

## **Japan's love of exotic pets ruffles environmentalists (AFP)**

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TOKYO - Demand for rare reptiles as pets has made Japan one of the top markets for smuggled exotic animals and conservationists here are concerned that law enforcement authorities lack teeth to deal with the problem.

"The big demand for exotic animals in Japan, particularly reptiles, encourages smugglers to poach rare foreign species," said Akiko Ishihara of TRAFFIC East Asia-Japan, a joint wildlife trade monitoring programme of the World Wide Fund for Nature and the World Conservation Union.

Japanese customs however lacks the animal experts who could spot violations of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

"I understand their resources are limited, but the government should improve that," said Masayuki Sakamoto, head of the Japan Wildlife Conservation Society.

No official or reliable private estimate of the size of Japanese rare animal smuggling market is available, environmentalists said, but there is plenty of evidence it is a big problem.

In May, three Japanese men were arrested at the airport in Cape Town, South Africa trying to smuggle out 37 highly endangered armadillo girdled lizards in their hand luggage and pockets.

One of the men had already been arrested in March trying to smuggle out 57 of the lizards, but was released after paying a fine of 18,300 dollars.

A single armadillo girdled lizard reportedly sells for around 350,150 yen (3,200 dollars) in Japan and there are believed to be only about 2,000 to 3,000 of them left in the wild due to overhunting for the pet market.

A quick search on the Internet brings up a number of Japanese sites selling protected species, such as the Indian star tortoise.

Trade in the rare tortoises, named after patterning on their shells, is heavily regulated in their native countries of India and Pakistan and their export is banned, Sakamoto said.

An Indian star tortoise can fetch between 20,000 yen and 2.5 million in Japan, depending on the size, color and shape, Ishihara said.

"Official records show only 2,000 of them have been legally imported to Japan in the past decade. Most of the ones available on the market, we must say, must have been poached and smuggled into Japan," Ishihara said.

Not all retailers are scrupulous in ensuring the animals they buy are imported legally.

"The reality is that we don't ask questions," said a Tokyo pet shop manager, who declined to be named.

Lax enforcement of laws against smugglers also encourages the underground business, Sakamoto said.

“Japan puts a lot of emphasis on catching smugglers of guns and drugs. But the government is not focussing much on CITES,” he said.

### **No count**

Last year Japanese authorities made 113 seizures of live creatures.

“Unfortunately, we cannot tell how many protected animals pass through customs. But we believe many, many smugglers successfully bring rare animals into Japan,” Sakamoto said.

Ishihara said customs officers, already under pressure to process tens of thousands of airport users every day, have to rely mainly on their experience and instinct to check for animal smuggling.

In one of the 113 cases, a Japanese man tried to smuggle in 30 protected tortoises, collectively worth 20 million yen, by hiding them inside tights worn under his pants. The man said he bought them from a street vendor in Bangkok.

Customs authorities did not disclose details of the seizures, such as the number of animals or arrests, saying they only record the number of cases.

A customs official said they were doing their best, but the task was difficult as animal smugglers used increasingly sophisticated methods.

Sniffer dogs for narcotics and metal detectors for weapons are useless in blocking reptile smuggling, he added.

Turtles and tortoises are the most popular reptiles in Japan because they are traditionally regarded as a symbol of longevity and hard work, said Tsuyoshi Shirawa, president of Rep Japan, a pet shop specialising in exotic animals.

“Many Japanese people live in small houses and apartments, so they cannot keep dogs or other large animals,” Shirawa said.

“But turtles can be kept in fish tanks. They don’t smell bad or make a lot of noise. That’s why turtles, reptiles and fish suit the Japanese lifestyle.”

Some 29,000 live tortoises are imported legally into Japan every year, accounting for about 54 percent of the international market for the reptiles, according to TRAFFIC.

“We believe it is only the tip of the iceberg. Often tortoises are smuggled into Japan, including protected ones,” said Ishihara of TRAFFIC.

Part of the problem is that an animal becomes more sought after once it is classified as endangered or protected, said Shirawa of Rep Japan.

“Once certain animals are declared endangered, that is official approval that it is rare. Rare species are the ones that people want,” Shirawa said.

He said the government should relax international trade of professionally bred tortoises, as opposed to poached animals, to satisfy collectors and prevent the illegal trade.