

News Release



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For Immediate Release

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New York Coral Smuggler Sentenced

Today Joseph Russo, co-owner of Russo's Reef, a New York wholesale marine supplier, was sentenced in a Manhattan federal court for illegally importing rare live coral. Russo must serve one year and one day in prison, pay a \$6,000 fine, pay \$523,835 restitution to the government for the estimated street value of more than 16,000 pieces of illegally imported coral, and have three years of supervised probation. Russo is also prohibited from possessing internationally protected coral.

Back in March, Russo pleaded guilty to one felony count of smuggling protected coral after an 18-month investigation led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Valley Stream, New York Office of Law Enforcement. The case was prosecuted by the United States Attorney's office for the Southern District of New York.

According to Valley Stream officials, the investigation began when a wildlife inspector discovered live stony coral hidden in a shipment to Russo at JFK airport. The investigation revealed that between 2007 and 2012 Russo routinely illegally imported live stony corals from foreign suppliers.

Russo, from West Haverstraw, New York, altered documents and falsely labeled shipments of the corals, which are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) treaty. Russo faced a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison and fines up to \$500,000.

CITES regulates trade in coral to ensure that certain species are not exploited and become threatened or endangered. Corals are live, ocean-dwelling animals important to marine ecosystems. Coral reefs protect coastal areas from storm surges, prevent shore erosion and keep ocean water clean through their filtering abilities. The estimated annual economic benefit of the world's coral reefs is \$29.8 billion.