

A tangle of slithering, slippery snakes



This article, titled "An ancient craft's new frontier", by Emma Tinkler, was featured in the Canberra Times on Saturday 27 August. The article is reproduced with the newspaper's permission.

It was a humble hard-sided suitcase being carried by an unassuming Japanese gentleman. But when Australian Customs Service officer Marni Punnell stopped him to open it, she found a tangle of slithering, slippery snakes. "She was surprised and in her experience it's probably the most dramatic find she's made," her boss, Robert Viles, says. "But she did a very good job. She probably gave her eyes a bit of a rub afterwards, wondering if what she'd actually seen was real."

The discovery early on Monday morning at Brisbane International Airport of 39 exotic reptiles being smuggled into Australia by the 40-year-old man is not an everyday occurrence, but is by no means extraordinary.

Conservation groups say the illegal international trade in wildlife is second only to drug and arms smuggling, netting hundreds of millions of dollars each year for criminal gangs and professional dealers. Australia records its fair share of the trade, hundreds of live animals and thousands of endangered-animal products being caught entering and leaving the country each year.

Customs statistics here offer no apparent indication that the trade has either increased or fallen recently. However,

conservation groups say that world-wide it is on the rise, the Internet opening the trade to a broader audience while allowing anonymity for dealers.

They are frightened that if left unchecked such sites will flourish and already endangered wildlife populations will be further depleted.

With its unique and diverse population of fauna, Australia has some of the strictest wildlife-protection laws in the world.

Native and foreign bird and animal species are protected under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, as well the international Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Maximum penalties for smuggling live animals and related endangered animal products, such as stuffed animals, eggs and trinkets made of animal parts, are fines up to \$110,000, and/or 10 years' jail.

Statistics show a fairly steady trade in live wildlife and related products since 2000, with Customs reporting between 20 and 45 live-animal cases annually. So far this year, Customs has detected 35 cases of live birds and reptiles being smuggled in and out of Australia. (Often more than 15 or 20 animals are moved at one time. In the 2004-05 financial year, there were 315 wildlife offences, involving live and dead animals, recorded by air passengers entering Australia.

Australian Customs Service national investigations manager Richard Janeczko says there is no typical profile for an illegal wildlife smuggler and when it comes to dead animal products, "it could be anybody".

Often people buy a trinket, such as a shark's tooth necklace or a piece of ivory on an overseas trip, and profess they don't know it's prohibited, he says.

Customs do know that "bikies are very big on dangerous dead animals", and it's uncommon to have anyone but a professional smuggler or their "mule" attempting to import or export live animals.

In terms of how animals and their products are smuggled, Janeczko says it is generally by post or carried by an airline passenger, in a bag or on the smuggler's body.

"People have many ways of concealing them," he says. "Recently a woman tried to bring in 50 exotic aquarium fish using an apron under her skirt. A few weeks before that, we got an airline crew member who brought fish in as well.

"It's unlawful, but it's also very cruel. A lot of smugglers see

dead animals as an overhead. The trade in live-animal products can be seasonal, with reptile smuggling generally carried out in the hotter months when the creatures are "easier to catch"

As far as native wildlife goes, Janeczko says "anything that is uniquely Australian" is targeted for export, but generally reptiles and birds, as with most live-animal trades. Most of the specimens go to Japan, Europe and North America.

Customs has a history of seizing more items and animals on the way into the country than on the way out, although both sides are monitored "just as diligently", Janeczko says. "If you are exporting things you can use a wider variety of ways to do it, there are many ways of getting to that point. There's more of a funnel on the way in."

Since 2000, Customs has detected 170 cases of live birds and animals by post or in airline transit. There have been 45 live-animal cases prosecuted and 41 people convicted.

"One of the difficulties with prosecuting people is that a lot of the offenders are based overseas," Janeczko says. "They do their deed, then leave the country. They separate themselves from the actual product.

"We know from our intelligence that we're having quite an impact on the organised trade. But we'd be naive to think we've stopped it because we are still detecting people. We are aware of groups of people who are doing this. We believe we are reasonably successful but to prove it is a different matter."

Customs spends considerable time monitoring the Internet. "We don't only seize the animal at the border, we conduct investigations and execute warrants on premises of people suspected of being involved in the trade," Janeczko says. "As part of that process, we look at their computers. In Investigations we always look at how the goods were ordered."

As with other illegal operations, the Web has been recognised as a "new frontier" in wildlife smuggling.

Earlier this month, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, or IFAW, issued a report on the prevalence of live endangered wildlife and animal products being traded via the Internet. In a one-week period alone, the fund's British office discovered 9000 items, 70 per cent from endangered species. Among them were a Siberian tiger, four baby chimps, a gorilla and a giraffe as well as thousands of ivory items and dried seahorses.

The conservation group's Sydney office supplemented those findings with two 10-day searches on the Australian arm of the world's largest auction site, eBay.

There were no live animals for sale in accordance with the site's policy, but some 150 products from protected species, including the teeth and jaws of great white sharks, turtle products and more ivory. Almost a third of these items had been listed on the web.

"This trade has devastating implications for both wildlife conservation and animal welfare. Whole species risk being wiped out by overexploitation. Millions of animals caught up in the trade suffer immensely and many die, resulting in yet more being taken from the wild."

FAW Asia Pacific campaigner Rebecca Brand says the Internet "opens up markets to people who may not have previously known these items are available".

With this in mind, IFAW sees the most obvious way to tackle the problem as improving consumer awareness.

"People need to know that their demand is having an impact on individual animals' and whole populations," Brand says. "If the buying stops then ultimately the killing will as well."

The report recommends that the owners of sites on which wildlife may be traded provide easy access for users to information on the legal requirements for wildlife trading; establish a reporting mechanism for users regarding any suspicious items; ensure regular and detailed monitoring of site content for illegal wildlife items; and cooperate with the government, enforcement agencies, other relevant authorities and non government organisations in efforts to reduce illegal



wildlife trade. On a broader front, IFAW recommends that governments and enforcement agencies world-wide trade and follows most of the IWAF's recommendations.

"We have a department that is dedicated to keeping this Internet marketplace safe to trade," trust and safety director Alastair MacGibbon says.

"We monitor key parts of the site and we take down listings that breach our policies.

"The Internet is a highly transparent place and you would really have to be crazy to sell something like this through eBay because of the level of cooperation we have with government agencies and the procedures we have in place."

Janeczko says there is no doubt the Internet has made life easier for people to advertise and to order animal products. But it's really just another way of doing an ancient craft," he says. "The Internet just allows greater accessibility, but our fundamental task of stopping them on the way in or out hasn't changed."

He says Customs continues to grow its partnerships with the states, federal agencies and international counterparts to share information allowing it to build profiles of smugglers. It is also investing using greater technology, such as x-ray machines.

And we rely on our hotline," Janeczko says. "We get a lot of information from people, particularly hotel staff who notice things when they are making rooms up.

"It's an ongoing challenge."