

JUSTICE NEWS

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Irish National Sentenced to 12 Months in Prison for Trafficking in Endangered Rhinoceros Horns

Patrick Sheridan, an Irish national, was sentenced in federal court in Waco, Texas, today to 12 months in prison for conspiracy to violate the Lacey Act in relation to illegal rhinoceros horn trafficking, announced Assistant Attorney General John C. Cruden for the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the Department of Justice and U.S. Attorney Richard L. Durbin Jr. for the Western District of Texas and Director Dan Ashe of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sheridan was arrested by United Kingdom law enforcement on Jan. 9, 2015, at Holyhead Sea Port in the United Kingdom as he disembarked a ferry from Dublin, Ireland. The arrest was made pursuant to a request for his provisional arrest by the United States and in September 2015 Sheridan was extradited to the United States. Sheridan's arrest and subsequent extradition were part of "Operation Crash," a nation-wide crackdown in the illegal trafficking in rhinoceros horns. Sheridan was sentenced by U.S. District Court Judge Walter S. Smith Jr.

In May 2014, a federal grand jury sitting in Waco, Texas, returned an indictment charging Sheridan and a co-defendant with conspiring to traffic in horns from black rhinoceros. In addition to conspiracy, the indictment charges substantive violations of the Lacey Act for wildlife trafficking and making a false wildlife document.

According to the indictment, Sheridan, along with John Slattery aka John Flynn and Michael Slattery Jr., used a "straw buyer" to purchase two black rhinoceros horns from a taxidermist in Texas, which the group then transported to New York, where they sold the horns along with two additional horns that the group also illegally purchased in Texas. In January 2014, Michael Slattery Jr. pleaded guilty in federal court in Brooklyn and was sentenced to 14-months in prison for his role in the conspiracy. In addition to the trafficking, the indictment also charged Sheridan and his co-defendant with making a fictitious and fraudulent Bill of Sale in connection with the rhinoceros horns, in an attempt to make their illegal purchase of the horns appear legal.

"We will hold wildlife traffickers fully accountable for these crimes, which are – transaction by transaction – robbing from our children and grandchildren the great diversity of life on our planet," said Assistant Attorney Cruden. "This case shows the global reach and demand of a trade that is literally driving the black rhino closer to becoming a relic of the past, but it also shows the tireless work of investigators and prosecutors to give it a fighting chance at survival."

"The slaughter of incredible animals like the rhino driven by poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking is a global scourge, requiring global enforcement," said Director Ashe. "Working with law enforcement in countries across the world, we're tracking, apprehending and extraditing criminals like Patrick Sheridan and his co-conspirators, no matter where they operate. Today's sentencing demonstrates that criminals who contribute to the slaughter of rhinos and other protected wildlife have nowhere to hide, and will inexorably face justice in the United States."

According to the information, plea agreement and statements made during court proceedings:

In China and Vietnam, rhinoceros horns are highly prized because they are believed to have medicinal value. The escalating value of the horns has resulted in an increased demand that has helped fuel a thriving black market.

In pleading guilty, Sheridan admitted to participating in a conspiracy to travel to and within the United States to purchase rhinoceros horns, which he, along with others, then resold to private individuals or consigned to auction houses in the United States, knowing that the interstate purchase and sale of the horns was illegal. Due to their dwindling populations, all rhinoceros species are protected under international trade agreements.

Rhinoceros are an herbivore species of prehistoric origin and one of the largest remaining mega-fauna on earth. They have no known predators other than humans. All species of rhinoceros are protected under United States and international law. Since 1976, trade in rhinoceros horn has been regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a treaty signed by over 170 countries around the world to protect fish, wildlife and plants that are or may become imperiled due to the demands of international markets.

Operation Crash is a continuing investigation being conducted by the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), in coordination with other federal and local law enforcement agencies including U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations. A "crash" is the term for a herd of rhinoceros. Operation Crash is an ongoing effort to detect, deter and prosecute those engaged in the illegal killing of rhinoceros and the unlawful trafficking of rhinoceros horns.

The investigation by was handled by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, with assistance from Ireland's An Garda Síochána (Irish National Police Service) and the Durham Constabulary Police Force in the United Kingdom. The prosecution was handled by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of Texas and the Justice Department's Environmental Crimes Section, with assistance from the Justice Department's Office of International Affairs. Assistant U.S. Attorney Greg Gloff and Trial Attorney Gary N. Donner of the Justice Department's Environmental Crimes Section are in charge of the prosecution.