

Porcupine!



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Editorial

Ecologists have been slow to get involved in the H5N1 bird flu issue, despite rising public concern, preferring to leave the talking to virologists and public health experts. However, many of the currently unanswered questions are ecological, so we have a lot to contribute, and the virus has the potential for both direct and indirect conservation impacts, so we cannot just ignore it.

An ecologist reading the recent bird flu literature cannot help being struck by the ecological naivety that most articles display. This is often our own fault. The migratory “flyways”, for example, have been great publicity for nature reserves, but, in Asia at least, are a crude simplification based largely on the movements of a few species of waterbirds. This did not matter much until virologists started to use flyway maps to prove (or disprove) the role of migratory birds in spreading bird flu. If we admitted our ignorance, perhaps someone would fund the studies that we need to fill in the gaps in our current knowledge? The truth is that, for the great majority of migratory species that visit Hong Kong, we know when they arrive and when they leave, but not where they come from or go to. The recapture rate of number-ringed birds is far too low for this to be an efficient way of learning about migration routes. Colour flagging has a much higher success rate and has revolutionized the study of wader movements. Could it be applied more widely? Satellite transmitters have so far only been used on the endangered Black-faced Spoonbill in Hong Kong, with stunning success, and should be tried on other large migrants, such as the Grey Heron and Great Cormorant (both of which are susceptible to H5N1).

On the conservation side, thousands of wild waterbirds have already died from H5N1 at various sites in East Asia, so an

out-break in a rare species that is concentrated at a few sites – the black-faced spoonbill is an obvious example – is a realistic possibility. Equally, if not more, threatening is an overreaction by panicked officials, as shown by Vietnam’s reported attempts to eliminate all birds, wild and domestic, from urban areas.

A role for migratory waterbirds in spreading the H5N1 virus is likely but currently unproven. An alternative possibility is that the outbreaks in these birds are a result of transmission from poultry or resident wild birds after arrival. Indeed, the whole focus on waterbirds as the natural reservoir for this virus may prove a red herring. However, there is no doubt that migratory waterbird populations are a reservoir for a huge variety of flu viruses, as are the populations of the many migrant species that are not associated with water. Studies of their movements could thus contribute to both Science and public health

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News from DEB

The big news is, of course, not from DEB but from Government. It has just been announced that the Country Parks and Marine Conservation Divisions of the Agriculture Fisheries and Conservation Department are to be merged with the Environmental Protection Department. The remains of AFCD will be reorganised into a new Department of Agriculture and Environmental Hygiene. The plan has yet to be put before LegCo but it is intended that this will happen before the end of 2005. The reorganization puts the arms of government responsible for environmental protection and nature conservation under one roof and, on the face of it, seems a rational move. I certainly hope that it proves to be a successful one. The merger would also result in the formation of two new divisions within EPD: the Country and Marine Parks Division, and the Ecology and Biodiversity Division. Now, where have I heard that name before?

On a different note, I’d like to draw attention – somewhat belatedly - to the formation of a new student society at the University of Hong Kong: the Environmental Life Science Society. The ELSS was formed late last year, and is now about to celebrate its first anniversary. The members – and especially the Executive Committee – are an active and dedicated bunch who are keen to spread the word about the need for awareness and conservation of nature in Hong Kong. You can find out more about them at <http://web.hku.hk/%7Eelsshku/> or via the link on <http://www.hku.hk/ecology/>. The ELSS homepage also provides access to their newsletter *Succession*, which describes recent activities and events.

Before signing off, I should report that my term as Head of DEB comes to an end on December 31. So, this is a good time for me to thank everyone who has supported the department during the last few years, and most especially those who have contributed articles and other efforts to making *Porcupine!* the success it is.

David Dudgeon