



Department of Justice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
FRIDAY, JULY 19, 2013
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EIGHT ARRESTED IN PUERTO RICO ON CHARGES OF ILLEGAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SEA TURTLES FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION

Federal Agencies Announce Formation of Puerto Rico Environmental Crimes Task Force

WASHINGTON – Federal authorities arrested eight people in the cities of Arroyo and Patillas, Puerto Rico, yesterday on felony and misdemeanor charges for the illegal take, possession and sale of endangered sea turtles and their parts for human consumption as well as aiding and abetting violations of the Endangered Species and Lacey Act, announced Robert G. Dreher, the Acting Assistant Attorney General for the Justice Department’s Environment and Natural Resources Division and Rosa Emilia Rodríguez-Vélez, U.S. Attorney for the District of Puerto Rico.

Roberto Guzman Herpin, 34, Madelyne Montes Santiago, 37, Edwin Alamo Silva, 50, Juan Soto Rodriguez, 45, Ricardo Dejesus Alamo, 33, Jose Javier Rodriguez Sanchez, 40, Iris Lebron Montanez, 53, and Miguel Rivera Delgado, 55, all residents of Patillas and Arroyo, were arrested Thursday and made their appearances in federal court.

The takedown was led by special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), with assistance from the recently formed Puerto Rico Environmental Crimes Task Force, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Puerto Rico Police Department and the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources. Participating agencies of the task force currently include prosecutors from the Justice Department’s Environmental Crimes Section and the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Puerto Rico, FWS, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Criminal Investigation Division (EPA-CID), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement- Homeland Security Investigations (ICE-HSI), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the FBI.

In 2011, the FWS initiated an undercover operation to investigate the illegal trade in sea turtles for human consumption. During this investigation, it was determined that these illegal sales of sea turtle meat, confirmed through DNA analysis conducted by the FWS Forensic Lab, have resulted in the illegal take of 15 individual endangered hawksbill sea turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricate*) and 7 endangered green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*).

“Hawksbill and green sea turtles are protected by Puerto Rican law, nationally under the Endangered Species Act as well as internationally under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna),” said U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service,

Resident Agent in Charge David Pharo. “The protection from the illegal take and sale of this and of other marine life organisms is a priority of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is instrumental to the health of marine ecosystems for where they exist. These charges stem from a collaborative effort amongst law enforcement agencies to achieve a common goal of protecting our nation’s sensitive marine environments. It demonstrates our commitment to pursue those who violate fish & wildlife laws for the purpose of personal and or commercial gain as well as those that drive the illegal trade of marine life nationally and internationally.”

The cases are being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Carmen Márquez. If convicted, the defendants face a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Indictments contain only charges and are not evidence of guilt. Defendants are presumed to be innocent until and unless proven guilty.

The waters around Puerto Rico are designated as a critical habitat for the hawksbill and the green sea turtle. The most significant nesting for the hawksbill within the U.S. occurs in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Each year, about 500-1000 hawksbill nests are laid on Mona Island, Puerto Rico. The green sea turtle population has declined by 48-65 percent over the past century. Puerto Rico is also home to nesting sites for the endangered leatherback sea turtle, the largest species of turtle in the world. The leatherback sea turtle suffered a severe population crash due to human harvesting of its meat and eggs, and the destruction of its nesting habitat by beachfront development.

The Puerto Rico Environmental Crimes Task Force

Also today, representatives of federal criminal investigative agencies, the U.S. Attorney’s Office and the Department of Justice Environment and Natural Resources Division announced the creation of a Puerto Rico Environmental Crimes Task Force to investigate and prosecute environmental crimes on the island.

The commonwealth of Puerto Rico contains six national wildlife refuges (Cabo Rojo, Culebra, Desecheo, Laguna Cartagena, Navassa Island, Vieques) and is home to 25 endangered and threatened animal species, 21 of which are found nowhere else on earth. For instance, there are only 200 Puerto Rican parrots (*Amazona vittata*) remaining, with less than 50 left in the wild, making it one of the 10 rarest birds on Earth. The island is also home to 49 endangered and threatened plant species. There are 37 Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) and Superfund cleanup sites on Puerto Rico.

Through the new task force, federal investigative agencies will coordinate their efforts to investigate and prosecute those responsible for committing serious environmental crimes. Federal laws have been enacted to protect the environment, but their enforcement requires the coordinated efforts and involvement of multiple federal law enforcement agencies with the assistance local law enforcement and the citizenry. The task force has three specific goals:

- Improve investigative coordination among the federal authorities who are responsible for protecting public health and the environment.

- Coordinate the available federal resources and improve the dissemination of information between the federal law enforcement agencies to better protect human health and the environment.
- Improve environmental awareness of the community to recognize violations of federal environmental laws and regulations.

“Through the effective and efficient coordination of federal agencies who will jointly investigate and prosecute environmental crimes on the island, the task force will help preserve the island’s abundant natural resources and wildlife, including endangered sea turtles,” said Robert G. Dreher, Acting Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department’s Environment and Natural Resources Division. “It is our hope and vision that these efforts will raise greater awareness about environmental crime, bring those who knowingly harm the environment to justice, and help preserve the island’s environment for generations to come.”

“With the creation of this Task Force we aim to protect the environment and the public’s health from exposure to environmental hazards, said Rosa Emilia Rodríguez-Vélez United States Attorney for the District of Puerto Rico. “We will vigorously investigate and prosecute those who do not comply with the environmental laws of the United States.”

“Puerto Rico’s high asthma rates and its incredible natural resources make pollution prevention together with the rigorous enforcement of environmental laws critical to the people of Puerto Rico,” said EPA Regional Administrator Judith A. Enck. “By pooling EPA resources and those of other agencies, the EPA’s Criminal Investigation Division and EPA’s Caribbean Environmental Protection Division can maximize the ability to ensure that those who willfully violate environmental laws are held accountable.”

“The task force will strengthen already existing enforcement partnerships that help protect Puerto Rico’s wildlife and rich wildlife heritage,” said Special Agent in Charge Luis Santiago, who oversees U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement operations in southeastern States, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

“This enforcement task force will be a great help for us in our mission to conserve, protect, and manage living marine resources in the commonwealth,” said Otha Easley, Acting Special Agent in Charge of NOAA’s Office of Law Enforcement Southeast Division, which covers eight southern states and all U.S. Caribbean territories. “Puerto Rico has a rich and diverse ecosystem, and this partnership is a significant step forward in its protection.”

For more information of environmental crime laws:
www.justice.gov/enrd/ENRD_ecs.html

For more information on marine turtles: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/

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