Where do inspectors work?

By law, most commercial wildlife shipments come through 14 "designated ports"—Anchorage, Alaska; Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Dallas, Texas; Honolulu, Hawaii; Los Angeles, California; Miami, Florida; New Orleans, Louisiana; New York, New York/Newark, New Jersey; Portland, Oregon; San Francisco, California; and Seattle, Washington. The Service operates wildlife inspection offices in these cities. Inspectors also staff 11 locations along the Mexican and Canadian borders and several additional ports that handle specific types of wildlife traffic.

What do inspectors do?

The United States is one of the world's largest markets for wildlife and wildlife products. High-volume "live" traffic includes reptiles, tropical fish, and primates. Manufactured products (such as boots, shoes, purses, jewelry, caviar, and meats) and less "processed" wildlife items (such as hunting trophies, feathers, furs, skins, raw coral, and shells) are also common.

Wildlife inspectors must understand and enforce a range of U.S. and international laws, regulations, and treaties that protect wildlife and limit commercial traffic in endangered animals and plants. They must be able to identify thousands of different species, both live and as parts or products.

Inspectors clear legal imports and exports, and stop shipments that violate the law. They make sure that wildlife imports and exports are accompanied by the required permits and licenses, and verify that the contents of shipments match the items listed on declaration forms. They pay special attention to live wildlife, checking to see that animals in trade are treated humanely.

Although inspectors spend most of their time processing commercial cargo shipments, they also keep tabs on international passenger traffic. Unwary travelers all too often return from abroad with illegal wildlife souvenirs. Many smuggling rings use human couriers; inspectors find protected animals hidden in clothing and stuffed in suitcases and handbags.