian army, police and bureaucracy due to the practice of gifting wildlife to superiors as a demonstration of gratitude and loyalty." (Jepson 2015) It was the start of the Bali Starling's conservation initiative that led to its status as a "bird to have" among Indonesian high society. The research also states the issue was, "A consequence of a misunderstanding of the awareness messages communicated by the international project. These inadvertently generated attitudes of, 'Why don't we have it now before it's finished?'" This is in no way an isolated event, with many other scientists and organizations experiencing similar nightmares. Recently, the geographic description of a rare species of salamander that was discovered in Laos by Dr. Bryan Stuart was used for its illegal collection and cause for its eventual classification as Endangered (Neme 2011).

The Bali Starling's plight has shown that attempting to leg-

islate change is not enough to save a species. Enforcement of the laws are not simple and often in countries facing high-level corruption those in charge of keeping a species protected are sometimes the reason for its eventual demise. What is needed instead is a cultural shift of consciousness, growth of integrity and a foundation of empathy for all species in question. This is where the conversation around conservation must grow. Without the elimination of extreme poverty and improvement of education, something as simple as convincing people to save a bird will seem trivial and will be incredibly difficult. Locals in Bali or Nusa Penida and poachers from Java will find it hard to deny the temptation of monetary gain until their futures are secure and their children are well taken care of. Though, the more daunting issue at hand is a quite simple one: there would be no temptation to poach if there was no demand for poaching. The demand for Bali Starlings does not come directly from a black market dealer's need for money, nor does it come from a poor local's desire for a payout in exchange helping the poachers find birds- it comes instead from the greed of the elite who demand such animals for status and social hierarchy in the first place. Instead of addressing the issue at its source, calls for justice for these animals are almost always focused on the arrest and punishment of the poor, which in no way stops the demand for poaching. This is an incredibly complex cultural and political issue facing not only Indonesia but also the world as a whole. It seems that Indonesians are catching most of the blame for the demise of the Bali Starling when it was the export of birds to the US and Europe in the 60's and 70's that prompted the Bali Starlings initial listing in Appendix 1 of CITES (Jepson 2015).

Recently we have seen organizations as well known and respected as the Red Cross not upholding their promises to the public (Elliot et al. 2015). What are the responsibilities of NGOs working towards the conservation of a species? Who is to hold these organizations accountable or verify that what they are being funded for is truth? With the new counts coming back so low and such open discussion about poaching, it is extremely problematic for the Bali Starling population to be blindly considered viable by FNPF, the organization at the forefront of Bali Starling conservation in Nusa Penida. It may be good publicity, but it is bad science. Recent evidence suggests that what was once a very successful example of "bottom-up" and holistic conservation effort has unfortunately been affected deeply by the high market price and demand for wild caught Bali Starlings (Eaton 2015). The consequences of ignoring such

information and reporting to international media that the population is thriving on Nusa Penida could potentially compromise or delay future conservation efforts on the island, if they are to take place at all.

There are currently no new releases of Bali Starlings planned on Nusa Penida. The last known release of a Bali Starling on Nusa Penida occurred in October 2014 with FNPF and the visit of National Geographic's Orion. Conservationists from the UK and the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust attended a traditional ceremony where four birds were released at a local temple. The release highlighted the conservation efforts on Nusa Penida as a success and all media reports from the release state there are now over 100 Bali Starlings on the island, though there is no actual population data reflecting such claims. Situations like this show how easy it is for conservation efforts to appear successful if under little scrutiny and, unfortunately, how fast that success can change. Only a little over a year since the Orion visited, after twelve weeks on the ground, twelve weeks of searching the island, I encountered quite a different truth. Truth is not a compromise; it is not a half told story. It is bold and sometimes ugly but that is why it is important.

Where there is empathy, there is change. Indonesia's President Jokowi recently bought and released multiple species of bird from Jakarta's notorious Pramuka Bird Market in a sign of support for endangered species. A recent report found over 19,000 birds for sale in Jakarta's bird markets, with the Bali Starling listed among the inventory. The study estimated that 98% of the birds at the market were harvested illegally (John et al. 2015). The display by President Jokowi was criticized by many but, ultimately, can be seen as at least some step forward in the conversation around Indonesia's caged bird culture (Jacobson 2016).

Words, though our most powerful form of communication, limit us when explaining something so complex, deep and fluid as the plight of the Bali Starling. Conservation stories that contain a human element can often become delicate and political. I hope my experience living so connected with the island is able to shed light on the current challenges and concerns facing the Bali Starling's future, while also pushing others to look deeper. With a year of critically low Bali Starling sightings and no current data on other populations, it's difficult to confidently call the conservation efforts on Nusa Penida a success or the future of the species a bright one.

Often in moments of disappointment, the easiest thing

for us to do is travel between the poles of anger and apathy. The child I was who wondered what was taking the adults so long to save the world now knows why. The ability to conduct research on Nusa Penida is currently very challenging. Disorganization and resistance to new information on the part of FNPF has left me questioning the role of similar organizations and their accountability to prove claims that are made. Rugged terrain and cloudy politics make efforts to work on the island difficult for outsiders, reinforcing the importance of bottom-up conservation. While on the other hand, the Bali Starling's sudden population crash leaves me unsure if bottom-up conservation efforts alone are the answer. Small organizations are often underfunded and too under-staffed to take on such a daunting responsibility like conserving the Bali Starling without support. Despite all of this, I urge others to keep mov-

ing, keep asking questions and keep pushing for change. The easy way out is to be apathetic and pessimistic. Alan Watts said, "Problems that remain persistently insoluble should always be suspected as questions asked in the wrong way." I now have a lot of questions. Though I may not have the answers, I think maybe it is time for conservationists around the world to start asking different kinds of questions.

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Professional Development

2017 WALTER CRAWFORD MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarship submissions are due in by October 1st, 2016. Please adhere to the deadline! This is to allow time for a thorough evaluation process with follow up questions.

The Walter Crawford Memorial Scholarship will award funds to one or more applicants to apply towards the IAATE Annual Conference. You must be a current IAATE member, in good standing, to apply for and receive scholarship funding. Successful applicants will be asked to provide a written testimonial on their experience within six months of the conference, for possible use on the IAATE website and in The Flyer.

Applications with details on requirements can be found at the IAATE website or by emailing the Professional Development Chairperson, contact info below.

Please send all Scholarship submissions to:

Arianna Bailey

IAATE Professional Development Chair

Email: Arianna36@gmail.com

Read on to see what our 2016 Scholarship recipients had to say about their experiences.

Leia Minch I work at the American Bald Eagle Foundation (ABEF) in Haines, Alaska. The ABEF is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to teaching guests about wildlife conservation in Alaska with the hopes that they take appreciation and love for animals across the globe with them. We are half a natural history museum and half a raptor center. We have 12 ambassador birds who help us run our programs.

My mentor, Kit Lacy, was involved with IAATE when I first started volunteering at her facility in early 2011. When I left and began working at the ABEF she encouraged me to use the varied resources in the IAATE tool bag. I applied for the scholarship because I knew attending the conference would be a paramount learning and networking experience for me. However, finding funds to do this was difficult. I could not have afforded to attend out of my own pocket, and my facility did not have the funds set

aside for me to attend. For the last two years, my organization has been moving away from the "grab jesses and go" paradigm and shifting into a "birds-choose" method of working with our animals. I cannot say enough how important this transition has been for the overall welfare of our birds. We see more comfort behaviors, more in-

teraction with enrichment items and guests and... (the best part) the birds regularly choose to work! I was eager to learn more and generate ideas with like-minded people. My goal was to bring these ideas back to Alaska so the ABEF human-team could continue to improve the welfare and increase the choices of our avian ambassadors.



Leia Mintz (center) with fellow scholarship recipient, Miryam Sainz (right), and IAATE member, Adrianna de los Santos (left) making connections at our 2016 annual conference.



Photo credit: Dick Daniels <http://carolinabirds.org/>