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Letter to the Editor

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Demand and corruption facilitates wildlife smuggling

The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) welcomes the recent arrests of wildlife poachers and the seizure of wildlife parts worth millions of ringgit. Nonetheless, the sheer quantity of wildlife contraband seized, including those seized en-route to or re-exported from Malaysia, is alarming.

Several raids around the country, complete with wildlife seizures, do not necessarily mean that law enforcement is any more on top of wildlife poaching which has increased incrementally. Instead, these raids and seizures evidence a tremendous increase in wildlife poaching.

Wildlife that is illegally taken from the wild can either be sold domestically or moved through countries. They are sold both overtly and covertly. Much of this trade goes on undetected and is therefore difficult to quantify but from seizures made, we know is that an enormous quantity of illegally taken wildlife is shipped and sold internationally.

We also know that these animals are most often sold to feed exotic dishes to Asia's elite, and (especially to China) to be used as religious offerings, herbal medicines, or as aphrodisiacs.

Despite record seizures of wildlife and wildlife related products, those caught and prosecuted were usually low-level carriers. This leaves the main culprits — the criminal masterminds leading the smuggling syndicates — untouched.

Despite amendments to the Wildlife Conservation Act that provide for harsher penalties, CAP is concerned that the illegal trade of rare wildlife species will continue unabated unless the law is effectively enforced. CAP's view is that illegal trade operated by illegal businesses run by sophisticated, international, and well-organized criminal networks need to be stopped.

In April 2023, 22 snakes and a chameleon were discovered in a woman's baggage at Chennai after she arrived from Kuala Lumpur by air. How did these reptiles escape detection by Malaysian Customs? Was this merely a horrific mistake, or does this oversight indicate (at Malaysian Customs) a purposeful disinterest in screening luggage and other items traveling out of Malaysia?

Targeted investigations are needed to answer these questions and assess the ability and willingness of Malaysian Customs to respond to the illegal trade in wildlife. Weak law enforcement is a primary factor in the ongoing problem of poaching and the illegal international trade in wildlife.

Studies have revealed links between wildlife crimes and official corruption which enable poaching and the illegal trade in wildlife to continue.

In 2017, the Secretariat of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) identified corruption among government officials as facilitating trafficking wildlife and wildlife body-parts across 120 countries.

To address these grave problems, wildlife crimes must be recognized as serious, transnational, organized crimes, and efforts to combat these crimes must be commensurate with the risks posed to wildlife.

Also, there must be collaboration across source, transit, and destination countries to ensure that these criminal acts are addressed and neutralized up the chain, from those at the source to those at the final destination, with a special focus on organizers and others who have the most to gain.

As part of this process, law enforcement and surveillance need access to techniques and technologies to provide information on commonly traded wildlife, methods used by traffickers to ship and conceal their catch, and how to detect hidden wildlife parts and products.

While CAP is very happy with recent announcements of arrests for wildlife poaching and for illegal trade in wildlife, CAP calls for much more on-the-ground action to match the surge in criminal activity and the resultant depletion of species.

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