

ABSTRACT

How much is a bird worth? The economic value of avian ecological services exceeds billions of dollars worldwide.
LIVING BIRD (Summer 2017): 18-20, by Çağan H. Şekercioglu



A very interesting analysis of the economic value of birds is presented in this paper. The author says that the question 'why should we care about birds?' is offending for him and that explaining the economic and ecological value of birds to people raises their interest and support for bird conservation.

The paper discusses the main benefits of birds in their various roles and tries to evaluate the economics for each service provided by a bird. The services are then categorized and an attempt is made to evaluate the monetary value. The main aspects discussed are:

Seed dispersal and pollination: Many tree species depend on birds for seed dispersal. Examples of bird dispersed timber tree species are given and it is stated that two valuable African mahogany species, *Entandrophragma utile* and *Khaya anthotheca* rely almost entirely on birds for seed dispersal. Thus, these are important for the timber trade. Specific details like the estimated cost of replacing Clark's Nutcrackers' seed dispersal of Whitebark Pine is \$1,980 to \$2,405 per hectare and \$11.4 to \$13.9 billion across the range of Whitebark Pines in the U.S.A. This shows the value of seed dispersal services. Birds as pollinators are important and bird pollination, especially in the winter, when most insects are inactive, is overlooked.

Pest Control: The economic advantages of birds as natural pest controllers are discussed. In Dutch apple plantations,

reduction in insect pests by birds resulted in 66% increase in yield of apples. Similarly, birds in a Jamaican coffee plantation increased coffee yield by \$310 per hectare by preying on coffee berry borer beetles. In Malaysia, oil palm farmers put up Barn Owl nest boxes to control rodent populations and in Israel, experiments with a trained Barn Owl significantly reduced seed consumption by rodents. Barn Owls are known to eat more than 11000 mice in a lifetime and are very beneficial to farmers. Many other examples are discussed where birds are helpful. The author states that birds themselves as pests are over-estimated. Studies have found that crop losses due to birds are less than 1% of production.

Scavengers and sanitary services: Here, the case of the drastic decline in vulture populations in India and the increase in potential disease vectors is discussed. The increase in population of feral dogs and the cases of rabies deaths in humans is detrimental to the economy in India. Here, the author strangely discusses the case of bubonic plague in Surat in 1994, saying that increase in disease vectors by reduction in vulture population could be a possible cause of plague. But, this seems rather far-fetched as at that time, the reason for plague was not a decrease in vulture population. Other important services are domesticated birds as a source of food, bird feathers for textiles and guano for fertilizer. Culturally also, birds play an important part by their roles in the arts and religion, and the huge benefit to the local economy by bird watchers spending large amounts of money for seeing birds in various parts of the world.

This is a very important paper and if the actual benefits of birds are explained to people, it will certainly help in conservation. For Gujarat, it can be shown that the large harrier population around Velavadar National Park is beneficial to farmers since the harriers prey on insects which destroy crops. Specific studies can be conducted and the value of birds can be explained in monetary terms. The value to the local economy in undeveloped areas due to bird watching tourism can be easily demonstrated.

All policy makers, forest department staff, ornithologists, amateur birders and NGO's should be sensitized to the economic value of birds and urged to study this paper. BCSG will do its bit for this cause. □



Manoj Dholakia

Harriers at Velavadar

“

A beehive, or an ant colony would appear to be ideals for society to emulate and frequently bees and ants are held up as paragons of responsibility. Unhappily, human beings are not bees or ants shackled to evolution imprinted responses, they are intellectual individuals within social organisation. At both ends there have to be self regulating limits. Unfortunately, an organisation itself cannot give, it can be used (and abused). Its systems can be manipulated. Here in lies the danger of expecting institutions to deliver - they can not, the individuals operating them can.

Without getting involved with larger systems like government, I may give an example of a garden where each plant is carefully nurtured to attain its maximum beauty, yet gently curtailed from overpowering others - a bud rubbed off here, a stem bent there. The gardener delighting in attending to his charges. It is the gardener on whom the responsibility lies, not the plants that make the garden. Even so, each plant has its requirements to give of the best. If every institution is seen as a garden, the vitality and vibrancy is palpable. A garden is laid out for specific effects, similarly institutions are set up for identified objectives. It is those objectives that need to be continually checked; are they being achieved?

”

- Lavkumar Khachar

