

Exotic fish seized in Melbourne



Customs officers seized a large consignment of tropical fish, believed to be potentially harmful to native fish, from two passengers arriving from Vietnam at Melbourne Airport in May 1999.

The 310 live fish, freshwater catfish and freshwater stingrays, were carried in eight water-filled plastic bags weighing a total of 97.7kg, of which the fish comprised 63kg. Four plastic bags were found in the suitcase of one passenger and four in the suitcase and carry bags of the second passenger. All luggage was padded to protect the plastic bags.

Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service officials confiscated the consignment and arranged for the fish to be destroyed after identification.

The seizure sparked a Commonwealth Government warning about the need to protect Australian agriculture and environment from exotic diseases to which Australian aquatic animals have no resistance.

In a joint statement on 13 May, the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Amanda Vanstone, and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Mr Mark Vaile, said: "There are fears that devastating diseases could have affected native fish stocks if these tropical fish had been sold in Australia.

They said the seizure was the fourth in as many weeks. Just two weeks previously, officers found a passen-

Left at top: A Quarantine officer holding a bag containing freshwater catfish.

Left: Quarantine and Customs officers with a bag of freshwater catfish.

ger attempting to smuggle nearly 240 live fish into Melbourne.

"AQIS and Customs personnel have been working together, and will continue to do so, to target people who try to smuggle banned fish into Australia. Australia's unique environment can easily be put at risk by backyard importers who attempt to smuggle fish, mammals, birds or soil into the country," the ministers said.

"We should also remember that tens of thousands of Australians are employed in the aquaculture industry, and that these jobs could be jeopardised by exotic diseases in the fish industry. Travellers must follow the rules or risk strong penalties."

Exotic fish risk

Most exotic fish species are 'proclaimed', which means they cannot be imported. Apart from carrying diseases or parasites that could attack native fish, many Asian and South American catfish species are banned because they are aggressive predators and breeders that could take over Australian waterways, out-competing native fish and eating their young.

Even small exotic fish such as *Gambusia*, imported decades ago in an attempt to control mosquitoes, have had devastating effects on small species of native fish, eating their eggs and young, as well as frog eggs and tadpoles.

Penalties for breaches of quarantine and wildlife protection laws can be as severe as \$50,000 in fines or 10 years imprisonment.