



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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LIVE ANIMAL "STING" REVEALS MASSIVE ILLICIT MARKET IN U.S. WILDLIFE

A massive illegal trade in protected and endangered U.S. reptiles has been uncovered by a live animal "sting" operation that was concluded today by Federal wildlife agents. G. Ray Arnett, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, announced today that the 18-month investigation involved suspected illegal trafficking in thousands of snakes, turtles, lizards and migratory birds by more than 175 individuals.

"What is surprising," Arnett said, "is that this investigation revealed that hundreds of thousands of U.S. reptiles are illegally taken from the wild each year for a thriving black market with a very large portion smuggled to Europe and Japan. These are specimens that cannot be taken from the wild or sold under Federal and State laws."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also estimates that at least 100,000 venomous and nonvenomous snakes are shipped secretly through the U.S. mails annually. Arnett said masking tape is commonly placed over the rattles of rattlesnakes so they won't be heard. Postal law forbids the shipment of snakes.

A large number of reptiles was expected to be seized today in the largest wildlife enforcement operation ever conducted with some 200 Federal and State wildlife conservation officers participating in the action.

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Arnett announced that the Justice Department had filed criminal charges in Atlanta, Georgia; Pittsburgh and Scranton, Pennsylvania; and Tallahassee, Florida; against individuals for violating various Federal wildlife laws. Arrest warrants were issued for 27 individuals. Federal and State search warrants were issued for 45 locations in 14 states. Most of the remaining suspects were interviewed.

Fish and Wildlife Service law enforcement officers initiated the investigation based on intelligence from past cases. Additionally, several State wildlife agencies requested assistance in controlling the interstate illegal traffic. A number of zoos also cooperated.

To infiltrate the illegal trafficking in wildlife, undercover agents established the Atlanta Wildlife Exchange, a wholesale reptile business in suburban Atlanta where they bought and sold almost 10,000 animals that had been caught in the wild illegally, all the while tape recording transactions. Price lists were prepared with a statement noting that the Exchange bought as well as sold native species. Over 1,000 Federal and State listed endangered animals of 15 species were eventually bought in the "sting" operation. Many of the protected species were released to the wild after being purchased by agents.

"This was not a large, organized conspiracy, but rather many small groups of two to five individuals working independently," said Clark R. Bavin, Chief of the Service's Division of Law Enforcement. "An extensive informal grapevine made sources and buyers of the animals easy to find."

Reptile collecting is usually done at night along isolated roads which retain the day's heat. Poachers use chisels, shovels and other equipment to get into the boulder crevices where many of the animals seek shelter. In some areas severe damage is inflicted to the habitat of rare species.

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Although the reptiles were taken from a number of States, most of the poaching was done in California, Florida, Pennsylvania, Texas, New York, Wisconsin, Kansas, New Mexico, Idaho, and Arizona. About 5 percent of the "sting" operation's business consisted of foreign species from Australia, Central and South America and Mexico, some of which were smuggled into the U.S. "Most of the trade is based on demand from private collectors," said Bavin, "and the varied backgrounds and occupations of those who were arrested or apprehended was also surprising." Included were zoo employees, police officers, a sheriff, teachers, an attorney, bankers, a mortician, businessmen, and officials and employees in the wild animal trade.

"People are attracted to these animals for a variety of reasons," Bavin said. "Their rarity and inaccessibility is a major consideration. Some of the snakes are prized for their intense coloration or intricate patterns. The California mountain kingsnake, a very docile, 2-foot reptile with repeated bands of white, reddish-orange, and black was particularly valued and would usually sell in the \$150 range. The Texas gray-banded kingsnake, another favorite, could bring \$200. The rarer the animal, the higher the price."

Other species are sought for their bizarre appearance or for the status or image they bring the owner. Many of the species sold to the Atlanta Wildlife Exchange were extremely dangerous. Among them were copperheads, water moccasins and 15 species of rattlesnakes. Other dangerous animals included a pair of rare 13-foot Indian pythons, American alligators, and Gila monsters, the Nation's only venomous lizards.

John Behler, the Bronx Zoo's Curator of Herpetology, cautions would-be snake fanciers to think twice before they decide to keep venomous pets. "In New York City over the last several years we've been consultants for dozens of bites from

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exotic reptiles including pet puff adders, king cobras, Asiatic cobras, saw-scaled vipers and a host of rattlesnakes. Most of the owners are totally unfamiliar with the hazard potential they are dealing with."

Most of the animals sold for between \$25 and \$200 although some cost as much as \$500. A Texas Trans-pecos rat snake would sell for \$75, alligator snapping turtles brought \$35; Gila monsters, \$200. Prices would double or triple for animals sold overseas.

Illegal collecting from the wild has already been a major cause for several reptile species becoming endangered or threatened.

Migratory birds, including both live and stuffed hawks, owls, and songbirds, were also purchased in the operation.

The individuals apprehended were sought for various violations of the Endangered Species Act, the Lacey Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Postal statutes, and conspiracy and false statement statutes. Both misdemeanor and felony counts were involved.

Throughout the investigation the Department of Justice's Wildlife and Marine Resources Section and the Atlanta U.S. Attorney's Office provided counsel and guidance to the Interior Department.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Photos are available upon request by calling 202/343-8770.