The absurdity of nature love through aviary bird-keeping

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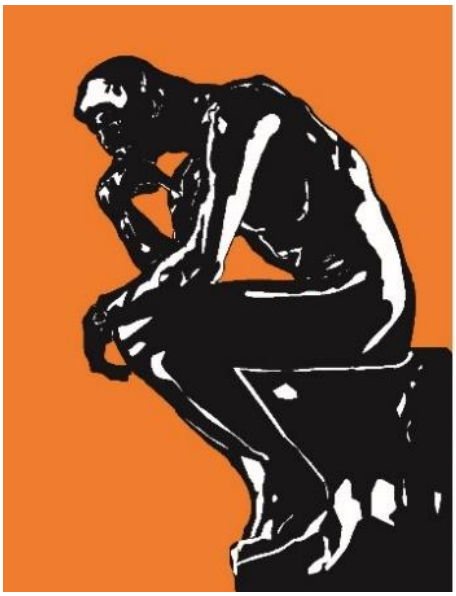

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"Are humans in a toxic, abusive relationship with nature? Love is strange."

In "Glands of Love"; *Meandering Sobriety* (2023)

Bird extinction crisis and the emergence of aviary bird-keeping for entertainment

Consistent evidence shows the tremendous impacts of humans on the extinction of multiple avian species. The study of Cooke et al. (2023), based on recorded extinctions and the completeness of fossil records, estimates that at least 1,300–1,500 bird species have gone extinct since the Late Pleistocene, representing over 12% of all known bird species on Earth. Most of these extinctions were driven by human expansion out of Africa and across the planet. Since the year 1500, 129 bird species have been officially listed as globally extinct (Butchart et al., 2004). In North America alone, bird populations have declined by nearly 3 billion individuals since 1970 (Rosenberg et al., 2019). With the alarming impact of human activities on Earth's ecosystems, reconnecting people with nature, specifically these feathered species, has become critical. Such a connection could foster greater public engagement in conservation efforts and the protection of avian biodiversity (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Birds, with their vibrant colors, lively movements, and melodious songs, play a unique role in bridging the humans' mental realms and nature. Their presence brings numerous benefits, positively influencing human well-being. Hammoud et al. (2022) suggest that everyday encounters with birds can enhance mental health for both healthy individuals and those diagnosed with depression. Remarkably, just 30 minutes of birdwatching can boost happiness and reduce stress even more effectively than walking in nature (Peterson et al., 2024). Additionally, the soundscapes created by birds help mitigate the negative effects of urban traffic noise, improve well-being, and restore individual attention (Ferraro et al., 2020; Uebel et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2017). Through their visual and auditory appeal, birds also serve as a wellspring of inspiration and creativity for art, literature, and music (Head, 1997; Reason & Gillespie, 2023; Vuong, 2024; Vuong & Nguyen, 2023). Recognizing the importance of birds in human lives fosters a profound connection with these creatures, deepening our bond with nature and inspiring efforts to protect and preserve the ecosystems that sustain them.

However, also due to these benefits, birds bring to humans, bird-keeping for entertainment has become a culturally ingrained activity in countries with large populations and high diversity of birds, such as Brazil, Indonesia, and Vietnam (Alves et al., 2010; Jepson & Ladle, 2009; Mirin & Klinck, 2021). In Vietnam, keeping birds for entertainment is a long-standing tradition. Commonly kept species include the Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*), Oriental Magpie-Robin (*Copsychus saularis*),

Spotted Dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*), Chinese hwamei (*Garrulax canorus*), Warbling White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*), Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*), Common Hill Myna (*Gracula religiosa*), Black-collared Starling (*Gracupica nigricollis*), and more. These birds are typically kept in small cages measuring approximately 30x30x30 cm.

It was once hoped that as societies advanced, greater awareness of conservation issues and the urgency of biodiversity loss would lead people to appreciate the intrinsic and ecological value of birds. This, in turn, would inspire efforts to protect avian habitats and mitigate human impacts on these ecosystems. Ironically, however, this increasing awareness has fueled a new form of entertainment in Vietnam: aviary bird-keeping. Small cages, traditionally housing one or two birds, are now being replaced by larger, intricately designed aviaries capable of holding multiple birds.

Given the rapid expansion of aviary bird-keeping as a form of entertainment in Vietnam, this paper seeks to expose the absurdity of bird keepers claiming to love nature and contribute to conservation while engaging in practices that exploit and commodify birds for human interests. Furthermore, it highlights the role of an eco-deficit culture—or, more profoundly, human's insatiable greed, in giving rise to such an absurd form of "nature love."

The absurdity of humans' love

The primary motivation driving aviary bird-keeping enthusiasts is often claimed to be their "love for nature" (Phương, 2012). Many aviary bird keepers argue that the ability to enjoy the beauty and sounds of birds all day without traveling to natural areas fosters a love for nature, a fondness for wildlife, and a willingness to protect it (Bảo, 2024; Phương, 2012). However, they intentionally or unintentionally overlook the fact that the demand for birds to fill these aviaries exacerbates the illegal hunting and trade of wild birds—key drivers of biodiversity loss and the expansion of "silent forests."

A quick survey conducted in October 2024 by Wildtour and Birdlife International across 36 bird shops in Ho Chi Minh City, Da Lat, Di Linh (Lam Dong), Pleiku (Gia Lai), and Kon Tum found a total of 5,584 individuals from 82 bird species being sold (Bảo, 2024). Beyond physical stores, research by the Monitor Conservation Research Society also highlights the rapid growth of the online bird trade through social media platforms (Leupen et al., 2022). Rare bird species have also been recorded at bird shops, driven by enthusiasts willing to spend increasingly large sums to acquire them. These include

species listed as Endangered (e.g., *Aratinga solstitialis*) and Vulnerable (e.g., *Lonchura oryzivora*, *Lorius garrulus flavopalliatus*) on the IUCN Red List, as well as species protected under Vietnamese law (e.g., *Lophura nycthemera annamensis*, *Psittacula eupatria, Psittacula roseata*) (Eaton et al., 2017).

Despite claiming their passion for aviary bird-keeping arises from a love for birds and nature, many enthusiasts persist in keeping birds while knowing they lack the necessary knowledge or suitable conditions to ensure the birds' survival (Bảo, 2024). Even if the birds survive in captivity conditions, their continued well-being and survival largely depend on the owner's emotional and financial commitment. Once that passion wanes or finances run low, the birds are frequently discarded to reduce costs. In the best-case scenario, they are passed on or gifted to another keeper. In the worst-case scenario, they are released into the wild without consideration of their ability to adapt to new environments (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A wreathed hornbill (*Rhyticeros undulatus*) captured by local residents in Ho Chi Minh City may have been either escaped from captivity or released into the wild by bird keepers (Khải & Vi, 2024).

The pursuit of aviary bird-keeping to satisfy personal desires under the guise of "loving birds" and "loving nature" starkly illustrates the absurdity of self-proclaimed bird lovers

(Nguyen, 2024). This practice not only contradicts genuine conservation efforts but also reflects a misguided and abusive relationship with the natural world.

Is aviary bird-keeping beneficial for conservation?

Despite the negative consequences of aviary bird-keeping, many enthusiasts continue to believe their actions support conservation, reasoning that they provide adequate food and shelter for the birds. Even if we were to assume this claim was true (though it is not), it is essential to consider the comparative value of this form of conservation versus preserving birds in their natural habitats.

The value of a species lies in its interactions with the surrounding environment and those it interacts with (Vuong & Nguyen, 2024a, 2024c). When birds are confined in aviaries, the value they generate is primarily for human interests. Directly, bird-keeping offers a convenient way to relieve stress, enhance well-being, and provide inspiration through the birds' aesthetic and auditory appeal. Indirectly, they help people display social status, power, knowledge, or even economic benefits. In the Vietnamese context, where Confucian values are deeply ingrained and face-saving plays a crucial socio-psychological role, the benefits of displaying social status, power, and knowledge are even more significant (Nguyen & Jones, 2022). These displays not only help individuals gain attention and admiration ("make face") but also allow them to cover weaknesses through passive impression management ("keep face") (Hwang & Han, 2010). Bird contests, for instance, serve as a popular avenue for enthusiasts to achieve these social rewards through bird-keeping.

In contrast, when birds are preserved in their natural habitats, the value they create directly contributes to the ecosystem. For instance, sunbirds, often used in bird contests, play vital roles in Southeast Asia's ecosystem by dispersing seeds and controlling insect populations. These ecological functions provide indirect benefits to humans by ensuring environmental sustainability and maintaining biodiversity (Rogers, 2019). In other areas where sunbirds serve as pollinators, their contribution to the ecosystem and humans' survival needs is even more significant. In particular, in African ecosystems, sunbirds pollinate 44% of plant species utilized by humans for medicine, food, building materials, and other purposes (Newmark et al., 2020). Some bird species also hold scientific significance, serving as ecological indicators, such as kingfishers (Vuong & Nguyen, 2023).

Figure 2: Sunbird, a species that is frequently used in bird contests due to its beauty (Bảo, 2024).

Besides all these benefits, people can still enjoy the beauty and songs of birds in the wild, where their calls, interwoven with those of other species, create a richer and more harmonious landscape and soundscape (Reason & Gillespie, 2023). While encountering such moments in nature often depends on luck, this unpredictability enhances their value. It is a fundamental principle in economics that scarcity creates value. The rarity of hearing bird songs or witnessing their natural behavior in the wild makes these experiences far more meaningful than observing birds confined to aviaries, where they are always available on demand.

The persistence of eco-deficit culture and a call for further research

The comparison above highlights the clear presence of eco-deficit cultural values among the Vietnamese people and possibly among people in similar circumstances elsewhere. Those driven by these cultural values tend to prioritize personal interests over environmental sustainability, thereby fostering cultural forms that harm the environment (i.e., aviary bird-keeping for entertainment). This cultural system reinforces human greed,

not only in exploiting nature for survival needs but also, even when survival pressures are alleviated (as bird keepers are typically wealthier individuals), they continue to dominate nature for selfish pleasures, neglecting the burdens nature has to bears (Vuong & Nguyen, 2024a). In the context of worsening climate change and biodiversity loss, these cultural values become even more dangerous as they are pushing humanity closer to its own demise by destroying the ecosystem that nurtures them (Diamond, 2011).

To shift away from this eco-deficit cultural system, more efforts are needed to make people realize that love for nature should benefit both nature and humans, not just humans. In a relationship, love that only satisfies one side's needs is abusive. Clearly, an abusive relationship cannot be sustainable!

One of the first steps toward changing the absurd nature love among aviary bird keepers is to conduct more conservation research on this issue. Research in the humanities and social sciences is crucial as it supports policymakers and conservationists in navigating human interaction with nature, enabling people to love nature conscientiously. Thinking and acting conscientiously, based on reliable scientific information and guidance, is a vital foundation for creating an eco-surplus culture—one that prioritizes the sustainability of nature over human selfish needs (Vuong & Nguyen, 2024b). This culture should be the cultural system upheld by genuine nature lovers.

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