

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Participates in Global Wildlife Trafficking Operation

During the recent 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), international conservation law enforcement officials decided that a collaborative, global wildlife and timber operation would significantly contribute to the fight against wildlife trafficking and enhance the capacity of international wildlife enforcement officers to respond to wildlife crime. They agreed to call this historic action, Operation Thunderbird.

The focus of the three-week operation was to provide a “snapshot” view of global wildlife trafficking, established a platform for information sharing, and initiate joint investigative efforts to combat transnational wildlife crime. In addition to the United States, over 60 countries participated in this exercise including Canada, China, India, Mexico, Mozambique, the Russian Federation, South Africa, Zambia, and the European Union (EU).



Photos of Enforcement Efforts and Seizures from Participating Countries: Italy, South Sudan, Spain, Ecuador, and Canada

In the United States, Service special agents and wildlife inspectors from every region participated in the operation by conducting increased inspection activities and timely reporting of seizure data through headquarters and via special agent attachés stationed at U.S. embassies around the world, including Beijing, China; Gaborone, Botswana; Lima, Peru; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and Bangkok, Thailand. The Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) worked in concert with Homeland Security Investigations, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and other government partners, to target shipments and investigate those who attempted to smuggle wildlife and plants.

In the U.S., Operation Thunderbird was considered a great success. It not only increased pro-active inspection efforts by Service special agents and wildlife inspectors at multiple U.S. Ports, such as Honolulu, Hawaii; New York, New York; Los Angeles, California; Miami, Florida; Newark, New Jersey; New Orleans, Louisiana; Portland, Oregon; and the San Ysidro Port of Entry (at the California-Mexico border), but also strengthened cooperation and information sharing with foreign partner nations.



A Service Wildlife Inspector and K-9 Participate in Operation Thunderbird at the Honolulu International Mail Facility.

Throughout the operation, seizure and relative investigative information was conveyed to multiple countries affected by illegal trade with the United States. For example, a mis-manifested ocean container full of illegal shark fins was intercepted in-transit by U.S. authorities in California. In coordination with a U.S. embassy and a Service attaché, OLE successfully initiated communication and transnational investigations between the affected countries.

The global statistics from the three-week operation are alarming and seizure data provided by the OLE demonstrate the significant role the United States plays in global wildlife trafficking. The overall results highlight the need for the world to tackle wildlife trafficking collaboratively.

Global Statistics (Courtesy of INTERPOL)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Than 4,770 Birds • More Than 100 Wild Cats • More 2.5 Tons of Raw Elephant Ivory and 432 Pcs of Ivory • More Than 2.75 Tons of Pangolin Scales • More Than 24 Tons of Various Wildlife products • More Than 1,240 Reptiles • More than 310 Skins of Various Animals • More Than 37,130 Wildlife Derivatives (Medicines, etc.) • More Than 14 Tons of Marine Products (Shark Fin, etc.)

'Snapshot' of U.S. Seizures/Interdictions
- Live CITES Stony Corals, Fish & Rays – 356 no.
- Live CITES Turtles/Reptiles– 1558 no.
- Live Birds (smuggled) – 44 no.
- Dried Sea Cucumbers – 1,000 kg.
- Dried CITES Shark Fins (smuggled) – 23,581 kg.
- Dried Seahorses (smuggled) – 180 no.
- CITES Nautilus/Sea Turtle/Coral Jewelry – 201 no.
- Coral/Sea Turtle/Giant Clam Products -
- Hunting Trophies (leopard, lion, baboon, hippo, caracal, bear, bighorn sheep, etc.) – 27 sp. and 44 kg. meat
- Whale/Giant Clam/Queen Conch Meat – 24 kg.
- African Bushmeat (unknown sp) – 10 kg.
- Pangolin – 1 kg bushmeat and 3 leather products (Africa)
- Elephant Ivory – 41 no.
- Parrot & Macaw sp. Part/Product/Feathers - 778 no.
- Dried CITES Plant/Orchid TCM - 41 kg.
- Dried CITES Wild Am. Ginseng Roots (EXPORT) – 10 kg.
- CITES Wildlife TCMs (Containing Tiger, Rhino, Seahorse, Pangolin, etc.) – 596 no.
- CITES Sturgeon Extract Cosmetic – 730 no.
- CITES Sturgeon Caviar – 5 kg.
- CITES Reptile Leather Products – 345 no.

The results of Operation Thunderbird will be announced on March 3, 2017, World Wildlife Day, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. The event will be presided by the President of the United Nations General Assembly. The United Nations Secretary General, the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Minister of Environmental Affairs of South Africa, and the Secretary General of CITES will also provide remarks.



CITES Protected Seahorses Smuggled in Snack Boxes



Container of Illegal CITES Shark Fins Interdicted In-Transit Through the United States

International efforts such as Operation Thunderbird represent a positive example of international collaboration with a message to would-be global wildlife traffickers – *the world is working together to combat wildlife crime and there is no safe place to hide.*



U.S. Hunter Investigation and Seizure of Imported Trophies



Smuggled Finches from Guyana Seized in Port of New York