



# Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பினாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

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**Letter to the Editor**

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## **Authorities need to seriously root out wildlife trafficking**

The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) welcomes the news of the arrest of a Malaysian wildlife trafficker and his extradition to the United States. According to the news release by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) on 30 June 2022, he was arrested by the Thai police in Bangkok. If convicted, this would show the world that wildlife traffickers are criminals and that crime does not pay.

The EIA investigations revealed his more than two decades of involvement in this illicit business as he worked in seclusion with criminal networks by providing concealment and packing services to those involved in smuggling elephant ivory, rhino horns, and pangolin scales into Asia via Malaysian ports.

Investigations also revealed his strong connection with Johor Port customs officials who allowed his customers to enter the Customs Clearance Warehouse to verify shipments upon arrival in Malaysia. Later his customers were allowed to repackage their shipments for onward transportation.

It is hard to comprehend how the Johor Customs officials could allow his customers to verify wildlife shipments without questioning what the consignment actually contained.

We wonder why the relevant officials had not conducted a background check into his identity, his business set-up, and relevant and active affiliations to get a pulse of what his reputation was like in the market before conferring him with the title “Datuk Seri”.

Wildlife experts claimed that Malaysia is a major transit point for the illegal trafficking of endangered species to other Asian countries, specifically because of its role as a significant transit point in the global ivory trade. More than 15,400 ivory seizure cases compiled over the last 21 years by the Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce (TRAFFIC) showed an increasing number of illegal ivory shipments passing through Malaysian ports—particularly Pasir Gudang, Johor.

While no one knows exactly how large the illegal wildlife trade is, it seems to be extraordinarily lucrative. Savvy smugglers take advantage of legislative loopholes and avoid detection by hiding illegal wildlife in legal shipments, falsifying trade documents, and by bribing customs and wildlife officials.

Wildlife trafficking suspects are untouchable and few are ever caught. Abject failure by authorities at both the source and destination countries, along with indifference from government enforcement agencies has allowed transnational wildlife trafficking syndicates to emerge largely unscathed.

To cover their illegitimate activities, wildlife traffickers operate legitimate businesses with connections to import-export industries and also connections to the legal wildlife trade such as pet shops, zoos, breeding facilities, and wildlife farms. They use these legitimate businesses as fronts to justify the movement of goods and payments across borders.

Rising incomes in Asia are a reason for the trafficking epidemic to surge in recent years. The increase in demand for wildlife products is also aided by the advancement of technology, ease of internet access, and the use of social media. The lucrative monetary returns due to the high demand for live wildlife and their products, encourage many to get involved in this illicit trade and crime gangs are evolving fast.

CAP urges that wildlife crimes be investigated as potential money laundering crimes as this would allow law enforcement agents to apply stringent action against traffickers such as the seizure of assets, monitoring of suspicious financial transactions, and red-flagging accounts of wildlife criminals.

Financial institutions also have a role to play through greater recognition of wildlife crime as a financial crime so that appropriate financial investigations and law enforcement can be carried out and action be taken to prosecute traffickers for money laundering. As of current, harsh actions such as seizures, or money laundering charges can be difficult because of a lack of funding or no political will.

Nevertheless, consumers must be educated on why wildlife crime needs to be eradicated and the need to abstain from purchasing wildlife and wild products. When purchasing black market goods or products potentially acquired illegally, they too, become accomplices to environmental crime. Efforts to curb or eliminate such criminal activities should come from everybody, not only the enforcement agencies.

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