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Letter to the Editor

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**Bring those involved in wildlife trafficking to justice!**

The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) lauds the USD18 million (RM80 million) seizure on 10 July 2022 by the Royal Malaysian Customs Department for its biggest seizures of elephant tusks, rhino horns, pangolins and a variety of other threatened animal parts. It is said to be the largest haul in the nation's history. While the seizure is significant, this recent event is not the first as there were recurring cases of illegal wildlife trade making its way into Malaysia before.

As a result of which Malaysia has become a popular regional transit hub used by criminal networks for lucrative illegal trade, with Port Klang being a port of choice for containerised shipment. The lack of action from our government to stamp out this appalling trade in 'blood' ivory and rhino horns has earned Malaysia an international reputation as a serial importer of both these illegal items.

It is both worrisome and intriguing that seizures of wildlife shipments which were confiscated had never resulted in any arrests despite investigations conducted. In the past, labelling of ivory for delivery to addresses in Malaysia failed to produce any arrests as the addresses were believed to be fake.

The perpetrators of this illegal activity will continue to carry on their trade, knowing how easy it is to evade arrests in Malaysia as they are rarely caught and even more rarely punished. For years ivory shipment has been making its way through Malaysia and customs inspections unhindered.

The Founder and Director of Nature Alert (UK) Sean Whyte had expressed his concern in the past and recently in his email dated 6 August 2022: "For at least the last 10 years Malaysia has been known and talked about in both national and international media as a major hub for the illegal trade in ivory. We have seen many confiscations, practically no government transparency over the confiscated ivory and no arrests. Given that these shipments arrive in Malaysia addressed to someone, does it not seem suspicious that in all this time no Malaysian ivory trafficker has been arrested much less prosecuted? Something stinks and it's not from the blood on the ivory."

Whyte's email suggests that the illegal trade could not have happened without inside help.

The shocking truth came to light recently with the arrest of a Malaysian major wildlife trafficking suspect – Teo Boon Ching – by the Thai police in Thailand. This was revealed in the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) report of 30 June 2022, a day after his arrest. The EIA investigations revealed his involvement in the wildlife trafficking business for more than two decades, providing concealment and packing services to criminal networks involved in the smuggling of elephant ivory, rhino horns and pangolin scales into Asia via Malaysian ports.

CAP is shocked to the core by EIA's revelation that it believed Teo's strong connections to Johor port Customs officials. They enabled his customers to enter the Customs Clearance Warehouse to verify the goods once wildlife shipments arrived in Malaysia. The consignment will later be moved to Teo's own warehouse for repacking into air cargo packages for onward journey.

The EIA report further stated that anyone with a good relationship with this specialist transporter is bound to have successful clearance in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries, often used as transit hubs for illegally imported wildlife products from Africa to Asia. For two decades he has been involved in his business dealings undetected because of his strong connections to Customs officials and individuals involved in the illegal wildlife products in Malaysia, Vietnam, China, and Laos.

With the seizure on 10 July 2022, it would be interesting to know whether the seized animal parts are identified, marked, registered and secured in the presence of an international wildlife watchdog, the Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce (TRAFFIC) to ensure the items do not go missing or re-enter the illegal market.

Upon verification, the ivory stockpile should be destroyed publicly as has been practised in many countries – USA, Hong Kong, Singapore, Tanzania, Kenya and Congo. The destruction is a powerful act to demonstrate that a country will not tolerate wildlife crime. Destroying the stockpiles will send a clear signal that Malaysia is serious about seeing an end to the brutality of the massacre, and ensuring that seized ivory and horns will never again be sold. Only by being publicly accountable and transparent can the government convince the world of its commitment to combating the illegal wildlife trade.

To this end, CAP calls on Malaysian enforcement authorities to work together with all the relevant countries to strengthen cooperation on the suspect's case and to conduct an in-depth investigation of the offences committed which could lead to a successful prosecution and conviction of the accused and his associates implicated in wildlife trafficking. Those involved in ivory smuggling, key players/ring leaders extradited to face justice.

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