Statement concerning the Trapping of California Condors presented to the California Commission of Fish and Game, May 21, 1953

The National Audubon Society has long taken an active interest in the welfare of the California Condor. Several years ago, realizing that the Condor was probably the third rarest bird in the United States and that it was in danger of extinction, the Society financed a study of the basic natural history of the bird and its present status. It was felt that an adequate plan for the future effective protection of the species was not possible without this information. On the basis of this work a sanctuary was set aside in the Los Padres National Forest in which the Condor would be given a chance to live and breed in as nearly an undisturbed state as possible. When the present permit was issued to the San Diego Zoological Society the Audubon Society opposed the action and now advocates the revocation of the permit for the following reasons.

According to the most accurate estimate available, there are only about 60 Condors alive today. The indications are that this population has remained stable for the past 30 years. In a stable population which is made up of so few individuals the removal of two birds could well have a very serious effect on the delicate balance and might mean the difference between increase and decrease.

In the case o f the Condor the problem is further complicated by the very slow breeding rate which consists of a single young every two years for each pair of adults. Thus it takes two birds at least 4 years to replace themselves, much less show any increase. This extreme slowness in breeding is due to the length of time which is necessary to raise the young to the point of independence. The time from the laying of the egg to the time the young can fend for itself is in the neighborhood of 18 months. Because of this lengthy period of dependence on the parents, there is never a time of year when some adult condors do not have either eggs or young which have to be fed. If either of the parents is removed during the time, the nestling will in all probability die.

After the young bird becomes independent it does not become adult and able to breed until it has reached the age of about 5 years. About 1/3 of the present population is believed to be of this group. This, of course, means that of the 60 living Condors only about 40 are of breeding age. Because each pair breeds only on alternate years, the maximum of young for a given year is 10. Due to various natural causes this total is never reached, probably 5 to 8 being a more accurate number.

The major reason for the setting aside of a large area in which Condors are known to be breeding is the birds' extreme sensitivity to human disturbance. Where there is much human

activity Condors will simply not carry on their natural activities. This is especially true of nesting. The presence of trapping operations on the very edge of the breeding area certainly leaves the path wide open to such disturbance. This could have a very serious effect on the population as a whole.

Several difficulties present themselves to anyone who would attempt to trap a pair of Condors. In the Andean Condor, which has been so successfully bred in captivity by the San Diego Zoo, there is no problem of sex identification. This is not the case in our California species. In our bird the sexes are identical and there is a great deal of doubt whether the sex can be accurately determined even in the hand. Even if this is possible it would probably entail the handling of a number of individuals before even a tentative identification could be made.

This last brings up another complication. In any trapping operation and especially one involving a bird the size of a Condor, there is always the chance that unwanted individuals would be caught and injured in the process. This could, despite all care, result in the loss of more than the two birds.

The capture of an already mated pair would result in the least disturbance to the population but this would only be possible under the most fortunate circumstances. In taking two birds it would be much more likely that they would come from different pair. This would result in the loss of two

nests instead of just one. If trapping were to be carried on again during the breeding season as was the case this year this would become almost a certainty.

If the cageing of a pair of these birds would in any demonstrable fashion help the wild population it might be another matter, but as yet no one has given any conclusive evidence that this would be so.

It has been asserted by proponents of the trapping that the presence of a pair in captivity would have great value as an educational exhibit whereby the public would be made aware of the precarious situation of the species and thus better protection would result. Actually, just the reverse might well be true. In the past, publicity for the Condors has in some cases resulted in harm to the birds. It stimulates the interest of the public, it is true, and makes people want to see Condors in the wild. This has led to detremental disturbance of the birds by curiosity seekers.

A California Condor at close quarters is no thing of beauty--indeed, quite the contrary. Except for its rarity it would have little display value. Few people beholding a Condor for the first time, at close range in a cage, would be inspired to do much toward saving them. When you place them in a cage, no matter how large, you rob them of their outstanding attribute which is mastery of flight. Thus cooped up they lose all of their esthetic value. As Aldo Leopold has so aptly stated, "The recreational value of wildlife is

inverse to its artificiality." This is especially true in the case of the Condor.

The granting of a permit to trap Condors for any purpose would appear to us to be setting a dangerous precedent. If one institution can get some, why not others? Would it not be much better to draw the line now and allow none to be taken?

It has been stated that the continuity of the species would be assured if the birds were bred successfully in captivity. Perhaps this is true, but the National Audubon Society is not interested in the relegating of any species to the status of a zoological curiosity. Our interest rather lies in the keeping of the Condor as he is now, one of the outstanding and intensely interesting components of our native wildlife. There has been no evidence in the short time since the sanctuary was created that this is not still entirely possible if the birds are given a chance. It is our feeling that they should be given that chance!

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