



First Seizure of Trafficked Earless Monitor Lizards (*Lanthanotus borneensis*) in Vietnam with Additional Notes on Illegal Trade

Chris R. Shepherd

Monitor Conservation Research Society, Big Lake Ranch, B.C., Canada (chris.shepherd@mcrsociety.org)

On 26 February 2023, two Earless Monitor Lizards (*Lanthanotus borneensis*) (Fig. 1) were seized in the Hung Dao Commune in Cao Bang City, Cao Bang Province, Vietnam. This is the first record of this species being seized in this southeastern Asian country. The seizure was made by the Cao Bang Environmental Police and Cao Bang Provincial Traffic Police and included the arrest of three people.

A variety of other species were seized in this case, including four Red-necked Wallabies (*Macropus rufogriseus*), three live and one dead; 16 Meerkats (*Suricata suricatta*), one dead; Greater Capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*); one European Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*); 10 Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*); five Yellow-crested Cockatoos (*Cacatua sulphurea*); one Galah (*Eolophus roseicapilla*); 11 Papuan King Parrots (*Alisterus chloropterus*); two Black Lory (*Chalcopsitta atra*); 75 Rose-ringed Parakeets (*Psittacula krameria*); two Javan Filesnakes (*Acrochordus javanicus*); and two Gila Monsters (*Heloderma suspectum*). All of the animals seized were transferred to a government-managed conservation center (rescue center). The Earless Monitors died, as many animals do when trafficked internationally, often due to stressful and inhumane conditions.

The animals were being transported in three vehicles, which police were following due to the previous involvement

of one of the arrested people in the illegal trade in civets. According to the traffickers involved in this case, the wildlife had been smuggled into Vietnam from Thailand and was destined to be trafficked further to China.

Endemic to the island of Borneo, the Earless Monitor Lizard has been recorded only from the Indonesian province of Kalimantan, from the Malaysian State of Sarawak (Das and Auliya 2021), and from Brunei (Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2022). Known only from a handful of locations, the Earless Monitor Lizard is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Das and Auliya 2021). Poachers and wildlife traffickers have reportedly removed this species from at least some of these sites (Das and Auliya 2021).

Although private ownership of Earless Monitor Lizards has rarely been reported since first described in 1878 (Das and Auliya 2021), trafficking and trade in this species has increased in recent years (Nijman and Stoner 2014; Nijman 2021; Baderan et al. 2023). Popularity has grown not only among reptile hobbyists, but also in parts of the global zoo community (Nijman 2021).

In 2015, Malaysia proposed to list the species in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); however, Indonesia opposed this proposal, and the species was listed instead in Appendix II with a zero quota for wild-caught animals (Janssen and Krishnasamy 2018). Since being listed in Appendix II of CITES, some international trade in captive-bred Earless Monitor Lizards has been documented (Table 1).

Vietnam has not reported importing or exporting this species to the CITES Trade Database, although trade data for 2022 and 2023 have not yet been published. Online surveys carried out from 2015 to 2017 to examine the trade in this reptile found 31 online offers for sale of Earless Monitor Lizards, comprising a minimum of 108 animals in 13 countries (Janssen and Krishnasamy 2018), but Vietnam was not among these. According to Nijman and Stoner (2014) and



Figure 1. Earless Monitor Lizards (*Lanthanotus borneensis*) seized from traffickers in Vietnam; unfortunately both died. Photograph by the Vietnam National Museum of Nature.

Table 1. International trade in Earless Monitor Lizards (*Lanthanotus borneensis*) reported in the CITES Trade Database. AT = Austria, CA = Canada; CH = Switzerland, CZ = Czech Republic, ID = Indonesia, IT = Italy, US = United States of America, T = trade, C = captive bred.

Year	Importer	Exporter	Origin	Importer reported quantity	Exporter reported quantity	Term	Purpose	Source
2018	CA	CZ	AT	—	12	live	T	C
2021	CH	AT	AT	—	4	live	T	C
2021	CH	AT	—	—	3	live	T	C
2021	US	ID	—	—	4	live	T	C
2021	US	IT	—	—	17	live	T	C

Nijman (2021), Earless Monitor Lizards existing outside range countries that were acquired prior to the species being listed in the CITES Appendices have all been obtained illegally, as the species is protected in both range countries. By extension, offspring of illegally obtained parental stock are considered illegally sourced as well (Nijman and Stoner 2014; Nijman 2021). Of the 40 individuals reported as legally traded in the CITES Trade Database, only four are reported as coming from a range state. As the Earless Monitor Lizard is protected in Indonesia, under the Second Amendment to the regulation of the Minister of Environment and Forest Number P.20/MENLHK/SETJEN/KUM.1/6/2018 regarding protected species of plants and animals (Ministry of Forestry and Environment 2018), trade in wild-caught animals is illegal. Licensed breeders may breed and export this species but according to national laws, exported animals declared as captive-bred must be second generation (F2). The Earless Monitor Lizard is protected by law in Brunei and in Sarawak, Malaysia, meaning none of the specimens in international trade could have been legally acquired from these two countries. No record in the CITES Trade Database lists either of these countries as participating in international trade in this species since it was listed in the CITES Appendices.

How traders in the other countries reporting export acquired their breeding stock is unclear, but the seizure of these specimens in Vietnam might provide clues.

Vietnam is well known as a hub of the wildlife trade, being a source, consumer, and transit country (Nguyen and Dinh 2020; Leupen et al. 2022). This is, however, the first time Earless Monitor Lizards have been seized in Vietnam. The variety of species included in the seizure with the Earless Monitors were largely from Indonesia, indicating a link between illegal wildlife dealers in both Indonesia and Thailand. Over the past year, seizures in India and Thailand have increased, as documented in the media and through discussions with conservation organization in these countries (Shepherd, pers. comm.). These seizures consisted of multiple assorted species originating from around the world but often being moved through Thailand. The cases often include mar-

supials and parrots from eastern Indonesia, mammals from South America, assorted reptiles, and other random species from throughout the world combined into single shipments. Vietnam apparently is part of this curious network as well.

Given its restricted range, rarity, and the threat of habitat loss, illegal trade in Earless Monitor Lizards is a very serious concern. More effort to understand the dynamics of the trade in this species and to support enforcement efforts to eliminate poaching and illegal trade are essential. Consumer countries should put in place stronger measures to prevent this species being imported illegally, investigate the reliability of reported sources, and confirm the legality of the trade with exporting countries. Consumers themselves need to be further educated with regard to the conservation needs of this species.

Specific to Vietnam, the authorities are encouraged to increase vigilance for this species, to prevent illegal import of the species for domestic demand, but also to ensure Vietnam is not used as a conduit for the trafficking of this species from range countries to other consumer nations. Finally, experts working on the illegal wildlife trade should establish a forum to share information on the poaching and trade in this species to better support its conservation needs.

Acknowledgements

I thank (Education for Nature – Vietnam) ENV for providing the details of the case examined in this note. As an organisation, ENV works tirelessly to investigate illegal wildlife trade in Vietnam and works with enforcement agencies and prosecutors to deter these crimes. Doug Hendrie alerted me to this seizure and provided helpful comments on an earlier draft of this note. I also thank Loretta Shepherd for comments on an earlier draft of this note.

Literature Cited

- Baderan, D.W.K., S. Rahim, and M. Iqbal. 2023. "Life finds a way": A reflection on the smuggling of a living fossil, the Borneo Earless Monitor *Lanthanotus borneensis* (Squamata: Lanthanotidae) in Indonesia. *Herpetology Notes* 16: 155–159.
- Das, I. and M. Auliya. 2021. *Lanthanotus borneensis*. *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 2021: e.T102342572A102342580. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2021-2.RLTS.T102342572A102342580.en>.

- Janssen, J. and K. Krishnasamy. 2018. Left hung out to dry: How inadequate international protection can fuel trade in endemic species — The case of the earless monitor. *Global Ecology and Conservation* 16: e00464. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2018.e00464>.
- Leupen, B.T.C., L. Gomez, M.D.T. Nguyen, L. Shepherd, and C.R. Shepherd. 2022. Online commercial exploitation may threaten Vietnam's native birds. *Asian Journal of Conservation Biology* 11: 176–188.
- Ministry of Forestry and Environment. 2018. Peraturan Menteri Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Republik Indonesia Nomor P.106/MENLHK/Setjen/Kum.1/12/2018 tentang Perubahan kedua atas Peraturan Menteri Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Nomor P.20/MENLHK/Setjen/Kum.1/6/2018 tentang Jenis Tumbuhan dan Satwa yang Dilindungi. Ministry of Forestry and Environment, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- Nijman, V. and S.S. Stoner. 2014. *Keeping an Ear to the Ground: Monitoring the Trade in Earless Monitor Lizards*. TRAFFIC Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.
- Nijman, V. 2021. Zoos consenting to the illegal wildlife trade – the earless monitor lizard as a case study. *Nature Conservation* 44: 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.3897/natureconservation.44.65124>.
- Nguyen, D.H. and T.M. Dinh. 2020. Impacts of wildlife trade and sustainable development in Vietnam. *E3S Web of Conferences* 157: 001. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202015703001>.
- Universiti Brunei Darussalam. 2022. A “Living Fossil” Discovered in Temburong, Brunei Darussalam. <<https://ubd.edu.bn/news-and-events/news/2022/10/24/a-living-fossil-discovered-in-temburong/>>.