

EARTH MATTERS: Exotic tortoises face abuse

By Sarah Sabaratnam

The cruelty inflicted on Indian Star Tortoises (pik), which are easily smuggled into Malaysia, is a wake-up call to those who encourage the trade by buying them for pets. SARAH SABARATNAM reports. THE next time you walk into a pet shop selling exotic animals, be sceptical. The local pet industry is far from innocent, as a report released last week by Traffic Southeast Asia, a wildlife trade monitoring network, revealed.

The report, titled "Demand Driven: The Trade of the Indian Star Tortoise (*Geochelone Elegans* in Peninsular Malaysia), revealed how the pet industry here sourced exotic animals, in particular the Indian Star Tortoise, illegally.

Malaysians are keeping such crooks in business by buying exotic animals from them.

As a protected species, the Indian Star Tortoise is not supposed to leave its native countries of India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. However, there is a great demand for these creatures with attractive star-like formations on their back, especially in Malaysia.

Smuggling from India and Sri Lanka to Malaysia abounds, the report showed.

The reptiles are dehydrated, bound with tape and stuffed into stockings to limit movement and prevent detection.

Helpless, they can't even cry in protest as the Indian Star Tortoise lacks vocal expression. This makes it easy to smuggle them through international borders.

They are smuggled in through carry-on luggage, cargo luggage or hidden on the body of a person during the flight.

However, despite their ability to survive without food for days, many die during their transboundary journey.

For instance, when authorities in Kuala Lumpur seized an illegal consignment of Indian Star Tortoises in July 2003, 65 of the 580 tortoises were dead.

Yet hundreds of other Indian Star tortoises continue to make it into Malaysia undetected, revealed the report.

In their native countries, they are afforded legal protection through national laws. The three countries have even banned their export for commercial purposes.

The species is also listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Flora and Fauna which enables other countries to help Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan prevent the trade of this endangered species.

It allows authorities at borders to seize illegal shipments of the species. Malaysia is a target for such smuggling operations. Firstly, it is easy to bring them in undetected, and secondly, the Indian Star Tortoise is not afforded legal protection under our Wildlife Protection Act.

This means they can be traded openly and freely here. But this does not make it right to keep them.

The species is not bred anywhere in the world in the quantities needed to supply commercial demand, which means that they are very likely being sourced from the wild in their native countries.

They may not be threatened with extinction but risk being so if trade of them is not strictly regulated.

"Reptile and pet enthusiasts in general should always ask about the legal provenance of an animal before purchasing," says Chris R. Shepherd of Traffic, who co-authored the report.

"Buyers of illegally supplied species are contributing to the threats and even the demise of wild populations. In fact, irresponsible purchasing is the engine that drives both the illegal harvest and the trade in species such as the Indian Star Tortoise." Investigators from Traffic working undercover discovered from the traders themselves that it is possible to acquire a large batch of 20 to 30 animals. Traders usually requested only one to two days to acquire the tortoises.

They were happy to volunteer information as to how to take the tortoises out of the country illegally. They even admitted that they did not have permits to bring in the Indian Star Tortoise legally, and that they knew it was an internationally protected species.

Some traders even used the species' protected status as a selling point.

The Indian Star Tortoises, which are among the most expensive and widely available species sold as pets here, are probably not the only animals being smuggled in.

As long as the Wildlife Protection Act does not list other endangered species protected internationally, there is room for abuse.

Shepherd says: "There are also several other threatened species of freshwater turtles and

tortoises — including Radiated Tortoise from Madagascar and Leopard Tortoise from Africa — that continue to be imported into Malaysia illegally." Such is the profile of some of our local pet traders.

Don't buy from them. When the buying stops, the smuggling can stop too.