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The Latest Frontier

Exotic Consumerism: Illegal Trade in Live Animals

Pet trade

As the passengers at the Cairo International Airport gathered to board a recent flight to Kuwait, one solitary man was different from the rest. It was not his height or his clothes that set him apart, or even his nationality. It was the fact that he had a live chimpanzee in his carry-on bag.

When officials behind the security x-ray machine saw the skeleton of a hunched-up animal on their screens, they unzipped the suitcase to find an infant chimpanzee staring up at them.

Egyptian customs officials confiscated the chimpanzee, which is an endangered species listed as Appendix I by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species

of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Trade is prohibited in such species in all but the rarest of cases, and then only with proper documentation – of which this shipment had none. But the attempt to smuggle an exotic animal through a major international hub only hints at the massive and lucrative illegal trade in live animals that threatens to decimate wild populations and ecosystems, even as it exposes entire cities and regions to corruption, violence and deadly diseases.

Great apes and other live animals comprise a highly profitable and symbolic aspect of the US\$23 billion illegal wildlife trade--the fourth most lucrative black market after drugs, people and arms smuggling – and the live trade relies heavily on corrupt officials and steely couriers to sustain the traffic. Commonly known as the “pet trade,” this criminal network is able to



supply cheetahs to the United Arab Emirates, bonobos to Armenia, macaws to the Czech Republic, and chimpanzees to China. Although data on the scale and scope of the live illegal wildlife trade is limited, it is clearly big business that attracts drug cartels, arms suppliers, counterfeit organizations, and a host of other illegal networks.

It is estimated that millions of live animals and plants are shuttled illegally around the world each day, sometimes as openly as the infant bonobo that was hand-carried in a bassinet like a baby through the Paris airport in 2006, or the gibbon stuffed inside a suitcase that was discovered at the Jakarta airport in 2014. Exact numbers are difficult to come by, but it is estimated that 40,000 live primates, 4 million live birds, 640,000 live reptiles, and 350 million live tropical fish are traded globally each year. In a single market in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, up to 90,000 mammals were sold in a single year, and a survey at a market in Thailand that spanned 25 weekends found 70,000 birds, representing of 276 species, were sold. A similar survey of four markets in Bangkok found that of the 36,537 birds observed, only 37 per cent were native to Thailand, while 63% were nonnative species. There is a growing number of documentaries and news briefings on this issue.



Photo Credit: Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme

The illegal trade in live animals is markedly different than the more commonly discussed traffic in elephant ivory, rhino horn, shark fins or pangolin scales. To begin with, all of those commodities are dead, and carry little of the urgency – or risk – associated with the live trade. Animals transported alive nearly always require a courier, a human being to accompany them along the supply line, thereby raising the stakes for law enforcement and seizure if an arrest is made. The live trade is also time-sensitive – most animals cannot survive for long in the cramped, contrived manner in which they are shipped – so the fastest route is usually the favored route.

Disease transmission

The live trade often requires a degree of corruption in order to pass through customs and security check-points, but the greatest risk is posed by the illicit traffic of animals and plants is the threat of disease transmission. None of the fauna or flora that comprises the illegal live trade goes through quarantine or any veterinary screens. As a result, animals – many of whom have been kept in unsanitary conditions for days and weeks – pass through transit countries and arrive at their destinations carrying all of the bacteria and parasites capable of spreading diseases.

In fact, experts point to pandemics such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), Avian flu, Monkeypox and even Ebola as some of the diseases most likely to make the jump to global human populations in the future as a result of the live trade in illegal wildlife. Since 1980, a new infectious disease has emerged in humans at an average of one every four months. The origin of HIV is likely linked to human consumption of nonhuman primates, for instance, and recent Ebola hemorrhagic fever outbreaks in humans have been traced to contact with infected great apes that are hunted for food. Meanwhile, the SARS-associated coronavirus has been associated with the international trade in small carnivores.

Many diseases are transmitted through the same species of parasites carried by imported animals. From November 1994

Video: Stolen Apes



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Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/60813938>

to January 1995, the U.S. Department of Agriculture inspected 349 reptile shipments from 22 countries containing 117,690 animals. Ticks were removed from animals in 97 shipments, and infested shipments included 54,376 animals. Ticks carry many diseases that threaten livestock and human health, including heartwater disease, Lyme disease, and babesiosis.

But what about the animals themselves? A wide range of factors are used to gauge the real loss to wild populations of the live illegal pet trade – such as 10 dead chimpanzees killed during the hunt and capture for every live specimen that is procured for sale – but most of those numbers are inexact, or require verified data as to the size and location of wild populations. CITES used to require countries to monitor the loss of specimens held in captivity prior to trade, but that rule was quietly dropped in 2007. Nevertheless, a recent study by Pro Wildlife show that, incredibly, up to 100 percent of birds in Senegal and Indonesia, up to 85 percent of ornamental fish in India and Hawaii, and up to 50 percent of chameleons in Madagascar die after they're captured and before they're exported.

Yet even those species that do survive the gruesome ordeal of capture and trade face an uncertain future. Many countries face crisis-level issues related to invasive species that have been imported and then released, turning ecosystems inside out and decimating native wildlife populations. The exotic pet trade is responsible for six species of pythons being introduced into Florida in the U.S., and a 20-year study indicates that 52 other species have become established there as well. As a result, the U.S. spends over \$135 million USD each year on programmes to eradicate invasive species.

Yet a series of confiscations and arrests in recent months suggests that the global trade remains considerable – and consistent. In July 2015, officials at the Kuwait airport intercepted a pair of infant orangutans being smuggled into the country from Indonesia, and six months later, and Qatar law enforcement officials arrested a man attempting to sell a live chimpanzee in the Doha suburb of Al Aziziya. Meanwhile, a pet tiger fell off a truck in Doha in late 2015 and spent several hours wandering among the city's rush-hour traffic.



Photo Credit: Common Commons



Main international routes for the illegal trafficking of great apes

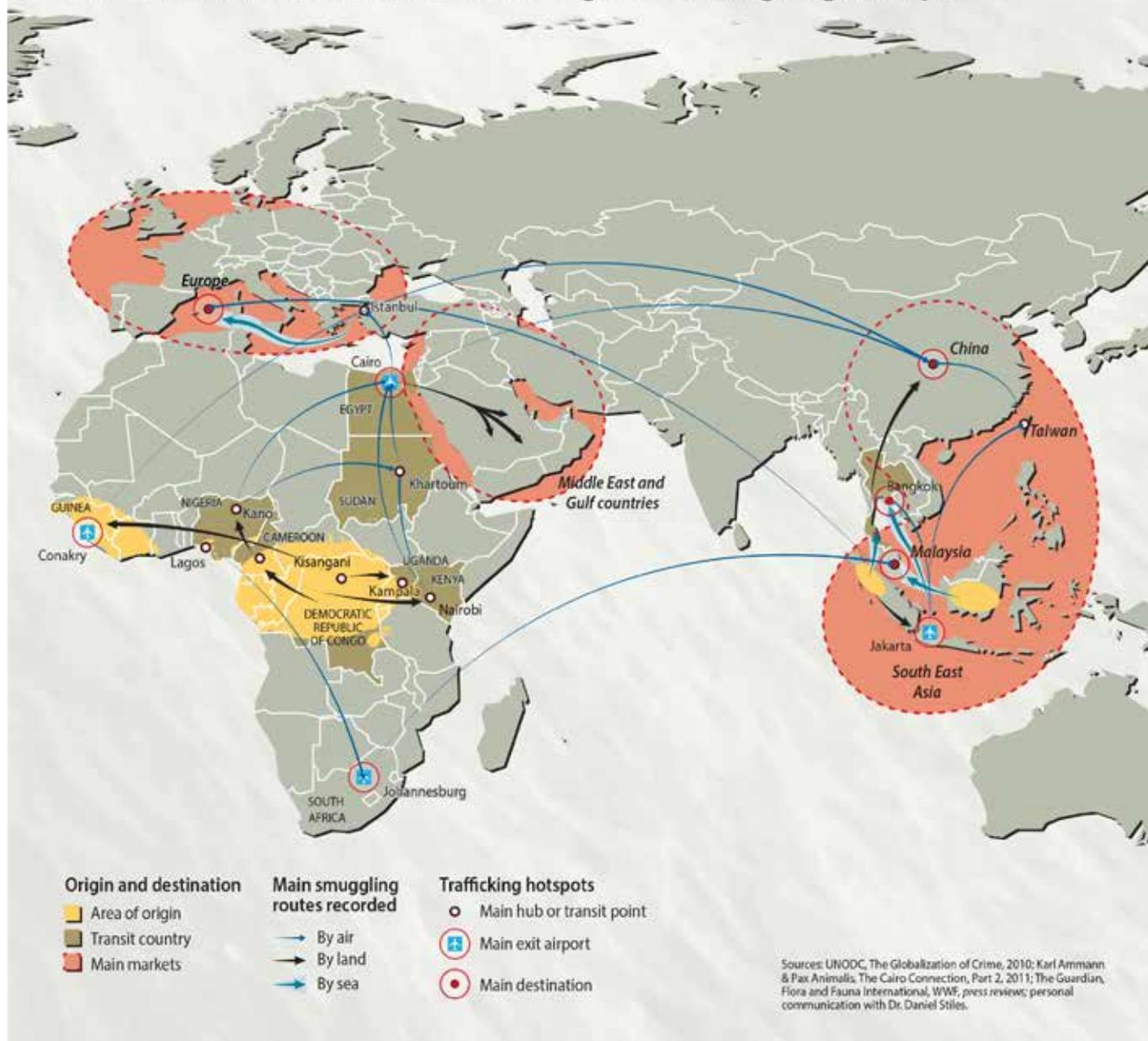


Photo Credit: GRASP



Photo Credit: Wildlife Conservation Society

The Middle East has long played a pivotal role in the illegal traffic of live animals. Beginning in the 1990s, it was a destination market to supply the private menageries of the wealthy elite, and many of the Gulf States established pipelines to exotic wildlife cartels in Egypt. A decade later, however, the Middle East had evolved into a transit market to feed the burgeoning live animal trade in China, Thailand and other Asian consumers.

Today, the Middle East serves as both a transit and destination market for illegally traded wildlife, an industry that now uses the internet and popular social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram to contract customers. But it's not just great apes, and it's not just the Middle East. Millions of live animals and plants – many of them endangered or critically endangered species – are being moved between major cities via airports and ports and rail routes every day, all going to serve lucrative markets.

According to data from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), 3,726 illegal shipments containing nearly 330,000 live animals attempted to enter the United States between 2005 and 2014. Yet much of the trade is still invisible.

It is estimated that less than 10% of illegal wildlife is actually detected. Analysts suggest that as many as 13 million live animals were actually brought into the U.S. in that time period – and up to 9.7 million of them died before they reached the intended buyer.

The U.S. trade data found that some of the most popular wildlife in illegal trade included tropical fish, freshwater turtles, coral, and pythons. In fact, the U.S. data reported that 53,799 individual tropical fish were seized during the 2005-2014 period, along with 68,680 turtles and 18,000 pythons. Coral, which is sourced for jewelry and other artifacts, was almost entirely illegal and sourced from the wild (91 percent).

Rare and exotic birds also comprise a huge element of the live illegal trade in wildlife. BirdLife International estimates that several million birds are trafficked annually from 4,000 species involved in the domestic and international trade, many of them traded as infants and stuffed head-first into plastic water bottles to avoid detection. It is estimated that one-third of all living bird species have been recorded as traded internationally for the pet trade and other purposes. Given that 266 of these species are considered globally threatened, and over half of these (152) are faced with potentially unsustainable exploitation, it is now estimated that 1,375 species – or 13% of extant species, basically one in eight – are globally threatened with extinction.

The most commonly affected families of birds involved in the pet trade include finches, weavers, parrots and raptors. Small birds comprise 70 percent of the trade, while large birds such as macaws, parrots, cockatoos, parakeets, and lorikeets account for 20 percent of the trade. Prior to the enactment of the Wild Bird Conservation Act in 1992, approximately 800,000 wild-harvested birds were imported annually to the U.S. to supply the pet trade.

Reptiles and amphibians are also big-ticket items among the exotic and illegal pet traders. In late 2014, a Chinese national named Kai Xu – also known as “Turtle Man” – was apprehended at the Canadian border with 51 live turtles



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carefully taped to his legs and hidden in his groin. Xu was already a suspect in the smuggling of thousands of reptiles all over the world, and his arrest in the Detroit-Windsor tunnel that connects the U.S. to Canada was a major break in cracking the illegal live trade.

A few weeks later, Xu, while out on bail, drove a hired car to Detroit Metropolitan Airport in the U.S. His accomplice carried two suitcases containing almost 1,000 turtles – valued at over \$30,000 USD on the black market. Agents made the discovery while inspecting the bags, and both men were arrested and faced federal charges. Experts say that some endangered turtles can be sold for \$1,800 USD in North America and Europe, and triple that amount in China.

Meanwhile, Egyptian customs officials made another horrifying discovery in April 2016 when they detected suspicious movement while monitoring the X-ray baggage scanner. Sixty Egyptian cobras – one of the largest and deadliest snakes in Africa -- were found to be stuffed in six bags inside two foam boxes and surrounded by ice to keep their movement limited, their mouths closed with surgical thread.

Exotic consumerism

But what facilitates this live trade in illegal wildlife? Clearly, markets willing to pay \$40,000 for a gorilla in China or \$10,000 for a Cheetah in Kuwait are enough to sustain the supply lines, and the rapidly expanding use of social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram to advertise wildlife makes transactions easier than ever. A recent survey by TRAFFIC of 14 Facebook sites in Malaysia over a period of five months uncovered over 300 wild, live animals for sale as pets, including gibbons, sun bears, binturongs and other endangered species – but the fact that those posts involved 106 different sellers indicates the widespread nature of the problem.

The illegal trade in live animals is also a big enough business to attract drug cartels. In Mexico, the record high prices offered for sea cucumbers -- a slug-like species that is considered a delicacy in Asia and sells for \$500 USD per kilogram -- led to pitched battles between rival gangs in Yucatán and Campeche in 2014. One year later, 10 armed men attacked three armed guards and stole 3.5 tonnes of dehydrated sea cucumber in El Cuyo on the Yucatán peninsula, and Mexican customs officials followed soon

Video: Exotic animal species smuggled



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Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzgTAbp-Fyo>
Photo Credit: IUCN

thereafter with a seizure of 17 tonnes of live sea cucumbers at the Cancun International Airport, the largest confiscation ever of that species.

Sea cucumber numbers have plummeted across Latin America, with the fisheries depleted on Ecuador's mainland coast and in the Galapagos Islands, and highly impacted in Mexico.

Back in Egypt, meanwhile, pet shop owners alternate between the internet and walk-up business to deliver the goods. Many stores promise same-day delivery from vast wildlife holding centers along the Cairo-Alexandria Road, while one Facebook advert guarantees a lion cub delivery within 25 days.

These sellers, however, are decidedly upscale compared to some of the wild animal markets that exist in Africa and Asia. Sprawling, semi-permanent open-air markets thrive in a number of major cities, such as the Benfica market in Angola, the Juba market in Nigeria, or the Taipint market in China, all of which offer wildlife for sale that violates CITES regulations

Video: Trafficked through Thailand: Cracking down on animal smuggling



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Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzgTAbp-Fyo>

Photo Credit: GRASP



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on a daily basis. While the wildlife on offer in these sites is predominantly destined for human consumption, much of it is sold alive and none of it is regulated. The disease risks are clear, and the legal implications are equally troubling.

In fact, a 2014 study of seven live wildlife trade markets in China's Guangdong and Guangxi provinces uncovered 13 endangered or critically species for sale, along with Indochinese box turtles and Burmese pythons, indicating that trans-border trade was occurring in species without proper documentation.

But even documents can be procured, if necessary. The 2015 arrest of the former wildlife director of Guinea, Ansoumane Doumbouya, pulled back the curtain on a West African empire of live illegal wildlife trade that spanned nearly a decade and resulted in the illegal export of hundreds of animals. Doumbouya, who also served as the head of Guinea's CITES authority beginning in 2008, issued fraudulent permits for chimpanzees, gorillas, manatees, bonobos, parrots and other endangered wildlife on a regular basis that fueled a complex web of illegal traders and ultimately led to Guinea's



trade suspension from CITES in 2013. Nevertheless, when Doumbouya was arrested, he was still carrying blank CITES export permits, several years after he'd left his post.

And where did those animals go? China was a major importer of chimpanzees from Guinea beginning around 2007, since that country's rapidly expanding middle class demanded zoos and safari parks and animal entertainment shows that are popular in China. In 2010 alone, China imported 69 chimpanzees from Guinea under fraudulent CITES permits that indicated the animal were "captive-bred" and therefore legal to trade, and existing data indicates a total of 138 chimpanzees and 10 gorillas were sent to China over a period of several years.

Crossing the frontier

The illegal trade in elephant ivory or rhino horn is a grim traffic that tolls a steady march towards extinction. Yet the numbers – no matter how devastating – are clear: every pair of tusks represents a dead elephant, and every horn represents a dead rhinoceros. The live illegal wildlife trade, however, only hints at the devastation and the loss of biodiversity. Who can say how many bonobos really died as a result of the infant that was seized from a speedboat in the Democratic Republic of Congo last month? What do the dozens of slow lorises confiscated in a recent raid on Bangkok's Chatuchak market say about the impact on wild populations? More information is clearly needed to understand the scale and scope of the live illegal trade in wildlife, but the more pertinent questions are what are the levers that policy-makers can use to stop live trade and have we left enough time to put them in place.



Photo Credit: GRASP



Photo Credit: IUCN