



Convention on the
Conservation of
Migratory Species of
Wild Animals



Agreement on the
Conservation of
African-Eurasian
Migratory
Waterbirds (AEWA)



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PRESS RELEASE

Migratory birds: from messengers of life to ambassadors of death?

While some media are still portraying birds as the main vectors of the spread of avian flu, the United Nations Environment Programme with its associated Convention on Migratory Species and the African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement are launching a campaign to remind the world that migrations are essential to natural processes for the effective functioning of our ecosystems. We must not make the mistake of blaming migratory birds for the creation and spread of deadly new viruses when human destruction of the natural world is the real culprit.

In ancient Greece the bird of Athena represented the renewal of life. A dove, with an olive branch in its beak, returned to Noah's ark to announce the end of the deadly flood. The dove remained a symbol of peace and hope. For the Egypt of pharaohs the falcon had protective powers and was linked to royalty. For the native Americans birds had different meanings, always positive and linked to the concepts of unity, freedom, community, safe return, love and celebration of life.

In almost all cultures, for centuries flocks of birds have announced the arrival of spring, and the yearly rebirth of nature associated with it. The social acceptance of birds as messengers of life was accompanied by the knowledge that migrations had indeed an important role to play in ecosystem functioning, as providers of services and food supply.

Both farmers and scientists knew that birds provide important ecological services, including seed dispersal, plant pollination and pest control. In addition to being important regulators of ecosystems many species were and still are source of food and livelihoods for many.

However, this year, for the first time in history, nobody seems to be impatient to greet the arrival of migratory birds. On the contrary, media worldwide are depicting the phenomenon as the carrier of a deadly disease. The illness is portrayed as the potential new plague and migratory birds are sometimes being cast in a role little better than that of rats in the middle ages.

"There is no evidence that avian influenza was passed to humans by wild birds, and it is obvious that only the mutation of the virus causing the spreading of the disease from human to human could provoke a real pandemic. Yet, the public perception, supported by incomplete or inaccurate media coverage, is pointing fingers at migratory birds" says Mr.

Bert Lenten, Executive Secretary of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement and main organizer of a UNEP campaign on bird migrations.

Wrong assumptions and solutions seem to stem from inaccurate or partial information. Also the Executive Secretary of the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species, Mr. Robert Hepworth, reiterates that holding migratory birds responsible is misleading and would not promote lasting solutions. "The international community should focus instead on the ecological, social and economic causes of the spreading such as the drastic reduction of wildlife habitats and unsustainable farming practices, which have led to an unhealthy proximity of migratory birds and domesticated animals".

"Blaming migratory birds seems the easiest way not to focus on the real problems related to development and unsustainable agricultural practices" continues Mr. Bert Lenten, Executive Secretary of the UNEP African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds Agreement. "Instead of wondering where the next deadly landing would occur, we should focus on effective conservation measures for wildlife and their habitats, thus maintaining healthy and uncontaminated ecosystems".

To promote awareness on the importance of bird migrations for ecosystem functioning, as well as to inform on the threats and the conservation challenges birds face, UNEP, AEWA and CMS have launched the "World Migratory Bird Day", to be celebrated every year on a date in early spring (this year the celebration will be held on 8 April). Information delivered during the events to be celebrated worldwide will certainly include up-to-date information on avian influenza and its effects on birds –so far also victims of the disease.

Under the motto: "Migratory Birds Need Our Support Now!" UN is stressing the urgency of action required to undertake a number of conservation measures, which will prevent many birds worldwide from facing extinction.

The campaign is inviting governments, international organization and the general public to raise awareness on the threats faced by birds, from obstacles to their journeys to the effects of climate change on their paths, to habitat degradation, desertification, unsustainable uses.

The organizers of the event have chosen to advertise the event through a poster portraying flyways, now too often seen as the route of the spreading of the disease. "Flyways should remain a symbol of healthy journeys from one breeding, feeding, nursing and resting site to another. Flying birds coming in our direction should not be the reason for concern, but on the contrary the announcement of a new, pleasant, season" concludes Mr. Lenten.

Useful links:

<http://www.migratorybirdday.org>

<http://www.cms.int><http://www.unep-aewa.org>

<http://www.gallmannkenya.org/index.php>

www.wetlands.org

www.hwo.org

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