

Newsroom

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Wildlife Trafficking: What Happens to Confiscated Animals?

Federal wildlife officials turn to an animal care and conservation leader for help

December 15, 2015



Rehabilitated arapaima in Shedd Aquarium's care. Photo courtesy of Brenna Hernandez/Shedd Aquarium.

On August 26, we turned to animal care and conservation leader Shedd Aquarium for assistance in the rescue and rehabilitation of 102 internationally protected juvenile arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*) that were confiscated from O'Hare International Airport following an attempted illegal importation for the pet trade industry. The species is one of the world's largest freshwater fishes and is listed as protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) at the Appendix II level. Half of the animals did not survive the unlawful trafficking, with the remaining 50 recovering under the watchful care of Shedd's animal care specialists since that time.

The animals were commercially hatched in Colombia, South America and were shipped under poor conditions into the United States, packed in double plastic bags with as many as five to six fish per bag. Many of the arapaima were dead on arrival at Shedd. Several of the remaining animals were considered to be in critical condition and received dedicated attention, supplemental air and a diet of small crickets, bloodworms and small krill to promote their recovery.

"This is an example of how the illegal wildlife trade is not just decimating elephants, rhinos, big cats and great apes, but also thousands of lesser-known species in what has become a \$19 billion-a-year industry," said Tim Binder, executive vice president of animal care for Shedd. "This situation is a difficult reality and further evidence of the critical role accredited aquariums and zoos play in inspiring care and providing education about species and their environments for the public."

The animals, which were estimated to be six weeks-old, between three and four inches long and weighed approximately 12 grams (.5 oz) each upon arrival in August, are considered evidence as part of a criminal investigation. We require a mandatory 60-day evidence holding period in cases like this before Shedd animal care staff can begin to place the fish in new homes. Since that time, Shedd has been permitted to keep the animals, with several being placed in the aquarium's Amazon Rising exhibit, where mature arapaima are already displayed. Others will go to fellow zoological organizations also accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums in recommendation with species management programs. The animals now weigh close to a pound in Shedd's care.

"It is a privilege to have cared for and learned from this species almost since the time Shedd opened. We're honored to be able to provide our assistance and expertise, working alongside federal agencies in the best interest of animals in need," Binder added.

Since 2012, Shedd has been working in the field in Guyana and directly with the Guyanese government and the local Amerindian community to conduct research in the sensitive ecological area of the Rewa River to understand where arapaima live during the wet and dry seasons so their feeding, breeding and migratory habitats can be protected. Using radio telemetry to track movements of the 200-plus-pound fish, field data collected from the research are helping to inform the creation of a conservation management plan for the country.

"Despite being a top predator, vital to the health of the floodplain ecosystem and to the livelihoods of the people who reside there, arapaima populations have declined drastically," said Dr. Charles Knapp, vice president of Shedd's Daniel P. Haerther Center for Conservation and Research. "Little is known about basic arapaima biology, migration, or population dynamics, creating challenges for conservation efforts. These fish are highly desired for food in South America and are susceptible to overfishing because their physiology requires them to surface periodically and take a breath of air. This is when they are the most vulnerable to poachers with harpoons or arrows. Because the arapaima is a flagship species for the Amazon, understanding how we can help conserve and protect them is critical."

In addition to the new arapaima, Shedd officials also assisted us in caring for 23 juvenile lake sturgeons (*Acipenser fulvescens*) in April. Also confiscated by our enforcement officers, six of the animals died shortly after due to poor shipping practices by the illegal importer and related complications. The remaining 17

received intensive care from Shedd's staff and are progressing well. Still recovering behind the scenes in the aquarium's quarantine area, the sturgeons have doubled in size since their arrival to 8 inches each.

"The wildlife inspectors and special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service diligently work to intercept smuggled wildlife and capture the criminals who perpetrate these crimes," said Edward Grace, Deputy Chief of the USFWS Office of Law Enforcement. "We also work closely with zoos and aquariums to ensure that any live animal we seize has the best care possible. We thank the Shedd Aquarium for the care and nurturing they provided to these protected fish."

Shedd has an extensive history of working with government agencies to house corals and other aquatic wildlife seized by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at Chicago's ports. In some cases, the animals become permanent residents at Shedd, including 34 Korean halibut that were confiscated in March 2012 by our wildlife inspectors as part of the live food fish trade and hundreds of pieces of living corals illegally imported since 2010.

For more information about the Shedd Aquarium and this rehabilitation effort, please contact:

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The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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