

Hand rearing of baby parrots. From a necessary evil to a bird unfriendly commercial activity.

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Some decades ago, hand rearing baby parrots started as necessary evil because it was not uncommon that parents did not raise their own offspring. It was also not unusual that parents mutilated their youngsters. It was also a problem that parents did not start to brood on the eggs, reason for aviculturists to start artificial breeding in incubators.

Basically, the necessity for hand rearing baby parrots was the result of management failures concerning housing, nutrition and care complemented with a lack of knowledge about natural (breeding) behaviour of parrots.

Most common is still that parents do not want to raise their own youngster when the youngster are not healthy, not viable because of nutritional deficiencies or unbalanced over supplemented diets.

Most common is still that there are different stress factors involved that are reason for parents not to raise their own youngsters.

Improvement in the general management and more knowledge diminish the need for hand rearing.

Aviculturists started to experience that taking away the eggs or separating the baby's from the parents created a situation in which the female started to lay more and more often eggs. Hand rearing became part of the practice within aviculture because the outcome was more baby's to sell, making hand rearing part of commercial interests. Proud stories appeared in avicultural magazines where aviculturists described that they "produced" 12 baby macaws from a single pair within a year using incubators and hand rearing babies.

It is not difficult to understand that this practice is not in the best interest of the female and is having a negative effect on the life expectancy of the parents. It is also having a negative effect on the quality of the eggs and the viability of the youngsters. The end weight of the babies can become 10-20% lower than the weight of the parents. There are data that show that those babies are more vulnerable for infectious diseases because the immune systems is less well developed.

There was a growing demand for parrots as companion birds and aviculturists and pet shops started to advertise with tame hand reared baby parrots. Even pretending that it was beneficial to buy a baby parrot as young as possible to ensure that the parrot will become the perfect tame companion bird. The price of those baby parrots started to rise and they became more expensive than parent reared baby parrots.

It has been an amazing development knowing that it has been recognized already in many other species that separating the young from the parents/mother is not in the best interest of the young and can cause serious development problems.

Because of the known negative effects on the welfare of the animals, in the Netherlands there is legislation that prohibits separating a young animal from their parents/mother during a specific period of time. Young dogs may not be separated from the mother until the age of 7 weeks. For cats it is 7 weeks, for rabbits it is 4 weeks and for chimpanzees it is 4 years.

To prevent problems, hand rearing in projects like the Californian Condor project of endangered crane projects, hand rearing was developed in a way that there was no human-animal relationship during hand rearing, mimicking the natural situations as much as possible.

The past 15 years more and more data has become available showing the negative consequences of separating baby parrots from their parents. A range of behavioural problems and welfare issues have been recognized as consequences of separating the youngsters from the parents.

There are indications that, as described in other animals, separating youngsters before or during the important first imprinting's phase, irreversible behavioural problems may occur. Some of the behavioural problems can occur after months or even after years especially when the birds become hormonal active.



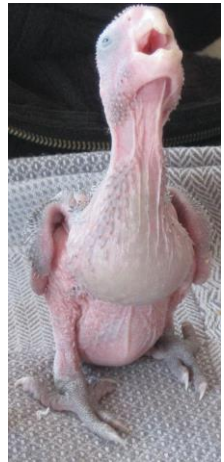
Insecure behaviour, fobic behaviour, biting behaviour, feather picking and self mutilating can become serious consequences of separating a baby parrot from the parents.

Typical examples are Moluccan cockatoos that are mainly hand reared within aviculture. Screaming, fearful behaviour, biting behaviour, feather picking, feather destructive behaviour and self mutilating are common behaviour problems. Visiting parrot rescue facilities it is painful to see the many Moluccan cockatoos that are victim of the commercial interests within aviculture and within the trade of baby parrots. There are indications that there are more Moluccan cockatoos within parrot rescue facilities around the world than living free in Indonesia.

Conclusions

Parrots belong to the most charismatic, intelligent and social animals on the planet having a very high life expectance when we are doing a good job. Based on the knowledge and experience there is every reason to prohibit hand rearing of baby parrots.

Baby parrots should have the legal right to be raised by their parents at least until the age the birds are no longer dependant on their parents concerning their nutritional needs.



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