

A Word from the President.

The history of modern falconry has, in many ways been written by the fortunes of the Peregrine Falcon. This species is almost synonymous with falconry, certainly Western falconry. Fluctuations in the populations of this resilient and widespread species over the past 60 years and the responses to these fluctuations have determined the practice of modern falconry, the attitudes of others to falconry and, even, the establishment and growth of the IAF. The consideration of down-listing of the Peregrine falcon at the CITES CoP 17 in Johannesburg this year can be seen as bringing this story in full cycle.

What happened to the Peregrine falcon is part of the falconry legend. It seems trite to repeat the story but young falconers may not be aware of the salient parts of this history and, like any good legend, the tale has morals and lessons. This tale can be passed on, as by some aged “grey-beard” to listeners around the camp-fire or in a majalis, and the issues discussed and debated to instruct us for the future.

If we look back to the time “before the collapse” of peregrine populations, we must recall that there was virtually no captive breeding of raptors. This was as recent as the 1960s. Falconry raptors were harvested from the wild. This was the sustainable practice that was the norm for the past 4 to 6 thousand years that falconry has existed. Trade in falcons certainly existed; we all know of the trade in the Netherlands and the iconic Mollen family, but this was a regional example of trade in a practice that is global in extent. There is no evidence that this trade adversely affected raptor populations. As some of the earliest recorded conservation legislation relates to the regulation of falcon harvests, we can perceive that our forebears had concerns for the issue of sustainability. Certainly, in some places and at some times, very large numbers of raptors were used for falconry. There were reports that Genghis Khan took 500 gyrfalcons on his campaigns and goodness-knows what other birds. Of course, there were, globally, far fewer falconers at that time.

With established practice and an extended history of sustainable use, what on earth went wrong? In the late 1950s and early 60s peregrine falcon populations declined. Falconers were the first to recognize this and to react. For example, correspondence shows that British falconers voluntarily suspended their harvest of peregrines because they noticed that peregrines nests were inexplicably failing to produce young. The decline was calamitous and in some regions the peregrine was completely extirpated. Obviously other species were affected. Conservationists became alarmed and the immediate response was to blame falconers for unsustainable harvesting. The myth of a middle-eastern sink hole for falcons was born and every falconer was immediately suspected of being an illegal trapper and trader and the cause of this environmental catastrophe. With power of hind-sight, this may seem ludicrous but it was a very real belief by many concerned with conservation and this informs attitudes to this day. Fortunately, real science prevailed and the cause of the environmental catastrophe was found to be DDT and other organochlorine pesticides. Soon the cause became widely understood; it was brought to the attention of the public through Rachel Carson’s famous book “*Silent spring*” and DDT was banned although it is still manufactured and has limited specific use to this day. There are still calls for its more wide-spread use against mosquitoes which carry malaria and the newly-prevalent Zika disease.

The essential response was to halt the use of DDT and related compounds. These pesticides are very stable and can remain within the environment for a long time but as the environment became safe once

more, many affected species rebounded. DDT accumulates in body fat and passes up the food chain so peregrines, as apex predators, were most vulnerable and there were huge areas, such as the Eastern seaboard of North America, where the peregrine had disappeared. Falconers were involved in the Madison Conference in 1965 which led to the establishment of the Raptor Research Foundation and resulted in the decision to use captive breeding and release as a means to re-establish the species. The response of North American falconers was to create The Peregrine Fund. This organization pioneered the captive breeding and release of peregrines. The tree-nesting peregrines of central Europe represented another population which had been extirpated. Special techniques were required to imprint peregrines on tree-nests and work was undertaken in Germany and Poland to restore the tree-nesting population; one which would possibly never re-establish without assistance.

There were other responses to this collapse of the peregrine population and to the subsequent denigration of the falconry community. The International Association for Falconry and the Conservation of Birds of Prey (IAF) was started by a group of 8 founder national organizations in Europe as a response to the challenges now faced by falconers. This organization now has 110 member organizations for 80 different nations. Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, God rest his soul, first leader of the newly formed United Arab Emirates, was sensitive to the discord between falconers and conservationists. He organized the first of the Falconry Festivals which centred on a conference to bring these groups together. This was held in Al Ain in 1976 and the event started the significant role which Abu Dhabi has played in developing and supporting modern falconry. Through the leadership of Abu Dhabi, falconry was recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2010 and Abu Dhabi has provided the financial support for the inception of the IAF Business Plan in 2013.

Captive Breeding of the Peregrine falcon for conservation reasons was extended to the captive breeding of surplus birds and other species of raptors for falconry. It also used for a wide range of other endangered or locally extinct species such as the Red Kite and the Mauritius Kestrel. The accessibility to suitable raptors for falconry made our art possible for many more people and the attendant publicity has resulted in an almost exponential growth in the practice of falconry. Falconry is now practiced in more countries in the world, by more people, using more species of raptors and flying their birds in better style and condition than ever before in history. We truly are seeing the golden age of falconry and all this is because we responded to the loss of the peregrine falcon.

The principle of sustainable use is poorly understood by many people working in conservation. Quite understandably, a person whose work involves protecting or husbanding a species or an ecosystem may become possessive of this and resist consumptive use by others. It is recognized, with good supportive evidence, that sustainable use benefits conservation and this is one of the three pillars which support the Convention on Biological Diversity and is further developed in the Addis Ababa Principles. Despite this, there is a powerful move within conservation circles to resist use and to rely on increased legislation and enforcement to conserve species and environments which are considered vulnerable or endangered. This movement is strongly supported by animal rights organizations which operate under the guise of conservation, but whose ideology opposes the use or management of wild animals even to the detriment of sound conservation. This ideology finds fertile ground in the relatively wealthy urbanized populations of the West and informs the decisions of the powerful voting bloc of the European Union and allied nations. Hunting is coming under increasing pressure despite incontrovertible benefits to conservation. To this mix must be added the antipathy towards falconry which developed in the early days of the peregrine population collapse. This attitude persists today as a

subtle and pervasive animosity which is frequently encountered amongst conservation individuals, groups and bodies. With the establishment of a permanent office and professional staff, as well as significantly increased funding, the IAF is working hard to establish and demonstrate the conservation track-record of falconers, to win friends and to inform attitudes. This is a hard persistent effort which is essential to the survival of falconry and to the interests of falconers in every part of the world.

Declines in some populations of the Saker falcon have been noted and are of concern to falconers and to other conservationists. In 2011, there was a call at the CoP of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) to up-list the species from Schedule II to I with the reason given for the decline being the unsustainable use of the species for falconry. With some sense of *deja vue*, falconers opposed this call, concerned that there were other causes for the declines, that recognition should be given to sustainable use projects such as the artificial nest project in Mongolia and that falconers should have a role in plans for the conservation of this species. As a result, the Saker Task Force was formed within the Raptors MoU of the CMS. The IAF has played a significant part in this MoU and in the subsequent development of the Saker Global Action Plan. The Saker Global Action Plan lists the principle cause of Saker falcon declines as due to electrocution. The role of electrocution was uncovered by falconers working in Mongolia for International Wildlife Consultants and funded by the Environmental Agency of Abu Dhabi. From their work, it is estimated that 5000 Sakers are killed in Mongolia alone by electrocution. Other causes for declines were listed as environmental degradation and loss of food sources followed by use for falconry. Falconers have responded to the Saker Global Action Plan. The IAF has funded and has taken joint management of the first of the Flagship projects of this plan: The Portal to Encourage Trust. We have also provided the start-up for the second Flagship project by funding the first ten satellite trackers for the 100 Satellite Tags project. The issue of electrocution is a serious one which possibly rivals DDT in its impact globally. The IAF has addressed this by preparing a Motion for a Recommendation for the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Hawai'i this September. The Motion calls on governments and funders of all new electrical infrastructure to ensure that it is designed to avoid electrocution and collisions of birds and to mitigate existing structures. We have 15 co-sponsors supporting us in this Motion including BirdLife International and the national representatives of Abu Dhabi, Hungary and Poland.

With the elimination of DDT and allied organochlorine pesticides, new pesticides have been developed which are safer in terms of environmental residue and secondary poisoning of animals that eat insects. The problem with these insecticides is that they are simply too effective and kill all insects including vital pollinators. The use of these insecticides has been coupled with intensification of agriculture and the growth of crops, principally maize, for biofuels. This has been catastrophic for biodiversity, particularly in Europe, where loss of insects is leading to a loss of insectivorous birds including the red-footed falcon. It has also led to a catastrophic loss of partridges as the chicks of this species require insects. The partridge has been the principle quarry of European falconers. Once again, falconers are responding to the challenge. The IAF has established a very capable Biodiversity Working Group and this Group has decided to develop a multilingual interactive Portal that will encourage and inform the reestablishment of biodiversity - The Perdix Portal. This Portal will allow national sites in national languages providing information that will avoid or reverse biodiversity loss using the Grey Partridge as the indicator species and our motivation will be to restore the small-game hawking for European falconers.

Let us return to consideration of the Peregrine falcon and reflect on the changed conservation status of the species. In response to global declines of the species, it was listed as CITES Appendix I. We know

now that these declines had nothing to do with trade. At the CITES CoP 16, calls to up-list the Polar bear from Appendix II to I failed because it was recognized that threats to this species were related climate change and not trade so it was not appropriate for CITES to respond in this case. The Peregrine falcon population is now restored. There are probably more peregrines in the world now than at any previous time. They have learned to use man-made structures for nests and thrive on burgeoning feral pigeon populations in and around cities. One report claimed that there are 9 peregrine nests in the greater London area – an area where there could never have been peregrine nests before. BirdLife, in the IUCN Red List, lists the species as “of Least Concern” and suggests a global population of 100,000 to 499,999 individuals. We could work with these figures and, taking a conservative estimate, suggest that there are 50,000 breeding pairs. Once again, being conservative, at 1 chick per nest fledging per year there are 50,000 young produced and, based on the USA Fish and Wildlife model, a 5% harvest (2500 to 5000 birds) would make no measurable difference to this population. Falconers categorically do not want to re-start a trade in wild peregrine falcons but a limited use of wild-taken eyas or passage birds would seem entirely reasonable. This occurs in a number of countries such as the USA, South Africa and Ireland. It would seem that other countries with stable populations should be permitted a controlled and well monitored harvest. This allows for the introduction of new blood into breeding stock and also allows for appropriately skilled falconers to fly passage birds and experience the adrenaline charge that traditional historic falconry was based upon. Certainly there are regions where populations of the Peregrine will not sustain a harvest and the illegal market must be closely monitored and prevented. To this end, the IAF is planning to develop a registration and stud-book program with the facility for DNA Banking.

We are, of course, aware that an illegal trade in falcons persists and this trade is strongly opposed by legitimate falconers who have a history of acting against illegal trade. There are numerous examples of this response by falconer in a range of countries but one recent example is instructive. A well-known illegal trafficker by the name of Lendrum has been active for some years. He was caught and imprisoned in Britain smuggling Peregrine eggs. British falconers undertook to incubate, rear, train and release the young birds. He was caught again, in late 2015, smuggling *Falco peregrinus cassini* eggs from Chile via Brazil to the Persian Gulf. A restoration effort was launched, supported by the IAF and involving falconers from Brazil, Argentina and Chile as well as the respective conservation authorities, to restore these falcons to the wild. Eventually, 1 chick survived and was placed in an active wild nest in Patagonia where it successfully fledged. Lendrum has a 4 year jail sentence in Brazil. Chilean falconers are planning a project to restore the estimated number of young birds, lost to the wild, through the illegal activities of this individual as a symbolic gesture to show the disapproval of legitimate falconers to this activity.

At the AGM in 2011, the proposal was made to the Assembly of Delegates that the IAF should work to encourage the down-listing of the peregrine falcon from CITES Appendix I to II. This proposal is now becoming a reality as Canada is presenting a Proposal to CITES CoP 17 in Johannesburg to down-list the Peregrine falcon. The IAF has provided support for this proposal and our Executive Secretary, Adrian Reuter, has worked closely with the Canadian government. The down-listing will not prevent nations from maintaining strict controls on the use of wild birds where appropriate and there is no need or desire for this to lead to any increase in trade in the species. By the time this article is published, the decision will have been made. By all logic, the proposal should succeed and it can only fail on political grounds or because the anti-use lobby has prevailed. Never-the-less, this proposal represents a very

significant achievement for those who have contributed enormous effort to the restoration of this iconic species and, in the process, have changed falconry for ever. Win or lose, this is an event for all falconers to celebrate and one to which many of us have contributed. In our celebration we must remember some giants of this effort, Tom Cade and The Peregrine Fund, Christian Saar and the Deutsche Falkeorden, the list goes on.

Adrian Lombard,

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