

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

WILDLIFE FEATURE

For Release On Receipt (prepared 4/9/75)

Levitt 202/343-5634

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ANIMAL PRODUCTS THREATENS WILDLIFE

Americans by the thousands--tourists, hunters, commercial importers, and other travelers--last year learned about some important Federal laws the hard way. The tortoise shell jewelry they had bought abroad, or the hunting trophy or the crocodile wallet or the fur-covered compact they had acquired were confiscated at ports of entry when they arrived home.

Federal law makes it illegal to import into the United States any live or dead animal, its parts, or products made from it if it is one of more than 400 animals on the worldwide List of Endangered Species established by the Secretary of the Interior.

Since 1971, more than \$2 million worth of contraband wildlife has been seized by special agents of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from thousands of Americans returning abroad.

As part of its efforts to halt this illegal traffic and to acquaint Americans with Federal laws governing wildlife importations, the Service has published a booklet "Facts About Federal Wildlife Laws." It is available free on request from the Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

The extent of international trade in wildlife and wildlife products made from furs, hides, shells, feathers, teeth, and tusks is enormous, and the market continues to grow. In 1972-73, more than 41 million wildlife products and some 220 million live animals and fish were legally imported into this country.

Unfortunately, some of the most beautiful and interesting wildlife products that can be bought by travelers abroad are made from animals protected by United States law--including many that are threatened with extinction. Although the importation of such products has been illegal since 1969 when the Endangered Species Conservation Act went into effect, a considerable amount continues to flow into the United States.

(more)

While a significant portion of this illegal flow represents a deliberate avoidance of Federal laws, too many travelers are simply unaware that such laws exist. These travelers find that attractive wildlife products, including those made from endangered species, are freely sold abroad. Hunters find that they can obtain licenses to hunt certain animals. So they buy and they hunt, and on their return to the United States they find to their dismay that their purchase or trophy cannot be imported legally and must be confiscated.

Another problem is that travelers often do not know when they buy an item that it was actually made from wildlife. An intricate ivory carving or a piece of tortoise shell jewelry, for example, are not readily thought of by most people as a wildlife product like a fur coat.

### "But It Was Already Dead"

A common argument by travelers, whose purchases of wildlife products are confiscated when they return to the United States, is that the crocodile, sea turtle, or leopard was dead long before they bought their shoes, jewelry, or fur coat. "I didn't kill the animal," they protest. "It was already dead." Yet, the fact is that every purchase of a product or curio made from an endangered animal maintains the commercial pressure on the surviving members of that species and indirectly leads to the deaths of many more at the hands of poachers and market hunters.

One intent of the newest law, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, is to remove the United States and its citizens from the international marketplace for endangered and protected wildlife, and to ensure that Americans do not hamper the efforts of other nations to conserve their fauna. By prohibiting the importation of a jaguar coat, a crocodile handbag, or a mounted bird, the Federal Government believes that fewer animals will be killed for the wildlife products trade.

### You Can Buy It There, But You Can't Bring It Here

The fact that wildlife products are freely sold abroad, including items made from non-endangered wildlife, does not mean they can legally be brought into this country. For example, stuffed animals such as iguanas, armadillos, turtles, and birds are sold by street peddlers in many countries. But the traveler may not be aware that the conservation agency of a particular nation may actually restrict the sale or exportation of these products. Some countries have adopted export licensing systems to control or halt the commercial exploitation of their wildlife. In other nations, permits may be required to export hides, skins, or products made from locally endangered or protected wildlife.

These foreign regulations may be poorly publicized or loosely enforced. They may be further undermined by neighboring countries that tolerate the sale of the prohibited or regulated wildlife products. The results are often confusing for American tourists.

Federal law prohibits the importation of fish or wildlife taken, possessed, sold, transported, or exported in violation of another nation's laws. Before travelers acquire wildlife items abroad, they should check with foreign wildlife authorities to make sure they can actually take their purchases out of the country. The name of the appropriate foreign agency can be obtained by contacting the nearest U.S. Consul.

The demand for skins, hides, and parts of rare animals is so great and the price so high that poaching and market hunting have pushed many species to the brink of extinction.

The most popular prohibited wildlife products sold abroad fall into five categories:

- tortoise shell jewelry and other products made from the shell of the hawksbill sea turtle.
- rugs, skins, clothing, and hunting trophies made from spotted cats such as the jaguar, cheetah, leopard, margay, ocelot, and tiger.
- whale teeth (ivory) carved into scrimshaw curios and figurines (netsuke).
- alligators, crocodiles, and sea turtles made into luggage, shoes, purses, wallets, belts and other leather goods.
- bird feathers made into curios or other products of certain birds and mounted specimens.

These items are imported by three general groups: tourists, commercial importers, and criminal violators. Criminal violators have by far the greatest impact on the resource and use elaborate schemes to conceal their activities, including mislabeled shipping containers, forged export permits, bribery, and illicit financial transactions.

#### Enforcing Wildlife Laws

As the demand and commerce in protected wildlife has increased, special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have intensified their investigations in this country and, in cooperation with foreign officials, in other countries. As a result, a number of significant violations have been uncovered and a staggering amount of restricted wildlife items has been confiscated. Over 1,000 investigations have been initiated as a result of illegal importations of endangered species. Yet only 27 percent of all cargo and less than one percent of passengers are currently being checked closely each year. The Fish and Wildlife Service believes that both the legal and illegal shipments of wildlife products are increasing.

x x x

NOTE TO EDITORS: A press packet and pictures are available.