



NEWS RELEASE

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Japanese National Sentenced to 21 Months in Federal Prison for Smuggling Turtles and Tortoises into the United States

LOS ANGELES – A Japanese national described in court documents as “a major wildlife trafficker” was sentenced today to 21 months in federal prison for smuggling 55 live turtles and tortoises from Japan into the United States, all of which were concealed in snack food boxes when the protected animals were discovered at Los Angeles International Airport in January 2011.

Atsushi Yamagami, 39, a resident of Osaka, Japan, was sentenced this morning by United States District Judge George H. King. In addition to the prison term, Judge King ordered Yamagami to pay a \$18,403 criminal fine, which will be paid to the Lacy Act Reward Account, which is used to finance investigations conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

On August 1, 2011, Yamagami pleaded guilty to smuggling the 55 reptiles from Japan. The majority of the turtles and tortoises were species protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an international treaty that protects species being threatened by international trade. In a sentencing memorandum filed with the court, federal prosecutors argued that the method of secreting the turtles in snack food packages stuffed into suitcases constituted animal cruelty, and the animals posed the risk of transmitting salmonella.

Yamagami has been held without bond since his arrest last year.

The case against Yamagami is the result of Operation Flying Turtle, an undercover Fish and Wildlife Service investigation. In July 2010, F&WS agents

infiltrated the smuggling ring and purchased approximately 10 CITES-protected turtles and tortoises from a person linked to Yamagami. During the investigation, agents discovered that Yamagami was a leader of an organized group of Japanese nationals who were responsible for smuggling CITES-protected turtles, tortoises, chameleons and lizards into and out of the United States, primarily through airports in Honolulu and Los Angeles.

After the animals were smuggled into the United States, Yamagami sold or traded them at reptile pet shows across the United States, and he used the proceeds to purchase snakes, turtles and tortoises native to North America. The animals acquired in the United States were smuggled by Yamagami and his couriers back to Japan for resale in the pet trade.

Yamagami smuggled reptiles himself, and he paid couriers to smuggle the wildlife inside their luggage, according to court documents. The investigation determined that from 2004 through 2011, Yamagami and his couriers took 42 trips to and from the United States.

Two of Yamagami's couriers – Norihide Ushirozako and Hiroki Uetsuki, both Japanese citizens believed to reside in Osaka – were arrested and prosecuted for wildlife smuggling in 2011. Ushirozako was sentenced last August to time served, which was approximately seven months, in federal court in Los Angeles. Uetsuki was also sentenced to time served – approximately six months – in January 2001 in federal court in Hawaii.

Operation Flying Turtle was conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which received assistance from U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations.

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