

# CITES – Cooperating to protect endangered animals and plants

The decline or extinction of many plant and animal species throughout the world led to the signing of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in March 1973. It was the first concerted effort by much of the world to stop this illicit trade.

The convention came into force on 1 July 1975 and has over 140 contracting countries. It is the international legal framework for prohibiting trade in endangered species and the effective control of trade in some other species.

Australia is one of the signatories to CITES. Each country that signs must adopt national legislation providing severe penalties for offences. The legislation also determines the powers of the various government services responsible for applying the convention and, in particular, lays down the powers of customs organisations.

The CITES secretariat is in Geneva, Switzerland, and is financed by the contracting countries, each of which designates one or more management authorities.

These authorities are answerable to the relevant ministry for environment, agriculture or foreign trade in each country. They are responsible for issuing permits and for relations with the CITES Secretariat, the other contracting parties and scientific authorities responsible for opinions on applying the convention. CITES is administered by the United Nations Environment Programme.

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*The illicit trade in protected animals and plants, and their parts and products, is a serious world problem. Extensive international efforts are being made to curtail this harmful trade, which has a turnover of about \$10 billion a year.*

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Without involvement of customs officers, who check goods at borders, CITES cannot achieve its objectives. Since 1973, the CITES Secretariat and the World Customs Organization (WCO), based in Brussels, have been strengthening their cooperation.

In July 1996, the WCO and CITES secretariats signed a memorandum of understanding to further upgrade joint training, exchange of information and other activities. Efforts are being made to bring to the attention of customs officers all

*After destruction of habitats, illegal trade in plants and animals is the biggest cause of the disappearance of endangered species*

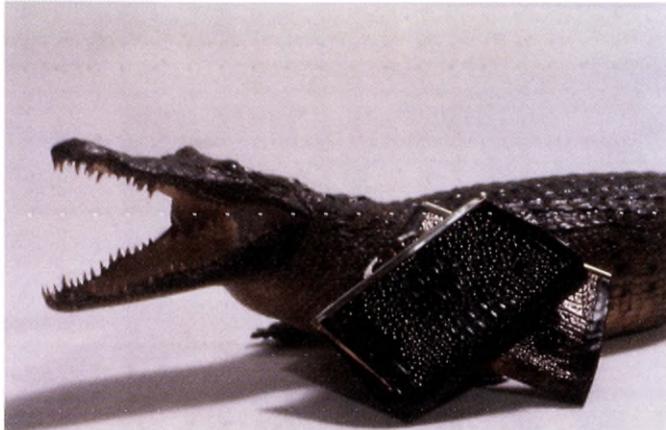
over the world their crucial role in combating the illicit trade in wildlife, and to make nature conservation and other law enforcement agencies more aware of the need to cooperate with customs officers.

The Australian Customs Service has a close relationship with nature conservation authorities and Commonwealth and State law enforcement agencies. This is essential, because Australia is a key target for those involved in the illicit trade.

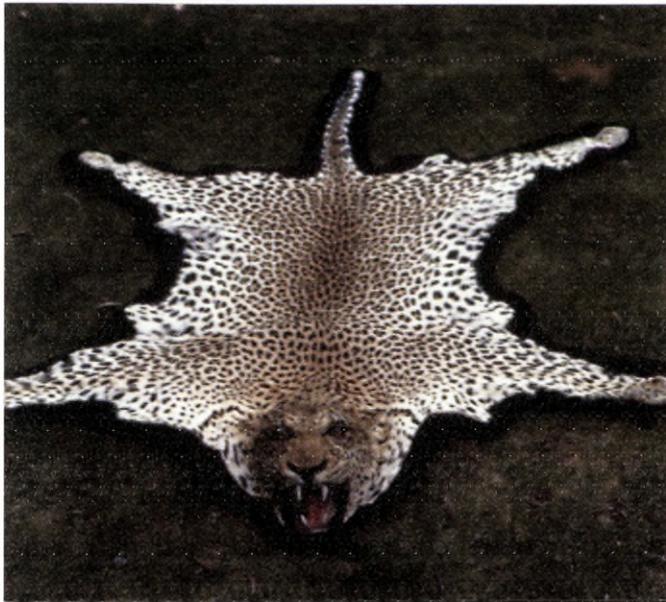
WCO estimates that the multi-billion dollar illicit trade in animals, plants and their parts and products each year involves:

- between 25,000 and 30,000 primates;
- more than 9 million orchids;
- between 2 and 5 million live birds;
- about 500,000 wild parrots and parakeets;
- about 10 million reptile skins;
- about 15 million furs; and
- more than 500 million tropical fish (see Exotic Fish Seized in Melbourne, page 26)

Some specimens can command high prices on world markets. Parrots, including some Australian species, can be worth \$20,000 to \$40,000. A trained falcon can bring between \$5000 and \$20,000. A kilogram of musk from musk deer is worth \$50,000. A shawl made of Tibetan antelope wool is worth up to \$35,000. The skin of a snow leopard may fetch \$60,000 and an orchid can be worth \$2000.



*At left: A sample of the range of items seized by Australian Customs under the CITES legislation – a stuffed crocodile and crocodile skin handbags, a leopard skin, processed whale meat.*



Even when the unit value is low, given the large quantities marketed, the financial stakes are colossal.

The illegal trade is the second commonest cause of the disappearance of endangered species, after destruction of their habitats. Tigers are still sought for their skins, to be used as hunting trophies or exotic mats. Their bones, like rhinoceros horn, are used in Asian medicines.

Protected species of plants and animals are traded throughout the world, often because of their rarity alone. The legal trade in zoological and botanical specimens, amounting to millions of dollars a year, is often a cover for illicit trade. Wherever goods are subject to prohibitions and restrictions there are people willing to try to evade Customs controls in order to make large profits.

The illicit trade in CITES specimens is much like the illicit trade in drugs, arms and precious objects. Smuggling methods, techniques and transit routes are often the same.

CITES statistics show that some countries are virtually exclusive exporters, or producers and others are essentially importers, or consumers. Exporting countries are in Central and South America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. Consumers are largely in North America, Western Europe, the Middle East and North and South-East Asia, Japan, Hong Kong China, Singapore and the Republic of Korea. Some countries, such as Australia, Canada and South Africa are consumers and producers.

The CITES Secretariat and the WCO believe that the illicit trade in protected flora and fauna is one of the most serious problems of our time. They regard customs as essential in the fight against this trade. Customs organisations are fulfilling one of their most important missions – combating transnational crime in the interests of humanity.

*This article has been compiled from a joint CITES and WCO publication designed "to draw customs officers' attention to their crucial role in combating the illicit trade in fauna and flora and to make nature conservation officers more aware of the need to cooperate with Customs".*

## Types of CITES fraud

The most common types of CITES fraud include:

### Evading implementation of CITES.

As with any other goods, specimens covered by CITES may involve false goods descriptions intended to hide their true natures, especially by giving them incorrect tariff codes. Even if the descriptions are correct, traders may claim that the specimens are not covered by CITES.

### Unauthorised crossing points.

Many countries have designated certain ports, airports and crossing points at land borders for importing specimens covered by CITES. Importers sometimes direct illicit trade through other points of entry in the hope that it will be easier to pass unnoticed. Others smuggle illicit goods by avoiding Customs control points.

### Physical concealment.

Small specimens, including live animals, insects, reptiles, eggs and plants can be concealed in travellers' baggage or in special pockets in clothing. Live animals have been found in suitcases adapted to contain cages. Many derivative products covered by CITES are transported in personal baggage, especially tourist souvenirs such as ivory carvings, turtle shells and crocodile skin handbags and shoes.

*Major Mitchell cockatoos, recovering after an illegal export attempt.*



### Postal smuggling.

Small animals, as well as derivative products such as ivory and medicines, are sent by post, the parcels declared as containing legal articles.

### Concealment in vehicles.

CITES specimens, including live animals and birds, have been discovered in doors, spare wheel compartments and under seats.

### Concealment in containers.

Undeclared boxes are sometimes loaded in containers transporting other goods. Crocodile skins, for example, have been found packed with cow skins.

### False compartments.

Boxes containing legal goods have been discovered fitted with concealed compartments containing live animals and birds.

### Document fraud.

Falsified CITES permits have been discovered. In some cases the number of specimens authorised on the document has been increased. Sometimes specimens of a different species have been added. Names and addresses of consignees, and even countries of destination have been changed.

*Ivory carvings seized by Australian Customs under the CITES legislation.*



PHOTOS: ENVIRONMENT AUSTRALIA