

NEWSBRIEFS

Iguana Conservation in Hispaniola and Fiji

The endemic and Critically Endangered Ricord's Iguana (*Cyclura ricordii*), is restricted to south-central Hispaniola, where four disjunct subpopulations remain in an area less than 100 km². Three subpopulations occur within the Jaragua-Bahoruco-Enriquillo Biosphere Reserve in the Dominican Republic (DR). The fourth, the smallest, and most threatened subpopulation is found in southeastern Haiti.

Conservation activities in the DR focus on habitat monitoring and regular patrolling by members of local support groups to prevent disturbances. This integrative, low-cost program is effective, raises awareness, and serves as a model for other endangered species programs in the DR. In September, with funding from an anonymous donor, the International Iguana Foundation (IIF) and Grupo Jaragua purchased 20 hectares in the DR encompassing a critically important nesting area for Ricord's Iguanas called Fonda de la Tierra near Pedernales. Over 140 hatched nests were documented in this area earlier this year. In Anse-a-Pitres, Haiti, where the most fragile subpopulation of Ricord's Iguana exists, the IIF and Grupo Jaragua recently conducted a workshop for local authorities with a proposal to create a Municipally Protected Habitat. If successful, this protected area would be the first of its kind in Haiti. The IIF, USFWS, MacArthur Foundation, Disney, and Sociedad Española de Ornitología support work on Ricord's Iguana.



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The smallest and most threatened population of Ricord's Iguana (*Cyclura ricordii*; top) is in southeastern Haiti. The discovery of Fijian Banded Iguanas (*Brachylophus bulabula*; bottom) on two government-owned islands might serve to facilitate establishment of a new national park.

In Fiji, two significant findings emerged from fieldwork conducted over the past year by the National Trust of Fiji, University of the South Pacific, Fiji Department of Environment, NatureFiji-MareqetiViti, Taronga Zoo, and the US Geological Survey. The first finding was the discovery of sizeable populations of the newly described Fijian Banded Iguana (*Brachylophus bulabula*) on two government-owned islands, Mokoai and Makodrago. These populations will hopefully serve as the focus of an assessment for a potential new national park within Fiji.

The second finding was confirmation that Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*), illegally introduced to Fiji earlier this century, now occur on at least four islands with documented breeding on two islands. Green Iguanas are highly invasive, and juveniles are very similar in color and shape to the threatened endemic iguanas of Fiji, a similarity expected to hamper control efforts. Partial funding for fieldwork in Fiji came from CEPF and the IIF.

Glenn Gerber and Miguel Garcia

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With contributions from Ernst Rupp, Masani Accimé, and Robert Fisher
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Bringing Down the Serpent King

A broken lock on a suitcase moving through Kuala Lumpur International Airport this summer led to the discovery of nearly 100 baby Boa Constrictors, two vipers, and a South American turtle. This was a fairly modest cache for a wildlife smuggler, but the man who claimed the suitcase was no ordinary criminal. He was Anson Wong Keng Liang, the world's most notorious wildlife trafficker — and, instead of a slap on the wrist, which he might reasonably have expected, Wong was about to receive a surprising punishment.

From the tiny Malaysian island of Penang, in a storefront no larger than your average nail salon, Wong commanded one of the world's largest wildlife trafficking syndicates. Much of the work of Wong's company, Sungai Rusa Wildlife, was above-board. He legally wholesaled tens of thousands of wild reptiles annually, making him the likely source for many of the snakes, lizards, turtles, and frogs on sale in American pet stores. However, using a private zoo as a cover, he also offered an astounding array of contraband, including Snow Leopard pelts, panda skins, rhino horns, rare birds, and Komodo Dragons. He smuggled critically endangered wildlife from Australia, China, Madagascar, New Zealand, South America, and elsewhere to markets largely in Europe, Japan, and the United States.

Wong's long career beyond the reach of the law offers a window on the \$10–20 billion-a-year illegal wildlife trade and our broken system to combat it. Underfunded law enforcement, government corruption, controversy-shy NGOs, and a feeble international legal framework have yielded few inroads against wildlife syndicates or kingpins like Anson Wong. Wong's arrest and his sentencing in November 2010 provide a lesson on how to change that.

Wong got into the business in the early 1980s, selling exotic animals to zoos and dealers around the world. Changes in international and Malaysian law eventually led him to focus on reptiles, which he believed were not as protected as other species. Wong's techniques mirrored those of narcotics and other traffickers. He paid mules to carry Komodo Dragons hidden inside suitcases, and hid endangered Malagasy Tortoises at the bottom of legal wildlife shipments. Purchasing vacation packages as cover, he sent men out to poach rare wildlife from breeding facilities in New Zealand. The most important technique Wong and other large-scale smugglers employ, however, is far less exotic than all that. Instead, it has to do with paperwork.

The primary treaty governing international wildlife trade is the U.N. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which classifies wildlife into three groups: Animals listed in Appendix I, such as tigers and gorillas, are so close to disappearing that they are banned from international commercial trade; Appendix II animals may be traded under a permit system; and Appendix III animals are protected by a country with a request that others honor the protection. Smugglers scan the globe for countries with weak laws or corrupt law enforcement officials tasked with stamping their animals' documentation, paper that is as much in demand as the animals themselves. Such countries become wildlife laundering pass-through points — animals come in illegally and leave “legally.”

Few places launder as much illegal wildlife as Penang. This was largely the work of Wong: “I can get anything here from anywhere,” he boasted to an American undercover agent in March 1997. “Nothing can be done to me. I could sell a panda — and, nothing. As long as I'm here, I'm safe.” The key, he explained, was paying off government officials.

Wong's activities finally landed him on the radar of international law enforcement agencies in the early 1990s, when Special Operations, the elite undercover unit of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), made him the target of an investigation called Operation Chameleon. Agents set up a reptile importing company outside San Francisco and a retail operation in

Reno, Nevada, and began doing business with Wong. Before long, they discovered Wong not only smuggled rare and endangered reptiles, but also critically endangered birds and mammals. His reach was global.

To arrest Wong, agents needed a ruse to lure him out of Malaysia. A lucrative international black market in bear bile is fueled by demand as a cure-all in traditional Asian medicine. USFWS Special Agent George Morrison, acting undercover, offered Wong a piece of a bear-bile smuggling operation he claimed to be running, on one condition: The two men had to meet in person. Wong agreed, but because he was already wanted in the United States on smuggling charges, he would only agree to meet in Mexico.

When Wong stepped off a Japan Airlines flight in Mexico City on 18 September 1998, he was met by Morrison, along with Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert S. Anderson and a team of Mexican federales, who arrested him. It was the culminating moment of Operation Chameleon, which had grown into one of the longest and most successful undercover operations ever undertaken by the USFWS, and one involving authorities in four countries. Wong fought his extradition from Mexico to the United States for two years, but eventually gave in.

In June 2001, Wong was sentenced in California to 71 months in prison, fined \$60,000, and banned from exporting to the United States for three years after his release — but the sentence did not stop him. While he was in prison, his wife ran his wildlife business, including sales to the United States. When he got out in 2003, Wong returned to Malaysia, grew a ponytail, and went back to work.

Wong's U.S. conviction had no discernible impact on his ability to operate in Malaysia. To the contrary, his new plan to build a tiger zoo received funding and land from the Penang government. Mislihah Mohamad Basir, the wildlife department official directly responsible for policing Wong, considered him to be a legitimate businessman, and believed the U.S. authorities had framed him.

In the years since the USFWS's revolutionary sting operation took down Wong, the global wildlife kingpin had grown more powerful, while the people who brought him to justice had fallen on hard times. Special Operations failed to make another major case after Wong's; today, its best agents have given up undercover work — and the unit, which never constituted more than a handful of agents, is all but defunct. Things didn't begin to change until January 2010, when *National Geographic* published a profile of Wong, detailing his government connection and his new plans to exploit tigers. The outcry by both the public and journalists in the Malaysian press was immediate. Malaysian newspapers and television are state-controlled,



Chinese Water Dragons (*Physignathus cocincinus*), such as this juvenile, escaped from the compound of Anson Wong Keng Liang on Penang Island and have become established in nearby waterways where they appear to be displacing some of the native riparian species in the agamid genus *Gonocephalus*.

which makes it difficult for journalists to criticize the government directly — but they are free to disclose foreign reporting about Malaysia. In the course of the past year, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment announced a revamp of its wildlife department, promising to rotate senior officers every three years. It stripped the department of key powers and is in the process of transferring Mislihah, who is now also under investigation by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission. While international wildlife NGOs were cautious about causing trouble in Malaysia, they have provided invaluable advice to the country's government, including the parliament, which passed the first overhaul of its wildlife law in nearly four decades.

As a result, when Wong was caught with a suitcase of Boa Constrictors, he didn't get away with it. The Malaysian government revoked his business licenses, shut down his zoo, and seized his entire collection of animals, including his Bengal Tigers. In November, a judge sentenced him to five years in prison, an unprecedented term for a wildlife trafficker in Malaysia.

The effort to catch Wong offers a few important lessons on what it takes to stop a kingpin. Two principles float to the surface. First, where long-term, high-volume international wildlife trafficking exists, one or more government officers are either complicit in the smuggling or so complacent as to be reasonably considered accomplices. As long as a few countries are willing to bend the rules and fudge some paperwork, it doesn't really matter what everyone else does: A single country, even a single wildlife enforcement official, can undermine the entire global "system" to control trafficking.

Second, the public in the kingpin's home country is the best weapon against him. No step to Malaysia's unprecedented legal and administrative reforms this year was more important than the outcry in Malaysia from concerned citizens. Dozens of articles — many of them on Malaysian newspapers' front pages — finally told the story of Operation Chameleon, Wong's Penang operations, and the history of poor management by the country's wildlife department, exposing years of bad policy and official venality.

Exposure is a critical ingredient for change. Law enforcement, NGOs, and others will find their work magnified and lasting once the public becomes aware of it. Full stories need to be told in the media. In the United States, where wildlife trafficking busts are often treated as humorous news items, that means journalists have to realize that criminal syndicates are often behind those people stopped at airports with exotic animals hidden under their clothes.

Of course, no fix is forever. Wildlife smugglers, like any other breed of trafficker, obey the laws of supply and demand. As long as a market for rare and endangered animals exists, someone will supply them. Rising incomes in China, India, and even in southeastern Asia mean more customers for endangered wildlife. In 2009, over 18,000 live animals and more than 267 tons of dead animals and derivative products were seized in law enforcement actions in southeastern Asia alone — and that appetite won't go away just because Wong temporarily did. Whether Malaysia's reforms will take root remains to be seen, as is what will happen upon Wong's release. Still, somewhere in Malaysia or another country someone is all but guaranteed

to be willing to look the other way, and aspiring kingpins are eager to take over his business.

Bryan Christy
Adapted from an article.
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Snake Owners See a Furry Bias in Invasive Species Proposal

Many snake lovers have been seething at the American government since early last year, when it sought to ban the importation and interstate transportation of nine species of foreign snakes. The federal Fish and Wildlife Service said the animals, if freed, posed a serious risk to native ecosystems across the southern United States.

When the Fish and Wildlife Service moved to ban trade in the snakes, which include boas and species of anacondas and pythons, it argued that they met the legal criteria for being both injurious and invasive. Invasive species — from Asian carp, which threaten the Great Lakes, to Zebra Mussels, which spread exponentially — are a serious environmental concern, one that is often not dealt with until a species has become firmly established. The Fish and Wildlife Service argues that, in the case of the snakes, they are trying to get ahead of the problem.

It is the first time the government has tried to list animals so widely held as pets. Roughly one million Americans are believed to own snakes of the types listed by the Interior Department, according to the U.S. Association of Reptile Keepers, and 31,000 were imported in 2008, the most recent year for which the government has data. Trade in these species is big business — more than \$100 million annually. Those with rare colors can fetch upward of \$75,000.

The move to ban the snakes has set off a swell of anger among aggrieved snake owners and breeders, who have the most to lose financially, as well as a smattering of academic herpetologists, zookeepers, and representatives

of international conservation groups. When the regulations came up for public review, they flooded the government with objections. At the heart of their arguments is a critique of the emerging science of invasive species risk assessment, and their response has highlighted the challenges that the government faces as it increasingly moves to protect native flora and fauna not just from current invasive species but also from future threats.

The reptile keepers group, which claims 12,000 professional breeders and sellers as members, has filed formal objections with the Interior Department and is threatening a lawsuit based on what it says is the government's poor scientific evidence. Andrew Wyatt, the president of the association, argues that the government is now promoting a native-species-only agenda favored by environmental groups. "This has implications for every animal interest out there, right down to family pets," he said, adding that by such standards, "all amphibians are injurious and cats and dogs can't be far behind."

The battle goes back to 2006, when the South Florida Water Management District petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to list the snakes under the Lacey Act, which would make it a crime to transport them into the United States or across state borders. Burmese Pythons — some thought to be dumped by pet owners and some that escaped — were establishing themselves across the Everglades, where they were swallowing up everything from endangered Key Largo Wood Rats to alligators. The population has been expanding northward at roughly three and a half to six miles a year — Indy 500 speeds in reptilian terms.

In recent years, Florida officials had taken significant steps to limit ownership of invasive snakes within the state but still wanted more to be done. What was to protect the Everglades from a snake bought in Georgia and carried across state lines? To ban the snakes under federal law, the government would have to show that they posed a threat to native plants, crops, or animals. With very little science available about how reptiles that come from distant places like subtropical Asia and Africa might fare in America, the U.S. Geological Survey was asked to assess the risk.

The agency looked at many factors, including the damage in the Everglades. It also turned to a computer model to determine what parts of the country might have a hospitable climate for the species. The scientists looked at variables including mean monthly temperatures and rainfall at a wide range of elevations in the native habitats of the animals and matched them to patterns in the United States.

They estimated that suitable climates for the Burmese Python in particular might include the 11 southernmost states from California to North Carolina. If global warming continued apace, the geological survey added, the snakes might even be at home in New York City by 2100. The national news media gave gleeful attention to the prospect of a snake invasion — but soon after, biologists at the City University of New York did their own modeling, using more factors and different ones like precipitation during the wettest periods of the year, and came up with only Florida and southern Texas as possible habitats for the snakes. Independent studies of snakes captured in the Everglades and taken north to Gainesville, Florida, and South Carolina found that most of the animals died when left outside in winter in those regions. These findings were further bolstered when an unusual cold snap in the Everglades last January left a large number of Burmese Pythons dead on canal banks and levees.

The studies have fired up the snake industry, which sees them as proof that the government is pursuing a hostile and unwarranted agenda. One breeder said that the government regulations, which do not prevent breeding and owning but do prevent transportation across state lines, would ruin his business and thousands like it. "The reptile industry would suffer a crushing blow over something that does not make sense," he said.

Dr. Elliott Jacobson, a professor of veterinary medicine at the University of Florida and a specialist in reptiles, also sees the government's science as skewed. He said he suspected that the government was less sympathetic to reptiles than to more cuddly creatures. "The impact of feral cats, for example, on wildlife is much greater than what the Burmese Pythons can do," he said, noting that a cat eats much more than a snake of the same size.

However, Thomas Strickland, assistant secretary for fish and wildlife and parks, said that the government was not going to back down and that it would approve the regulations by next summer. The science is solid, Mr. Strickland said, and the geological survey will soon publish a peer-reviewed answer to its critics. Like other invasive species, snakes are a real and growing problem, he said. "You are not dealing with hamsters here," he said. "I was down in the Everglades, and it took four people to hold a 19-foot Burmese Python. These things wreak havoc."

Leslie Kaufman
New York Times
8 January 2011



SUZANNE L. COLLINS, CNAAH

The U.S. Geological Survey estimated that suitable climates for the Burmese Python (*Python bivittatus*) might include the 11 southernmost U.S. states from California to North Carolina. If global warming continued apace, the geological survey added, the snakes might even be at home in New York City by 2100.