

Wildlife crime



Wildlife smugglers use body packs in their illegal attempts to import or export flora and fauna.

Global cooperation was advocated as the key to the elimination of the cruel exploitation and traffic in endangered species and Australian native wildlife at a Wildlife Crime 2000 Conference in Canberra last November.

Environment Australia is taking the initiative to support the fight against wildlife crime by holding an annual enforcement conference. The conference is a forum to share information and examine criminal trends and techniques.

Former Justice and Customs Minister, Senator Amanda Vanstone and Ms Anne-Marie Delahunt, Assistant Secretary of Wildlife Australia, welcomed national and international delegates to the conference, including representatives from Environment Australia, Australian Customs and Australia Post, Interpol, the Convention on

International Trade in Endangered Species Secretariat (CITES), European Union Enforcement and the New Zealand Wildlife Enforcement Group.

"Customs, police and environment officers share responsibility for implementing laws which help protect the endangered species of the world and Australia's native animals and plants," Senator Vanstone said.

"By sharing information and learning from each other, we can help support those environment and enforcement officers controlling this cruel and illegal trade at the front line."

Ms Delahunt said, "Environment Australia is the lead agency in dissemination of wildlife information to Australian law enforcement agencies. Advances in technology have resulted in significant improvements in the tools used to catch wildlife smugglers, including the use of DNA, advanced methods in document examination and improved access to State intelligence holdings."

Big business

The vibrant colours and unique character of our Australian flora and fauna is highly attractive to overseas collectors which encourages poachers and organised crime.

"On an international scale, some estimates suggest the money obtained from illegal wildlife trade is second only to drug trafficking and it's not only the demand for live animals and plants which drives the trade," Senator Vanstone

said. "Criminals prey on wild populations to produce luxury products such as sturgeon caviar and shatoosh shawls."

"In many ways, wildlife crime replicates the narcotics trade. Drugs and wildlife often originate in 'developing' economies, are collected at relatively little cost and smuggled via a chain of couriers and dealers to the developed world. All along the chain, the price increases with each individual player raking off their percentage."

"The prices for smuggled wildlife on the black market are so lucrative that there are many people willing to run the gauntlet at the border in the pursuit of cruelly derived profits."

"Nest robbing and removal of mature animals and plants not only depletes wild populations, but may damage their habitat so that they are unable to reproduce in that area again. Many wild animals don't adapt well to confinement and they die as a result of drugging, confinement, inadequate care, not adapting to climate change or lack of special dietary requirements," Ms Delahunt said.

Quarantine risks

"Wildlife smugglers threaten our agricultural industry and natural environment," Senator Vanstone said.

As a country surrounded by sea, Australia has a natural quarantine barrier. Viewed internationally as a clean agricultural producer, our rural industries and environment benefit from the absence of many significant weeds, feral species and diseases.

"By avoiding our wildlife and quarantine laws, smugglers bring these threats with them with potentially devastating

consequences to our health, rural industries and native animals and plants," Senator Vanstone said.

She spoke of several recent attempts by traffickers to smuggle exotic wildlife into Australia.

Eight live queen bees were allegedly concealed in oversized pen cases in a man's shirt at Sydney airport in October 2000. Bees can be hosts to parasites such as varroa mite, which have the potential to severely impact on Australia's multi-million dollar honey industry.

Ten baby green pythons recently found hidden in a man's clothing at Cairns airport were not only an endangered species but were also found to be carrying an exotic disease caused by an iridovirus—a deadly threat to our native snakes.

After being selected for examination by Customs at Melbourne Airport in May 1998, the suitcases of two passengers revealed 310 live tropical fish, freshwater catfish and stingrays in water filled plastic bags. These fish, had they escaped into Australia's waterways could severely threaten some Australian native fish species.

A cruel trade

"Live animal smuggling is a trade in destruction and misery," Senator Vanstone said.

"Some of the most shocking things I have seen are the dead or dying animals which suffer at the hands of smugglers. Beautiful birds are drugged and stuffed into plastic tubes, snakes are coiled into stockings and sent through the post, lizards are stitched into suitcases. "Some people are placing our environment and health at risk for financial gain or status achieved by owning a prized pet."

Traditional medicines such as American ginseng, followed closely by coral, giant clam shells, elephant ivory and reptile skins are the most commonly seized wildlife products. Recent examples of more unusual items include a rhinoceros foot hollowed out and fitted with an ice bucket, a monkey skull fitted into a necklace, stuffed turtles and cats, an elephant ivory tusk used as a bottle opener and snakes bottled in wine.

"Most seizures are the result of travellers purchasing illegal items in ignorance of our laws," she said. But like for other prohibited and controlled goods, we all have responsibility to inform ourselves before travelling."

Globalisation of crime

"Customs officers have witnessed clear demonstrations that criminals are becoming more sophisticated, have greater business organisation and are learning from their mistakes," Senator Vanstone said.

"The current trend is for wildlife smugglers to visit the nesting sites of the rarer species in the breeding season and rob the nest of eggs. Couriers act as incubators and transporters to deliver the valuable cargo to its ultimate destination. Couriers have been found to be carrying up to 50 eggs in purpose-designed undervests."

Senator Vanstone said continued cooperation on wildlife crime issues was essential and the support by Australian and international organisations was clear from the response to issues raised at the conference.