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Author: [Sadeq Behnam](#)

IWPR story said to have contributed to introduction of ban on poaching of species that prey on agricultural pests.

Conservation officials in Herat say the publication of an IWPR report on rare-bird trafficking has drawn support from the security services and the general public for their efforts to combat the trade.

Birdlife Disappears From Afghan Landscape, published in November 2010, reported local concerns that the poaching of predatory species had led to an increase in attacks on crops by locusts, field mice and other pests. With insufficient numbers of birds to keep them down, flies, mosquitoes and other insects were also becoming a problem.

Agriculture officials in Herat province confirmed that hunting birds could lead to a rise in the number of insects and thus harm farming productivity, while the use of chemical insecticides as an alternative to natural predators was both expensive and bad for the environment.

The IWPR story was picked up by a variety of local media outlets, including television and radio stations, and led to an upsurge of interest from security officials and residents of Herat province, some of whom even visited the environment protection department to pledge their cooperation with conservation attempts.

Abdul Qayum Afghan, director of environment protection in Herat, said, "For a long time, we had received reports about the theft of chicks of various birds such as hawks, but we could not take action because of a lack of the necessary coordination among governmental agencies."

However, he continued, "after the IWPR report appeared, and was repeatedly re-published by other media outlets, many officials began to pay attention to the problem and public support was also mobilised".

Afghan said that high-ranking provincial officials had been spurred to try and find a solution and, after several meetings, it was decided in conjunction with Herat governor Dawud Saba that hunting and selling any kind of wild birds would be immediately banned.

Since then, he went on, at least 12 people had been convicted of bird trafficking and given short prison sentences and fines, while hundreds of captive birds had been seized and released into the wild again.

These sanctions had caused many rare bird traffickers to halt their activities, he said, adding, "We now see it as our duty to report our activities to the media, particularly IWPR, as a way of solving serious problems which usually get little attention."

Noor Khan Nekzad, Herat police spokesman, said his forces had not previously appreciated the seriousness of the problem of bird poaching and so had not taken the issue seriously.

But after the topic received such wide media attention, the police realised that hunting wild birds was in fact a crime which diminished the natural resources of the country, and worked together with environment protection officials to try and stop it.

"I thank IWPR and the other media outlets for writing a report about this problem," he said, calling on the press to cover other issues which the police were not aware of.

Hayatullah Hamid, head of the Baran local radio station in Herat, said he often turned to IWPR for ideas for his own reports and that his attention had been particularly struck by the story on bird poaching.

After reading it, he had ordered a radio reporter to organise a talk show with environment protection officials, the police and other experts for the very next day, prompting a large number of calls from members of the public.

Wali Shah Bahra, director of information and culture in Herat, said that it was the responsibility of media outlets to draw the attention of both officials and the wider community to society's problems.

Unfortunately, he continued, some media outlets focused on reporting about the war and conflict in Afghanistan rather than trying to address other issues which affected the public.

“As far as I am concerned, IWPR mainly focuses on issues that are about the needs of our society,” he said. “As the director of information and culture here, I would like to thank the institute for its performance in Herat.”

Sadeq Behnam is an IWPR trainee.

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