



NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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PROBE OF INTERNATIONAL REPTILE TRADE ENDS WITH KEY ARRESTS

A 5-year undercover U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service investigation that successfully infiltrated the illegal reptile trade ended yesterday with the arrest of an international wildlife dealer and the apprehension of two individuals in this country. The three face Federal charges related to the smuggling and sale of endangered and protected reptiles, including some of the rarest species on earth.

This final phase of "Operation Chameleon" began September 14 when Mexican authorities, who worked closely with the Service on this aspect of the case, arrested Keng Liang "Anson" Wong when he arrived at the airport in Mexico City. Wong, who operates Sungai Rusa Wildlife in Penang, Malaysia, is believed to be the kingpin of an international smuggling operation that plundered reptiles from southeast and central Asia, New Zealand, and Madagascar for sale in the United States and other markets.

Wong is wanted in this country on charges of conspiracy, smuggling, money laundering, and making false statements as well as for 14 felony violations of the Lacey Act, a Federal law that allows the United States to prosecute individuals who traffic in illegal or smuggled wildlife. He will be held in Mexico while the United States pursues formal extradition.

After Service special agents confirmed that Wong was in custody in Mexico, they arrested two U.S. citizens also implicated in the case and began executing a series of search warrants in Arizona and California. This sweep targeted individuals and businesses that had allegedly conspired to smuggle wildlife into the United States or that had knowingly bought or sold illegally imported animals.

The two men arrested, the owner of an Arizona wildlife import/export business and a San Francisco resident who allegedly served as a courier for Wong, face charges that include conspiracy, smuggling, and Lacey Act violations. A fourth individual, a Hong Kong resident who runs a wildlife import/export business in that city, is also wanted in the case.

"Reptile smuggling is a high-profit criminal enterprise, and the United States is its largest market," said Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark. "Sacrificing the world's legally protected rare species to meet the demand for reptiles prized as exotic live collectibles will not be tolerated by this country or by our global conservation partners.

"We could not have completed this final phase of Operation Chameleon without tremendous help from the Mexican government. Assistance from the U.S. Customs Service and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was also crucial. International cooperation and the support of the U.S. Department of Justice have been vital throughout the investigation."

Trade of the animals smuggled and sold in this case is regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a global agreement that controls the importation and exportation of hundreds of animals and plants. Commercial traffic in many of these reptiles is prohibited. Some are also protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, which outlaws their importation into the United States for commercial purposes.

During Operation Chameleon, the Service uncovered a black market that specialized in some of the world's most unique reptiles, animals that, in many cases, occur only in very specific, geographically isolated habitats and that are already on the brink of extinction. The Komodo dragon, for example, is an endangered species native only to a relatively small area of Indonesia. The tuatara, a lizard-like reptile known as a "living fossil" because other species from its taxonomic order last thrived in the Triassic and Jurassic periods, lives only on 30 small islands in New Zealand. The ploughshare tortoise occurs only on the island of Madagascar, off the southeastern coast of Africa.

These species bring high prices on the black market. A Komodo dragon, tuatara, or ploughshare tortoise can each fetch about \$30,000 in the illegal trade.

The species traded by Wong and others investigated by the Service also included such rarities as the Chinese alligator (which inhabits the lower course of the Yangtze River); Gray's monitor (a lizard native to two islands of the Philippines); the false gavial (a crocodylian whose range is restricted to parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and southern Thailand along the Perak River); and two other reptiles found only on Madagascar (the radiated tortoise and the spider tortoise). Only the Gray's monitor and spider tortoise can be legally traded, but such commerce requires a CITES export permit from government authorities in the Philippines and Madagascar.

Prices in the illegal trade can be approximately \$15,000 for a Chinese alligator, \$8,000 for a Gray's monitor, and \$5,000 for an adult radiated tortoise or a false gavial. Spider tortoises sell for about \$2,000.

Wildlife smuggled in the case also included Burmese star tortoises, Indian star tortoises, Boelen's pythons, Timor pythons, green tree pythons, Fly River turtles, and Bengal monitor lizards.

"Stealing the world's natural treasures takes a toll that cannot be measured in dollars. It robs countries of their natural heritage, disrupts ecosystems, and shortchanges future generations," Clark said.

This week's arrests shut down one conduit for the illegal reptile trade between Asia and North America. Operation Chameleon's wider probe of that trade had already broken up a major smuggling ring that was funneling species from Madagascar and other countries to Germany and then on to markets in the United States and Canada. Work on that aspect of the case yielded charges against 18 people here and abroad.

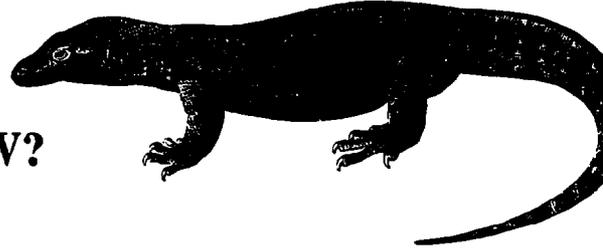
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.



FACTS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Reptiles at Risk



DID YOU KNOW?

The Reptile Trade

- The United States is the world's largest market for wildlife and wildlife products, and wildlife trade in this country is a billion-dollar-a-year business. Illegal trafficking is believed to be even more lucrative.
- Reptiles have become increasingly popular as pets and as high-priced live collectibles. Collectors and breeders are enticed by the lure of the exotic, making rare reptile species an extremely profitable black-market commodity.
- International trade in reptiles has increased significantly in the last decade and U.S. trade accounts for a substantial portion of that commerce. Reptiles are also a major target for wildlife smugglers.
- In 1997, the United States imported 1.8 million live reptiles worth more than \$7 million and exported 9.7 million valued at more than \$13.2 million. The most commonly imported species is the green iguana (*Iguana iguana*); the red-eared slider turtle (*Trachemys scripta*) is the leading U.S. export.

Protections for Reptiles

- The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) regulates international trade in animals and plants listed on three appendices. The treaty, supported by some 143 member nations, includes more than 140 reptile listings, some covering entire families. Among these protected reptiles are all alligators, caimans, crocodylians, boas, pythons, monitor lizards, sea turtles, and *Geochelone* species of land tortoises.
- Of the reptiles safeguarded under CITES, 55 species or species groups are listed on Appendix I and thus receive the Convention's highest level of protection. All commercial trade of these animals is prohibited because they face an immediate threat of extinction due to over-exploitation. Noncommercial traffic requires permits from both the exporting and importing countries.

- o Reptiles and other animals and plants listed on CITES Appendix II can only enter trade with export permits from their country of origin. Such controls help ensure that commercialization will not jeopardize the continued survival of these species in the wild.
- o Some 115 reptilian species are also protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Of this group, 79 have been listed as endangered because they face an immediate threat of extinction. The Endangered Species Act prohibits the import, export, and interstate sale of animals listed as endangered or threatened.
- o Violations of U.S. and international wildlife trade prohibitions can be prosecuted under the Lacey Act. This law makes it illegal to import, sell, or purchase any wildlife or plant taken, possessed, transported, or sold in violation of any Federal, state, foreign, or Native American Tribal law, treaty, or regulation. The maximum penalty for a felony Lacey Act offense is a \$250,000 fine for individuals (\$500,000 for organizations) and 5 years imprisonment.

Prized Species

- o The smuggling conspiracies investigated by the Service during "Operation Chameleon" targeted some of the world's rarest reptile species. Many of these animals have been listed on CITES Appendix I and are protected as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.
- o The Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*) is the world's largest lizard. A member of the monitor family, this animal may grow to up to 3 meters (about 10 feet) long and weigh as much as 165 kilograms (364 pounds). The species occurs only on Komodo Island and a few neighboring islands in the Lesser Sunda chain of Indonesia. The Komodo dragon is protected as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and is listed on CITES Appendix I. Its black market "retail" value can be about \$30,000.
- o The tuatara (*Sphenodon punctatus*), a 60-centimeters-long (2 feet) lizard-like reptile, is the only surviving member of its taxonomic order. The fossil record shows that related species were common throughout the world between about 225 and 120 million years ago but that all species except the tuatara had become extinct by about 60 million years ago. That species occurs in the wild only in New Zealand on 30 small islands off the northeastern coast of North Island and in Cook Strait. The tuatara is protected as endangered

under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and is listed on CITES Appendix I. This reptile can sell for approximately \$30,000 on the black market.

- o The ploughshare or angulated tortoise (*Geochelone yniphora*) occurs only on the island of Madagascar, where it is confined to a single small area in the northeast. It is one of the most threatened and rare of all tortoise species. The theft of 70 from a breeding program in Madagascar 2 years ago set off an intensive worldwide search orchestrated by international wildlife conservation groups. Priced at around \$30,000 on the black market, the species is protected as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and is listed on CITES Appendix I.
- o The Chinese alligator (*Alligator sinensis*) lives only along the lower reaches of the Yangtse River in China, where its viability is threatened by habitat loss and collection from the wild. Rarely exceeding 2 meters (6.5 feet) in length, this reptile is one of only a few crocodylian species found in temperate regions. Collectors dealing on the black market can pay about \$15,000 for a Chinese alligator. The species is protected as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and is listed on CITES Appendix I.
- o The false gavial (*Tomistoma schlegelii*) is a thin-snouted, reddish-brown crocodylian that grows up to 4 meters (13 feet) long. Native to southeast Asia, the species' range is restricted to Indonesia (specifically the island of Sumatra and the southern part of Borneo), Malaysia, Singapore, and southern Thailand along the Perak River. It is protected as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and is listed on CITES Appendix I. The animal can sell for approximately \$5,000 in the illegal trade.
- o The radiated tortoise (*Geochelone radiata*) occurs only in the southwestern part of Madagascar. Prized by collectors for both its rarity and stunning appearance, it features a bright yellow head and high-domed black shell with yellow starburst designs. It is protected as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and is listed on CITES Appendix I. Adults can sell for about \$5,000 while juveniles can go for about \$1,500.
- o Gray's monitor (*Varanus grayi*) is a lizard native to Luzon and Catanduanes Islands in the Philippines. Listed on CITES Appendix II, the species can only enter trade with an export permit from its home country. Black market prices can range from around \$5,000 to about \$8,000.

- o Other high-value species traded during Operation Chameleon include Boelen's pythons (about \$3,500), Burmese star tortoises (approximately \$2,500), and spider tortoises (about \$2,000).

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