

TRAFFIC

June 2021

CALLING FOR COMPASSION

COUNTERING VIETNAM'S SONGBIRD DEMAND
WITH BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY





INTRODUCTION

The forests of Vietnam are going silent as unsustainable trade empties them of songbirds. In one three-day study alone, TRAFFIC surveyors recorded a total of 8,047 birds from 115 species for sale in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2016. Ninety per cent of the species observed had no protection under Vietnam's legislation, paving the way for a potential conservation crisis.

Photo by Lightfield Studios @shutterstock.com

To better understand songbird consumers in Vietnam, TRAFFIC carried out a comprehensive songbird consumer survey in 2018 with targeted audiences of birdkeepers over 18 years old. The survey aimed to uncover socio-demographic data on consumers, reveal consumption motivations and provide a basis for a demand reduction communications campaign.

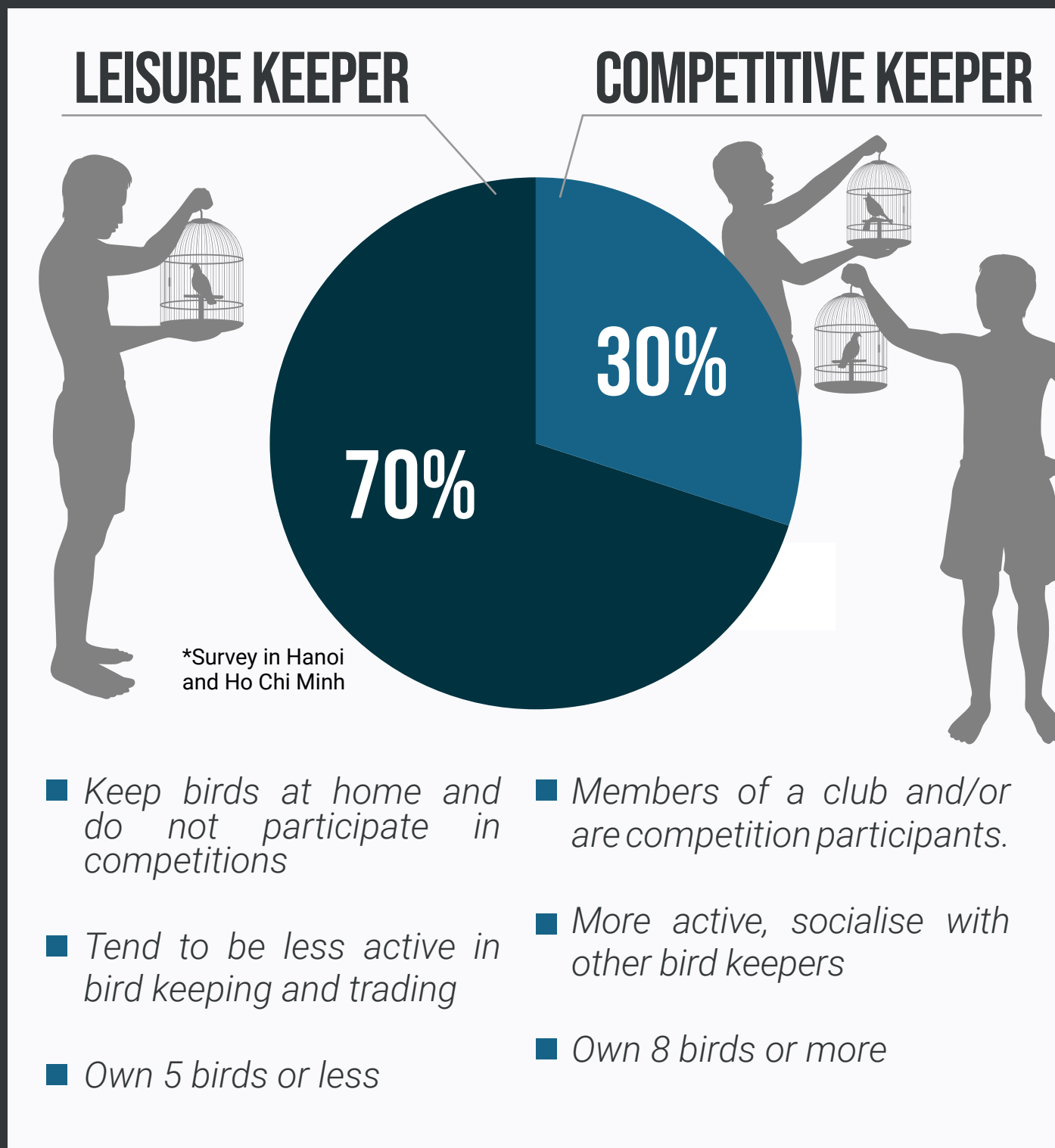
a fixed questionnaire (200 each from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city). To select the participants for the study, we recruited three methods, including: 200 people for the open sampling, 98 birds owners surveyed at bird group meetings and 102 consumers interviewed at bird shops.

Following this, TRAFFIC implemented a social and behaviour change initiative between April and June 2020 to reduce the demand for songbirds among target groups. The campaign incorporated the survey results and insights into Vietnamese cultural values, as well as lessons learned from other demand reduction projects. The initiative engaged the Vietnam Central Buddhist Association and illustrated how keeping caged wild birds conflicts with Buddhist beliefs about showing empathy to sentient beings. Pre- and post-event surveys and online feedback indicated there to be good potential in leveraging spiritual beliefs to change consumer behaviours associated with birdkeeping in Vietnam.

A third-party market research company conducted the songbird consumer survey in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city with two phases. The qualitative survey was carried out from August 2018 to October 2018 with nine in-depth interviews with two birdkeepers, two bird association leaders, two bird shop owners and a bird expert. The quantitative research was undertaken from 15th September to 4th October 2018 with the sample size of 400 birdkeepers interviewed using

SONGBIRD CONSUMER SURVEY PROFILES AND FINDINGS

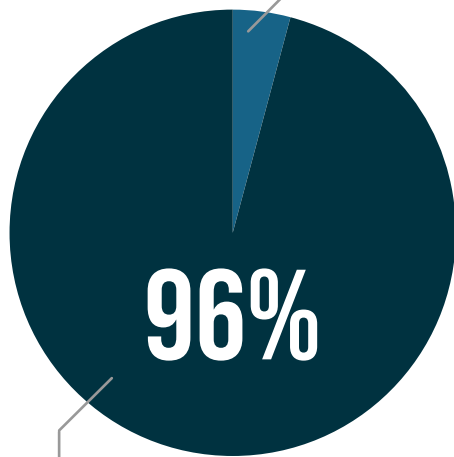
The study found that bird owners in Vietnam could be characterised broadly as the following profiles:



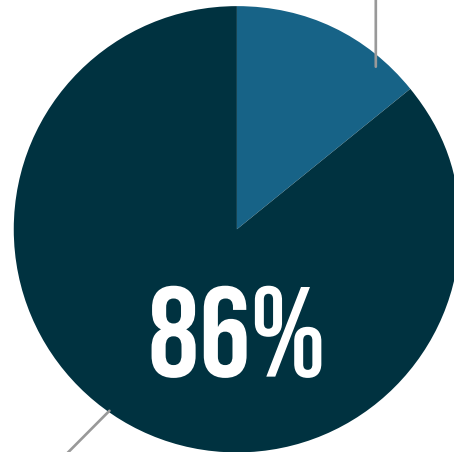
There are no significant differences of age, profession and income between these two profiles of bird keepers.

In Vietnam, birdkeeping is mostly practised by men

HO CHI MINH CITY



HANOI



6 → 8

AVERAGE NUMBER
OF BIRDS
OWNED BY
BIRD KEEPERS



27

AVERAGE AGE WHEN
FIRST OWNED A BIRD



Respondents were asked about the species of birds that they currently own, and which ones they would ideally like to own ('dream bird').

Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus* is the most popular bird owned, traded and searched for in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It is a popular birds in singing competitions.

White-rumped Shama *Kittacincla malabarica* and Chinese Hwamei *Garrulax canorus* are also popular, in terms of current and past ownership, and being sought after.

While the White-Rumped Shama *Kittacincla malabarica* is one of the most desired species, Chinese Hwamei *Garrulax canorus* is more popular in bird fighting competitions.

RED-WHISKERED BULBUL

Ownership

58%

Dreambird

45%



In Ho Chi Minh, the White-rumped Shama *Kittacincla malabarica* and Black-throated Laughingthrush *Garrulax chinensis* were kept significantly more than in Hanoi where the Indian White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus* and Japanese White-eye *Zosterops japonicus* were kept in increasing numbers.

NOTES:

- Most traded bird: most sold and most bought bird by bird owners in the survey.
- Most desired bird: most bird owners said they want to buy this bird species in the future.
- Most searched for bird in the market in bird owners' perception.

CHINESE HWAMEI

Ownership

17%

Dreambird

21%



© Hiyashi Haka

WHITE-RUMPED SHAMA

Ownership

22%

Dreambird

28%

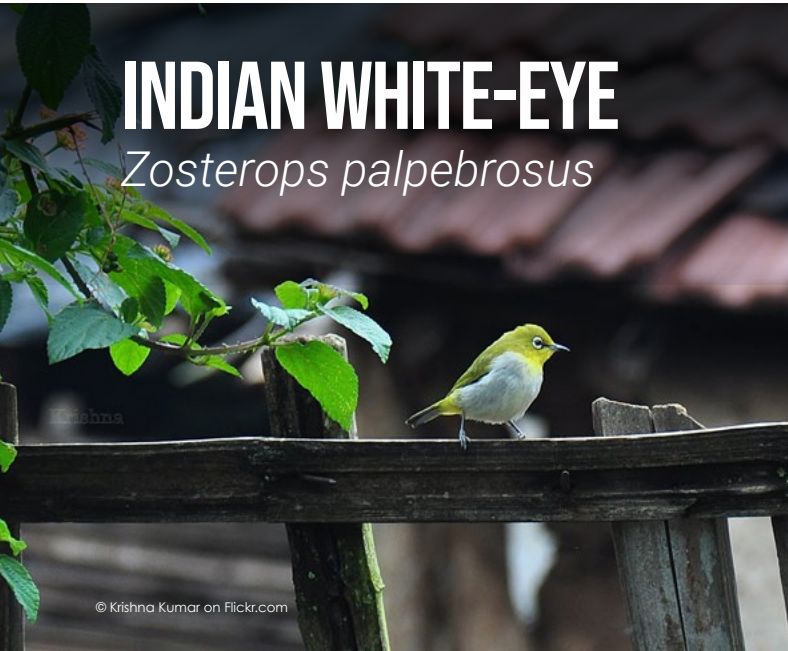


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OTHER POPULAR SPECIES

INDIAN WHITE-EYE

Zosterops palpebrosus



JAPANESE WHITE-EYE

Zosterops japonicus



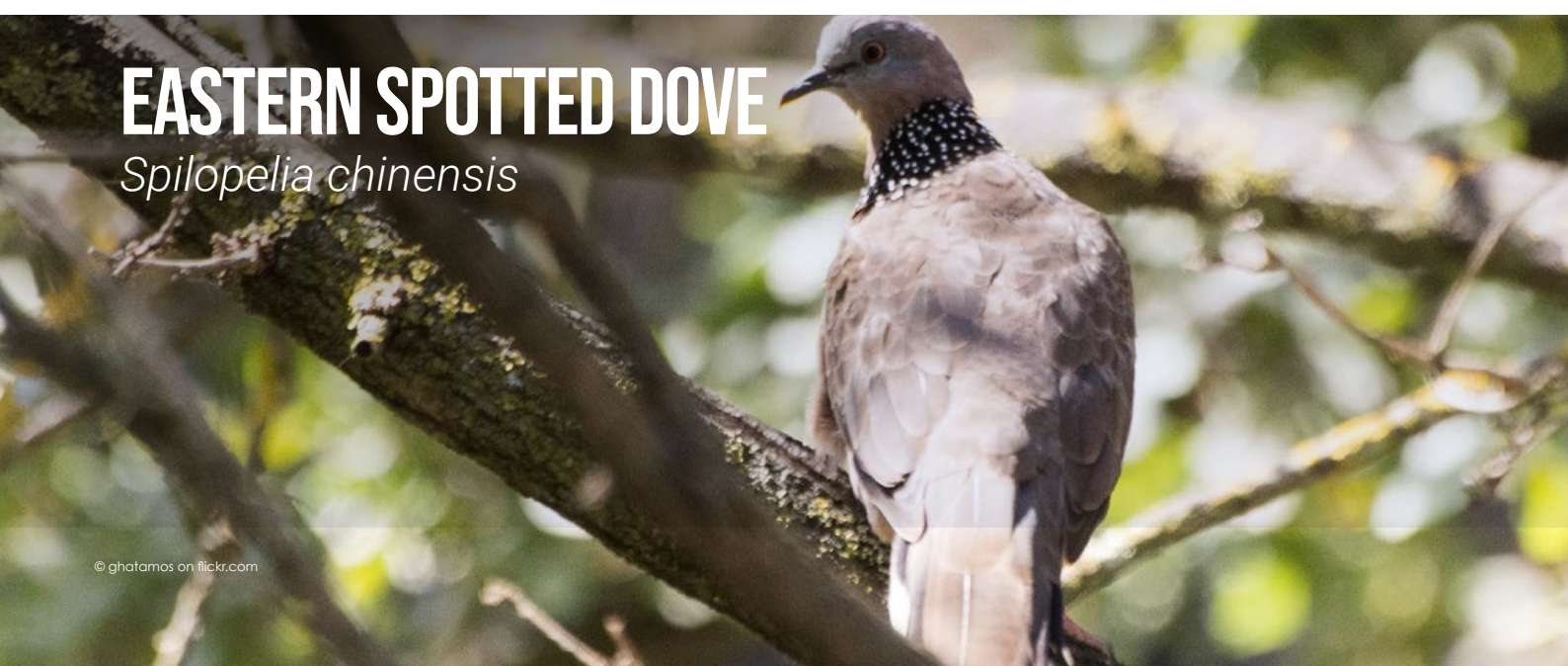
ORIENTAL MAGPIE-ROBIN

Copsychus saularis



EASTERN SPOTTED DOVE

Spilopelia chinensis



PERCEPTIONS OF WILD VS. CAPTIVE BIRDS

- Wild birds are preferred, because they are thought to sing and perform better in competitions, although they are harder to train.
- Captive-bred birds interact better with people but are perceived by most songbird keepers as less suitable for competitions.
- Most owners think the birds they own originated from the wild.
- Raising a wild bird takes a lot of time and effort to get the bird used to a captive environment so many bird owners choose to buy trained birds from bird “raisers” or other bird owners.

“The percentage of “mature birds caught from the wild” may be even higher because White-eye, Red-whiskered bulbul, and Hwamei are unlikely to reproduce in captivity.”

- Vietnam Birding Association

SONGBIRD MEETINGS AND SINGING COMPETITIONS

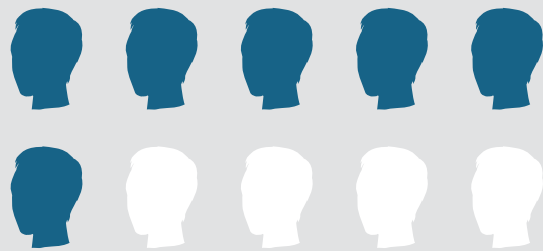
Owning songbirds is a social activity for many Vietnamese. Owners meet to show off their birds, compare them, let their birds meet other birds, teach them to sing for competitions, and share experiences among birdkeepers.

These meetings also offer an opportunity to resell or buy new birds. They are often held at coffee shops, parks, or on the sidelines of competitions.

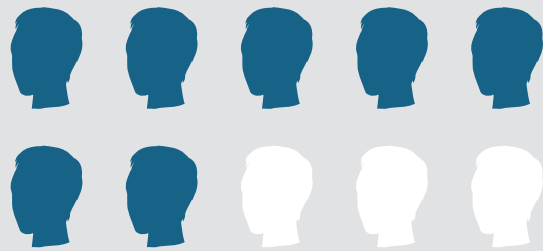




**NUMBER OF BIRD KEEPERS
MEET WITH OTHERS TO SHOW
OFF THEIR BIRDS : 6 OUT OF 10**



**NUMBER OF BIRD KEEPERS
MEET AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK
7 OUT OF 10**



**VND 100,000 – 200,000
(ABOUT USD4.30–8.60) PER BIRD
TO ENTER A BIRD INTO COMPETITION**



**NUMBER OF BIRD KEEPERS
BEING MEMBERS OF A BIRD CLUB/
ASSOCIATION: 3 OUT OF 10**





BIRD MEETINGS ARE CONSIDERED IMPORTANT TO BIRD KEEPERS, PARTICULARLY COMPETITIVE ONES.

ATTENDANCE



Small competition has

**50-100
BIRDS**

Big competition has

**500-600
BIRDS**

PRIZE



Prize: money or gift (bike, TV, motorbike, bird cage), trophies, and certificates. Prize values vary depending on the size of competition.

Biggest prize can be from several millions VND to tens of millions VND.

PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS BIRDKEEPING AND CONSERVATION

- Bird keepers are divided about whether owning birds can give financial gain (46% disagreeing and 36% agreeing), but almost all (99%) said that their hobby provides peace of mind.
- Bird keepers are divided about whether owning birds is a way to show status, but most agree that it is a hobby across all socio-economic demographics.
- They generally also agree that owning birds can help them to socialise and network, especially respondents from Ho Chi Minh..
- Friends and YouTube are the main sources of information for bird owners.
- In terms of media consumption, 90% of bird keepers use the Internet regularly, compared to 61% who watch TV
- Bird keepers were divided about whether bird trapping in Viet Nam is sustainable, with 39% agreeing that wild birds in Viet Nam are currently caught with moderation, but 45% disagreeing
- 49% of respondents agree that there are still plenty of birds in the wild, enough for bird-owning demands.
- Bird trading and owning are perceived as not well-regulated in Vietnam, more specifically from people in Ho Chi Minh City.
- 63% of bird keepers interviewed are aware of that birds are endangered, but only 52% think that bird-catching impacts wild populations

*From these responses, we identified that **social and spiritual angles** would be most effective in engaging birdkeepers to shift their behaviour away from keeping wild birds, and that **the Internet can play a vital role in disseminating the desired messages**. Buddhism is very close to the Vietnamese people, whose central virtue of compassion and tenant that humans and animals both have Buddha-nature is in line with a message of discouraging songbird collection. Working with the **Vietnam Central Buddhist Association (VCBA)**, provided the opportunity to pilot a campaign using the spiritual angle using **trusted messengers** (prominent spiritual leaders).*

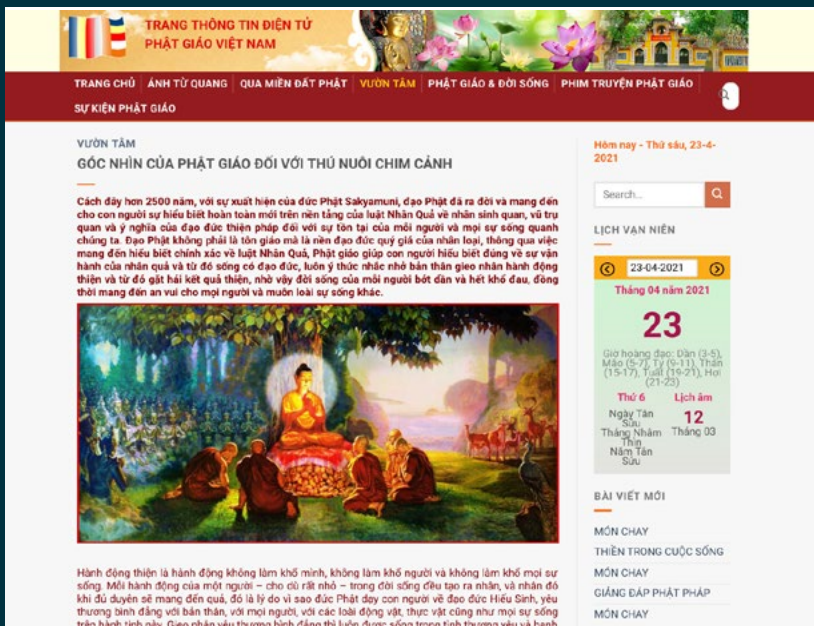


PARTNERSHIP WITH THE VIETNAM CENTRAL BUDDHIST ASSOCIATION

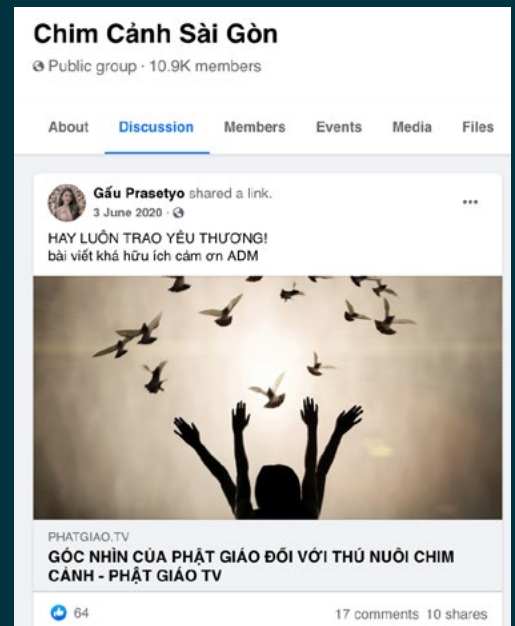
Buddhism plays a central role in Vietnamese culture, including worshipping at the pagoda and observance of holy days. Monks are highly respected and often attract large crowds for dharma talks explaining Buddhist thinking on current issues. After partnering with the Vietnam Central Buddhist Association (VCBA) on the delivery of communications to combat rhino horn consumption, TRAFFIC understood the potential value of leveraging the partnership to counter unsustainable songbird trade. Since songbird owners comprise a large proportion of the audiences of dharma talks, TRAFFIC called upon the Venerable Thich Thanh Huan, Abbot of Phap Van Pagoda and a wildlife advocate, to motivate the local community to protect vulnerable species by discouraging songbird collection.

Through a series of 12 dharma talks, the Venerable Thich Thanh Huan called upon more than 1,000 citizens to demonstrate their compassion for songbirds by refusing to support the songbird trade.

The Abbot also wrote a journal about songbird collection, which the VCBA disseminated on the websites of several pagodas and songbird clubs that had been identified in the 2018 consumer survey.



Vietnam Central Buddhism Association's website



Sai Gon Songbird Club's Facebook page

THE JOURNAL WAS DISSEMINATED ON THE FOLLOWING PLATFORMS FROM 10TH APRIL TO 15TH JUNE 2020:

Vietnam Central Buddhism Association's website

3516 VIEWS

Three renowned and established pagodas' websites: Phap Van Pagoda, Dinh Quan Pagoda and Bo De Pagoda websites

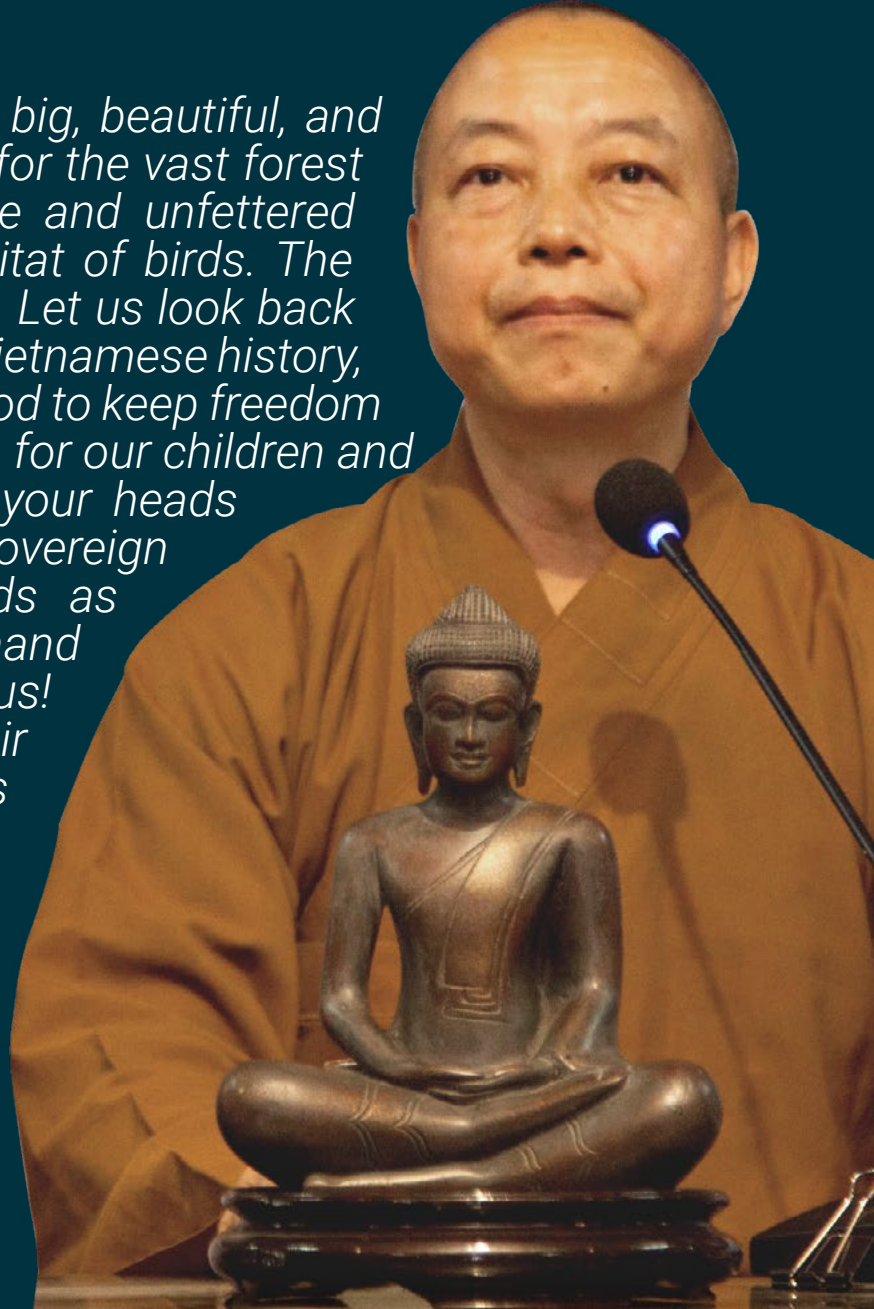
23290 VIEWS

Religious Culture Heritage Center's Facebook page is established and administrated by staff working at Government Religious Committee which aims to maintain tangible and intangible values of the country.

1906 VIEWS

“ But the cage, even if it is big, beautiful, and expensive, is not a substitute for the vast forest with green trees and the free and unfettered space that is the natural habitat of birds. The cage is the prison of the bird... Let us look back on the thousands of years of Vietnamese history, our fathers sacrificed their blood to keep freedom and independence at all costs, for our children and grandchildren. You can hold your heads up as the free people of a sovereign country, not bow your heads as slaves to those who command you. Freedom is so precious! For all other kinds of life, their longing for freedom is no less than ours. Even though we do not understand their language, the desire for freedom and the desire to live in peace is what all life aspires to. ”

– **The Venerable Thich Thanh Huan**



THREE POPULAR SONGBIRD FORUMS:



Vietnam Songbird Club's Facebook page

33,706 members



Number of views, shares, comments: 133
107 likes, 16 comments and 10 shares



Hanoi Songbird Club's Facebook page

10,973 members



Number of views, shares, comments: 129
22 likes, 22 comments and 85 shares



Sai Gon Songbird Club's Facebook page

11,992 members



Number of views, shares, comments: 132
105 likes, 17 comments and 10 shares

To gauge the effectiveness of the journal in affecting readers' attitudes towards bird collection, TRAFFIC conducted a small-scale self-reporting survey of 10 respondents who attended regular dharma talks at the selected pagodas and were recorded to be bird keepers.

BASELINE SURVEY



POST-ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

80%

intended to continue keeping songbirds.

60%

intended to continue keeping songbirds

40%

among those intended to retain their collections believed that their hobby helped keep the birds safe from poachers

100%

intended buy songbirds in the future

40%

would still buy songbirds in the future (their collection helps them make a living and they were not doing any harm to the animals)

60%

changed their mind because they wanted to avoid acquiring bad karma for caging birds

100%

would not advise others against collecting songbirds

40%

would not advise others against collecting songbirds because they were afraid others would say it was none of their business.

60%

would advise others against collecting songbirds because doing good things would help bring them fortune and luck.



In addition to the small-scale survey, we tracked the receptiveness to the dharma talks from the Abbots through the online comments.

The messages which received a lot of likes are:

- Encourage people **not to buy** wild songbirds. If the birds are already purchased, **treat them well but refuse to buy more;**
- Encourage people to **watch birds in the wild** by going to national parks or protected areas as a way to avoid causing harm to the birds and the biodiversity
- DO NOT release birds with unknown origins, as this could result in an invasive species (related to merit-release which additionally may cause stress to the bird and lower chances of survival);
- DO NOT encourage the release of birds as it drives poaching and they could be captured again (related to merit-release).

Some songbird owners commented that the birds were lucky to be caught and had a better life than those in the wild. They said that keeping them in cages was a way of protecting them while others said that owning birds helps people relax, so they felt that collecting songbirds should not be criticised.

COMMENTS FROM ONLINE USERS ARE:

[User] Birds just eat and sleep, don't need to look for food and might get dead

[User] hunters can hunt them

[User] caging is protecting and adding value to the species

[User] exactly, it is to protect them and help them to reproduce.

Few wild birds are found now

[User] Uhm. You guys must not eat fish, meat to live. If you just live by breathing, then nothing will be sold in the market.

[User] we just protect them, we never hurt any birds

Songbird owners' reflections indicate that there is still a great deal of work to do to change attitudes and opinions about songbird ownership in Vietnam, The insights collected are invaluable to inform future efforts to change people's behaviours in relation to the songbird trade.



LESSONS LEARNED

The project has generated insights from songbird keepers, which will be valuable in fine-tuning future interventions. Some vital lessons include:

- Songbird collection is a deeply rooted tradition and is popular throughout Vietnam.
- Interviews with owners indicate that songbird contests are on the rise.
- Many owners believe keeping birds in cages is a kind as birds are protected from outside dangers and are well-fed.
- There is little base understanding that the songbird trade is fuelling declines of wild bird populations.
- Primary motivators for the collecting songbirds are for personal interest and the relaxation that comes from listening to birdsong.
- Songbird collection provides livelihoods for many. Beyond hunters and traders, there are cage sellers, cage carvers, cage decorators, and bird food vendors. Disruptions to these livelihoods should be taken into consideration when planning interventions that protect wild bird populations from further decline.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TRAFFIC recommends scaling up the intervention to increase the impact among songbird collectors, with the following activities:

- Strengthening partnerships with Buddhist entities to increase the reach of behaviour change messaging to a larger audience;
- Utilising online and traditional media platforms strategically to disseminate behaviour change messages (depending on funding availability) to the target audiences;
- Support the organisation of relevant in-person events, workshops, and free informal talks about Buddhist philosophy and wildlife protection;
- Developing engagement with bird associations, encourage association leaders to shift bird keepers away from buying and keeping wild birds;
- Offering alternative behaviours for songbird collectors, such as participating in birdwatching groups or playing digital bird games in which users can collect and feed birds virtually;
- Evaluating the impact of behaviour change campaigns on bird buying and keeping activities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, is the leading non-governmental organization working globally on trade in wild animals and plants in the context of both biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

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