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## High Returns for Snakes on a Plane

Wildlife trafficking is a multibillion dollar industry that is primarily orchestrated by well-funded and powerful international criminal syndicates. Although much media attention has been paid to the plight of exotic and endangered animals as they are transported to and from Thailand, which has become a global hub for animal trafficking, little has been done to change the status quo.



Trafficking of wildlife in Thailand is regulated by the Wild Animal Preservation and Protection Act BE 2535 (1992) (**WAPPA**) that we discussed last week in relation to the buying and selling of preserved and protected species at marketplaces like the famous Chatuchak.

This week we will discuss the Act from the angle of animal trafficking, and the role Thailand plays in the illicit industry.

In 1983, Thailand became a signatory party to the United Nations Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which is implemented domestically by the WAPPA. Under Section 23 of the WAPPA, no person shall import or export preserved and protected wild animals (or their carcasses) unless permission is obtained from the Director-General. The penalty for doing so is 4 years imprisonment and/or a maximum fine of up to 40,000 baht.

Unfortunately, the risks associated with being caught pale compared to the staggering potential profits of a single successful trafficking operation. According to the Wildlife Conservation Society, a lone gibbon can easily fetch over 500,000 baht on the black market. These traffickers are not transporting one animal at a time either. One high profile seizure at Suvarnabhumi Airport involved 259 species of exotic animals, packed into three suitcases, while other individuals have been caught attempting to smuggle baby leopards, bears, panthers, and other extremely rare animals through the Kingdom. One problem that exists with the legislation is that the exact species and sub-species of the animal being smuggled must be on the list of protected or preserved animals, and yet the list of preserved and protected animals has not been very rarely updated since 1992.

Thailand has devoted substantial resources to combatting illegal animal trafficking through the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation as well as the Central Investigation Bureau's Natural Resources and Environmental Crimes Division.

Although an increase in the frequency of seizures and raids is reported to have resulted in the capture of more than 46,000 animals in the last two years alone, doubling the total from the two years prior, numerous investigative reports in this publication and others have quoted top ranking enforcement officials as well as senators admitting that major problems remain. Thailand continues to be a hub of the illegal animal trafficking industry, allegedly because of complacent officials actively working against those trying to enforce the law, legislation that does not penalize the trafficking of some endangered and high-value species, and inadequate penalties to deter the smuggling of those animals that are identified. For example, although officials do conduct periodic raids in Chatuchak market, we are not aware of a single case of a vendor going to prison for the illegal sale of exotic and endangered animals. Perhaps, the relatively small fines are viewed as nothing more than the cost of doing business.

The one reported case of which we are aware dates back to 1992. In this case, in Yala province the police found the accused in possession of a number of live animals including pythons (*Python Reticulatus* and *Python curtusm*, for the herpetologists among you), turtles, and pangolins. In addition, she had many Southern (Sumatran) Serow (a.k.a. Mountain Goat) legs, and the carcasses of many other preserved or protected animals. The court sentenced the accused to 12 months in prison for possession and trading in preserved and protected animals.

One question you might be asking is what happens to all of the animals that are seized in these raids and at the airports? Many are released back into the wild inside sanctuaries and protected areas where there is a lower risk that they will be illegally poached and captured again. But others, such as baby tigers, are still unable to survive on their own and must be cared for 24 hours a day by government agencies. The Department of National Parks has reportedly stated that it takes approximately 1.7 million baht per month to feed all the birds and beasts at government animal rehabilitation centers across the country.

A catch-22 exists in that the more effective law enforcement is in stopping animal trafficking, the more it costs the government to care for those animals they recover but cannot release into the wild. The Department of National Parks has established a fund to help cover some of the costs and reportedly receives private donations from celebrities and animal-loving Thais.

The global demand for exotic animals as pets, décor, food, and even aphrodisiacs places these defenseless species at risk of poaching and trafficking from ill-minded criminals. Although Thailand is

currently at the center of this trade as a transport hub, it does not have to remain so. By updating the Wild Animal Preservation and Protection Act to encompass the species being trafficked along with much heavier penalties for those who are caught violating the law, combined with an internal rooting-out of systemic corruption within this illegal industry, Thailand can go a long way to ensure that wild animals remain where they belong, in the wild.

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