

News

Wildlife trade flourishes in Fortress Malaysia

Weak enforcement laws attract smugglers

By SHEILA RAHMAN

WILDLIFE smugglers search the world for countries with weaker enforcement policies and when they find one, they route their illegal trade through that country, said lawyer Bryan Christy, author of widely-acclaimed book *The Lizard King – The True Crimes and Passions of the World's Greatest Reptile Smugglers*.

"To understand this, one needs to only look at the number of high-technology multinational companies that have made Malaysia home. Companies recognise when laws are favourable to business. So do smugglers. Strong protections for investment attract good companies; weak protections for wildlife attract others."

In the book, US Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agent George Morrison, who arrested reptile smuggler Anson Wong in 1998, "refers to Malaysia as 'Fortress Malaysia' because Anson flourished so easily," said Christy, clarifying that Malaysia certainly had officials committed to wildlife protection.

"But without stronger laws and policies, it will remain 'Fortress Malaysia.' Malaysia is in a difficult geographic position and it is what security experts refer to as a 'choke point,' a place through which significant resources pass on their way to the world.



KOMODO DRAGON: One of the endangered species traded by Wong

"The entire world counts on a handful of countries to protect its wildlife — and Malaysia is one of them," added Christy.

For over 10 years now, wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, the Malaysian Nature Society, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the WWF-Malaysia and other concerned Malaysian people have pressed for stronger wildlife laws.

An online petition on this has been started early this month at www.petitiononline.com/MYLaw/petition.html by the four NGOs and the target is 100,000 signatures by June next year.

"Wildlife crime is still a crime.

"Source countries and consumer countries need to treat them so. Wildlife smugglers steal what the world values most," said Christy.

To conduct business on such a large scale, he said illegal wildlife traffickers forged documents, laundered money, smuggled across borders and bribed government officials.

"In some cases (such as for elephant ivory, sturgeon eggs, or Malagasy reptiles) they even murder. They do all the things we think of as deplorable crimes but because they traffic plants and animals, we treat what they do as an environmental issue, not a criminal issue."

And in this gap between the envi-

ronment focus and crime could be found smuggling's most appealing aspect, Christy explained. "Unlike crime involving theft, forgery, money laundering, bribery or murder, wildlife criminals face almost no penal risk.

"Traffickers are rarely caught, and when they are, chances are that nothing significant will happen to them. In the US, we refer to the penalty most wildlife smugglers get as 'a ticket,' as in a parking ticket."

Even a country with strong enforcement policies, such as Australia, can usually only protect wildlife within its own borders.

"Wildlife is the most innocent of victims, and yet around the world we offer it almost no international protection," Christy said, adding he was "very encouraged by the immediate response of Malaysian Customs, which (in reply to an article in the *New Sunday Times* in September), had committed itself to looking into the situation described in my book."

Christy said that everything written in *The Lizard King* is documented, including by audio tapes secretly recorded by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and through emails, faxes, CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) permits, court plea agreements and other primary sources.

Wong ran an international ring

By FRANCIS C. NANTHA

MALAYSIAN Anson Wong, one of the key accused in what has been described as one of the largest cases of illegal trade ever prosecuted in the US, was reportedly a key supplier to the father-son team of Ray and Mike Van Nostrand, who ran Strictly Reptiles and were known as the most notorious reptile smugglers in the United States.

Wong had been accused of running an international smuggling ring between 1996 and 1998 to illegally export more than 300 protected reptiles native to Asia and Africa to the world's biggest market — the US.

As part of his plea agreement upon his conviction in the US, Wong agreed that the market value of the animals he smuggled in the San Francisco case alone exceeded US\$500,000 (RM1.73 million), and that does not include the animals he had been charged in a separate Florida case.

International police agency, Interpol, says wildlife smuggling is so pervasive on a global scale, estimated that total annual value exceeds US\$6 billion and is surpassed only by the



BRIAN CHRISTY: Wildlife smugglers steal what the world values most

black market in drugs.

In many areas, organised gangs, including South American drug cartels and the Russian mafia, have added wildlife smuggling to their other illegitimate activities.

The World Wildlife Federation estimates that 103 species of reptiles and 58 species of amphibians are currently under threat of extinction. Even zoos can't find some of these

species, yet smugglers can and reap handsome profits as a result.

Wong, now 50, was caught in September 1998, when an undercover US Fish and Wildlife Service agent posed as a reptile trafficker and lured Wong to Mexico City, where he was arrested by the Mexican Government and incarcerated pending extradition to the US.

Wong fought the extradition until June 2000, and was then flown to San Francisco for the trial — where he pleaded guilty to federal felony crimes alleged in the San Francisco and Florida cases on Dec 13, 2000 and sentenced to 71 months prison.

The charges to which Wong pleaded guilty included money laundering, conspiracy, smuggling, making false statements and violating US laws that prohibit trade in protected animals.

In addition to Wong, seven other defendants have been convicted or pleaded guilty to federal crimes associated with the smuggling ring.

These include James Michael Burroughs, of San Francisco, in connection with his role as a human courier of smuggled animals in airline baggage.

Singaporean jailed 37 months

SINGAPOREAN national, Lawrence Wee Soon Chye, now 43, was also sentenced in 2003 to 37 months prison for smuggling protected animals into the US.

The former advisor to National Geographic filmmakers, who had an authoritative knowledge of reptiles, was scolded by Orlando judge John Antoon, who wished out loud that he could sentence Chye to a much longer sentence than the 37 months federal guidelines allow.

Chye was convicted of smuggling several hundred protected reptiles into and out of the US in 2002 and 2003 by sending them in express mail packages mislabeled as magazines or books.

Many died in transit while those who did survive the trip posed significant risk of salmonella infection.

The World Wildlife Federation estimates that almost 90 per cent of smuggled animals die in transit: they're packed carelessly, they starve, they die of thirst, crush or eat each other, or are left on tarmacs waiting to be boarded on planes.

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