

Rs 10 lakh worth star turtles bound for Singapore seized in pre-dawn swoop

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CHENNAI: In a pre-dawn operation by the Forest Department officials on Wednesday, two persons attempting to smuggle 950 star tortoises (*Geochelone elegans*) in their bags were taken into custody and the tortoises rescued.

The value of seizure in the international market is put at around Rs 10 lakh.

Talking to reporters here, Chief Wild Life Warden, K S S V P Reddy said the officials, acting on a tip-off from the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, apprehended Mohammed Ayiah and Mohammed Arithu trying to smuggle the tortoises to Singapore.

Reddy said the accused had apparently brought the tortoises by rail to Chennai from Andhra Pradesh and were planning to send them off through the Chennai airport.

When the forest officials rushed to the airport here at about 2 a.m., they found that the accused had managed to pass through the security check-in and even boarded a Singapore-bound flight. The tortoises were stacked in three of their bags.

Various sections of the Wild Life Act were slapped on the smugglers. Reddy told reporters that such tortoises are a delicacy in many hotels in South East Asian countries, mainly Singapore and Malaysia, and India is one of the main sources for these reptiles.

There is a spurt in the smuggling of star tortoises from Chennai, he said. In the past one month as many as 2,100 star turtles had been seized and four persons arrested in this regard.

The department is taking necessary action, including alerting the Andhra Pradesh forest department officials and intensifying checks at transit points that include railway stations and airports, to curb the menace, he added.