

Dress for Success

Community pride might save the St. Lucia parrot

By Rebecca Sweat

POSTED: March 7, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

St. Lucia Amazon, Courtesy James Morgan/Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust

Making environmental presentations to school children while dressed in a parrot suit may not be something most of us would think of doing to try to save an endangered parrot species. But if you're conservationist Paul Butler, it makes perfect sense.

For the past three decades, Butler has been an integral player in the recovery program of the St. Lucia Parrot (*Amazona versicolor*). Found only on the island of St. Lucia in the southeastern Caribbean, the St. Lucia parrot — or jacquot as it is known on the island — was on the slippery slope to extinction. The bird's numbers had dropped from a thousand in the late-1950s, to just 150 individuals by the mid-1970s. Butler was hired on as conservation advisor to the St. Lucian Government in 1977 to see if something could be done to curb this trend.

The most serious threat to the parrot was habitat destruction. At the time, deforestation in St. Lucia was about 10 percent a year. "The forests were cleared for agriculture, development, and for timber and fuel," Butler noted. Also negatively impacting the bird's numbers was the fact that the locals hunted it for food and for export as exotic pets. Turning the situation around was not going to be easy.

In the early 1980s, the scientific community issued a bleak assessment on the bird, proclaiming that *Amazona versicolor* was "in terminal decline." Butler devised a recovery program for the parrot that included more traditional initiatives like setting up protected areas, enacting changes in legislation to make it illegal to hunt or trap the bird, and setting up captive-breeding programs, as well as a public education program he dubbed, "Protection through pride."

"There was a complete lack of local awareness about this bird," Butler said. "If you don't know about something, you can't appreciate it. If you can't appreciate it, you can't love it." He set about turning the parrot into a celebrity, showing the islanders what a special bird they had and why they needed to protect it. A whole PR campaign was developed that included songs, advertisements, posters, billboards, bumper stickers, music videos and Butler making presentations to schools and community events while dressed in his parrot costume.

For Butler, the work is never ending. It's an unfortunate reality, he observed, that "there are many, many endangered parrot species today, and they are in peril for a whole variety of reasons, ranging from habitat destruction to the illegal trade in wildlife to hunting."