

INTERNATIONAL SWEEP TARGETS REPTILE SMUGGLERS

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NEWS RELEASE

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Suspected smugglers of various reptiles, including the frilled dragon, were served search warrants today by special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The warrants were issued as part of an international investigation involving reptiles illegally imported from Indonesia, Australia, the Netherlands, and other countries.

The investigation into reptile smuggling in the United States was initiated by a request for assistance from the Netherlands Ministry of Justice, Netherlands National Police, and Netherlands Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Conservation, and Fisheries.

Federal search warrants were executed in New York, Florida, North Carolina, and New Mexico in coordination with other warrants executed at businesses and residences in Indonesia and the Netherlands. Officials from the Netherlands uncovered the elaborate smuggling scheme involving live reptiles, including the frilled dragon (*Chlamydosaurus kingii*), shipped out of Indonesia, into the Netherlands, and then on to other European countries and the United States.

The United States is the world's largest importer of wildlife and in recent years the demand for live reptiles as collectibles and exotic pets has increased rapidly. The various species of reptiles involved in the investigation are highly prized by collectors in Europe, Japan, and the United States.

Frilled dragons, certain Australian and Indonesian skinks, pythons, and some unique turtles, all species of concern in this smuggling investigation, may sell in the United States for \$250 to \$1,500 each. These animals are protect-

ed by law in their countries of origin and their export is tightly controlled. Although some of these species can be bred in captivity, the high level of demand by reptile collectors often encourages smuggling of wild-caught specimens.

The frilled dragon, used as a model for Jurassic Park's spitting dinosaur, is a non-venomous 18-inch-long lizard native to Indonesia and Australia. This reptile is particularly striking when it becomes excited and opens a scaly fold of skin surrounding its head. The lizard is also remarkable for standing upright and running on its hind legs.

The Netherlands Police began their investigation into the illegal trafficking of protected reptiles from Indonesia in September 1994. They gathered information for more than a year before initiating an official request for assistance through international channels to the U.S. Department of Justice. Through an agreement with the Kingdom of the Netherlands, known as the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, the United States and the Netherlands provide a broad range of cooperation with each other in criminal matters. Special



Subadult Iguana iguana. Photograph: Bo Staten



Exuma Island Iguana, *Cyclura cychlura figginsi*. A male animal was offered for sale by a southern California dealer with the motto "If it's rare..., we can get it for you," despite the fact that no iguanas of this species have ever been legally imported from the Bahamas. Source: I.I.S. members, Ministry of Agriculture, the Bahamas.

agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were chosen to assist the Department of Justice because of their expertise in wildlife import, export, smuggling, and illegal commercialization offenses.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Netherlands and Indonesian authorities continue to investigate illegal trade in reptiles. Reptile smugglers in the United States face possible Federal conspiracy, smuggling, false statement, and money laundering charges. The investigations in the United States are being coordinated by the United States Attorney's offices in Miami, Florida; New York, New York; Greensboro, North Carolina; and Albuquerque, New Mexico, with

support from attorneys in the Wildlife and Marine Resources Section of the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the United States Department of Justice.

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