
Trade and conservation efforts involving the Sumatran Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor* in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

In 2018, the Indonesian Government provided legal protection for the Sumatran Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor*. This species, endemic to the island of Sumatra, is now restricted to a few submontane and montane forests on the north and south of the island. Heavily trapped for the Indonesian songbird trade, populations are in serious decline. Calls to provide full protection for this species were made close to 15 years ago, and since that time, the Sumatran Laughingthrush has become very rare and categorised as Endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. While ex-situ conservation breeding programmes may help ensure this species does not go extinct, its continued survival in the wild will depend very much on effective law enforcement in Indonesia.

ABSTRAK

Pada 2018, Pemerintah Indonesia memberikan perlindungan resmi untuk burung poksay Sumatra, *Garrulax bicolor*. Burung yang merupakan spesies endemik dari Pulau Sumatra ini sekarang persebarannya terbatas pada sejumlah hutan submontana dan montana di bagian utara dan selatan Pulau. Mereka ditangkap secara besar-besaran untuk kepentingan perdagangan burung berkicau sehingga populasinya menurun tajam. Permintaan untuk memberikan perlindungan secara penuh bagi spesies ini diajukan sekitar 15 tahun yang lalu. Sejak saat itu, poksay Sumatra telah menjadi sangat jarang di alam dan dikategorikan sebagai genting pada Daftar merah IUCN bagi spesies yang terancam. Meskipun program-program konservasi untuk mengembangbiakkan spesies ini secara ex situ bisa membantu memastikan agar mereka tidak punah, kelangsungan hidup poksay Sumatra di alam liar secara berkelanjutan akan sangat bergantung pada penegakan hukum yang efektif di Indonesia.

Keywords: Laughingthrush, trade, Sumatra, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The Sumatran Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor* is endemic to the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. It is only known from a small number of sites scattered on the north and south of the island in submontane and montane forests, including secondary forests, from 750-2000m (van Marle and Voous, 1988; Collar, 2006; Eaton et al., 2016;

Collar et al., 2019). Existing populations are now considered small and severely declining (Harris et al., 2015). This decline is primarily attributed to the songbird trade in Indonesia, which is fuelling the indiscriminate and persistent poaching of this species and driving it ever closer to extinction. Just as persistent however, have been efforts to raise awareness on this threat and its drastic impacts on remaining wild populations. This paper seeks to provide a documentation and time-line of events surrounding conservation efforts and trade

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monitoring activities involving the Sumatran Laughingthrush in Indonesia from 1993-2018 and further insight on what may be required to help ensure wild populations recover from over-exploitation.

Trade and Demand

The demand for songbirds in Indonesia is massive and is pushing an increasing number of species towards extinction (Nash, 1993; Shepherd, 2004; Owen et al., 2014; Chng et al., 2015; Eaton et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2016). Among these species is the Sumatran Laughingthrush. This species is particularly vulnerable to trade as it is an island endemic, occurring in very few locations. It was formerly considered a subspecies of the White-crested Laughingthrush (*Garrulax leucolophus*) (*G. l. bicolor* – endemic to Sumatra); a more common and widespread species but was elevated to a full species in 2006 (Collar, 2006). While the change in status is a relatively recent development, bird dealers in Sumatra have always regarded the Sumatran Laughingthrush as a distinct species, calling it *Poksai Lokal*, while referring to the White-crested Laughingthrush as *Poksai Hong Kong* (Shepherd, 2007). In Jakarta, the Sumatran Laughingthrush is known as *Poksai Medan* or *Poksai Jambul Medan* (Basuni and Setiyani, 1989; Shepherd pers. obs).

Once described as common (van Marle and Voous, 1988), the Sumatran Laughingthrush has suffered a very rapid and ongoing population decline largely due to trapping for the songbird trade (Eaton et al., 2015; BirdLife International, 2016). There are no records of commercial breeding of the species, and all individuals in trade are considered to be wild-caught. This species is now considered rare, localised and locally extinct throughout its range (Shepherd, 2007; Shepherd, 2010; Shepherd, 2013; Eaton et al., 2015; BirdLife International, 2016; Eaton et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2017; Bušina et al., 2018). This is further corroborated by bird dealers who claim the species is becoming more difficult to obtain and as such market prices have soared over the years, ranging from US\$ 8-15 in 2007 to US\$

90 in 2014 (Chng et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2015; Shepherd et al., 2016).

The Sumatran Laughingthrush has frequently been encountered in trade during market surveys in Java and Sumatra (Basuni and Setiyani, 1989; Nash, 1993; Shepherd, 2007; Shepherd, 2010; Shepherd, 2013; Eaton et al., 2015; Eaton et al., 2016; Bušina et al., 2018) and in online trade surveys (Iqbal, 2015). However, earlier records are incomplete, as the species was previously considered a subspecies of the White-crested Laughingthrush and no structural distinction was made between the two during survey efforts (Shepherd et al., 2004; Shepherd, 2007). White-crested Laughingthrushes were frequently observed in trade; Nash reported the species to be in the top 20 most widely traded non-CITES bird species in his studies in Indonesia between 1991 and 1993. During that study, White-crested Laughingthrushes were observed in more than 75% of the 37 surveyed shops, totalling approximately 5,400 individuals (Nash, 1993). Nash also reported observing approximately 700 birds of the race “bicolor” in seven shops during the same period (Nash, 1993). During 61 surveys carried out between 1997 and 2001 in the bird markets of Medan, 3,392 White-crested Laughingthrushes were counted and included a large but unquantified number of Sumatran Laughingthrushes (Shepherd et al., 2004; Shepherd 2006).

In addition to evidence of trade in Sumatran Laughingthrushes from market surveys carried out in the 1990s, Nash also reported on Government-set quotas for the local capture and trade of supposedly White-crested Laughingthrush (Table 1). These birds were, of course, Sumatran Laughingthrushes.

Year	Quota
1987	100
1988	100
1989	200
1990	100
1991	600
1992	0
1993	0

Table 1. According to Nash, the Indonesian Government extended quotas for harvesting wild White-crested Laughingthrushes. This contributed significantly to the population decline (Nash, 1993).

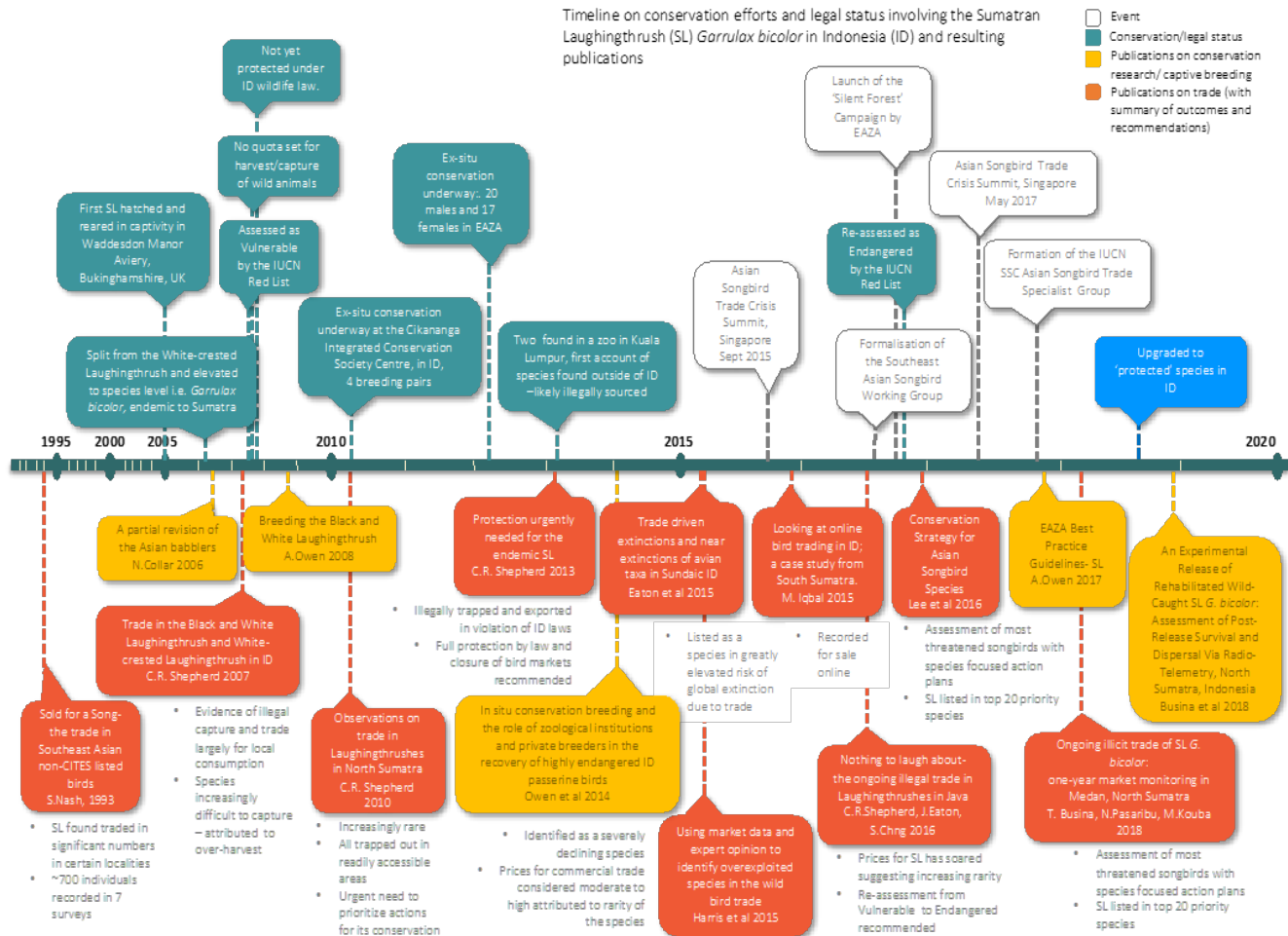


Figure 1. Time-line on conservation efforts and legal status involving the Sumatran Laughingthrush (SL) in Indonesia (ID) and resulting publications

Some authors have stated that, when the imports of the White-crested Laughingthrush to Indonesia was banned in 2005, due to the risk of avian influenza, the Sumatran Laughingthrush was targeted as its substitute (Bušina et al., 2018). However, since both species have concurrently been traded since at least the 1980s, there is little to suggest that the Sumatran Laughingthrush is merely a replacement for the White-crested Laughingthrush. To the contrary, Sumatran Laughingthrushes have likely become more common in trade following the import restrictions placed on White-crested Laughingthrush.

While most of the trade in the Sumatran Laughingthrush supplies local demand, there are anecdotal reports of the species being kept outside of Indonesia. According to Owen (2008), there was at least one importation of Sumatran

Laughingthrushes into Europe around the year 2000, and by 2006, the species was known to have been in two zoological collections and in the possession of at least one private aviculturist (Owen, 2008). In March 2013, two Sumatran Laughingthrushes were observed in a zoo in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and although there appear to be no export records of the species to Malaysia, this observation represents the first documented evidence of it being displayed in a South-east Asian country outside of Indonesia (Shepherd, 2013). Anecdotal information also suggests the species is currently, and increasingly, offered for sale online in Europe via private dealers.

Ex-situ conservation

The first Sumatran Laughingthrush ever reared in captivity was hatched in Waddesdon Manor Aviary,

Buckinghamshire, UK, July 2005 (Owen, 2008). Since then, conservation breeding programmes of Sumatran Laughingthrush, sometimes referred to as assurance colonies, have been in development in Indonesia at the Cikananga Integrated Conservation Society Centre, in European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) institutions and in the hands of a few private breeders, with successful breeding taking place (Owen, 2008; Collar et al., 2012). Best practice guidelines for the breeding of this species were developed and published by the Chester Zoo, North of England Zoological Society, in 2017 (Owen, 2017).

In 2016, the Asian Songbird Trade Working Group launched the “Conservation strategy for Southeast Asian songbirds in trade (Recommendations from the first Asian Songbird Trade Crisis Summit 2015 held in Jurong Bird Park, Singapore, 27–29 September 2015)” (Lee et al., 2016). This strategy, which lists species of high priority in urgent need of conservation action, includes the Sumatran Laughingthrush. Among the actions outlined for the species is the establishment of total legal protection in Indonesia.

Subsequently, in 2017, the IUCN Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (ASTSG) was established to prevent the imminent extinction of songbirds threatened by unsustainable trapping and trade. The ASTSG seeks to address the impact of the songbird trade and to identify solutions, reverse songbird population declines and improve the conservation status of all species involved. The Sumatran Laughingthrush is one of the priority species for conservation attention under the auspices of the ASTSG.

In response to the crisis facing Southeast Asian songbirds, EAZA launched the “Silent Forest” campaign in 2017, which not only supports conservation breeding programmes but also campaigns to raise awareness of the plight of Asian songbird species, including the Sumatran Laughingthrush.

Call for help

Considering the impact of trade on the species, conservationists have for years persistently recommended the Indonesian Government to

provide full legal protection for the Sumatran Laughingthrush under the Act of the Republic of Indonesia No. 5 of 1990 concerning Conservation of Living Resources and their Ecosystems (Undang-undang Republik Indonesia No. 5 Tahun 1990 tentang Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam Hayati dan Ekosistemnya) (Shepherd, 2007; Shepherd, 2013; Harris et al 2015; Lee et al., 2016; Shepherd et al., 2016; Busina et al., 2018), which would prohibit capture and trade of wild-caught individuals. The Sumatran Laughingthrush was afforded some level of legal protection under the Regulation of the Minister of Forestry Number 447/Kpts-II/2003, which regulates the collection and trade of all of Indonesia’s unprotected species through a quota system. And since there has been no established harvest quota for the Sumatran Laughingthrush, at least not since its elevation to species level, capture or trade of wild individuals of the species is effectively illegal. Its continued presence in markets may be explained by the fact that no punishments for transgressions are stated under the law regarding trade of non-protected species, which complicates enforcement and prosecution efforts.

In July 2018, the Indonesian government launched a revised list of protected species under Government Regulation No. 7, 1999 Concerning the preservation of flora and fauna; a list which until 2018 had not been updated since it was first gazetted. On a positive note, this new list includes the Sumatran Laughingthrush as a protected species. This means that the trade and harvest of wild-caught individuals is strictly prohibited unless it involves permitted second generation captive-bred individuals. Violation of the law stipulates a five-year prison sentence and a fine of IDR100million (US\$7000).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of Indonesia is applauded for its inclusion of the Sumatran Laughingthrush in the list of protected species, which is a critical step towards conservation of the species. In line with this, law enforcement capacity should be enhanced to raise awareness of the protected status of the species

and to ensure its implementation so that the illegal capture and trade of the Sumatran Laughingthrush ceases. While the new law came into force in July 2018, Sumatran Laughingthrushes were still observed in bird markets across Java in October 2018. Similarly, behaviour change among consumers, local communities and hunters/trappers involved in the poaching of songbirds - like the Sumatran Laughingthrush - should be considered and should be implemented through awareness raising campaigns and consumer education. Conservation organisations and research institutions should continue monitoring and reporting trade in the species to aid efforts to assess levels of illegal trade as well as evaluate enforcement effort and effectiveness of conservation actions in protecting the species.

Unfortunately, anecdotal information suggests there is an increasing international trade in Sumatran Laughingthrushes, but to date little solid evidence exists. Consequently, further investigation into the international trade in this species should be undertaken as a matter of priority. As the Sumatran Laughingthrush is endemic to Indonesia and is not permitted for export, listing the species in Appendix III of CITES should be considered as this would assist the Indonesian authorities in preventing illegal international trade.

While ex-situ conservation breeding programmes may help prevent the species from going extinct, its continued survival in the wild will depend critically on Indonesia's law enforcement. Inevitably, two important steps must be taken to keep the species from going extinct in the wild. Enforcing the law that protects the species, combined with stiff penalties that will effectively deter illegal capture and trade. Furthermore, increased awareness of the species' dire conservation status and the laws prohibiting capture and trade will reduce the demand in Indonesia.

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