

OAKLAND

Reptile import charges revived

- Henry K. Lee, Chronicle Staff Writer

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An Arizona reptile dealer is facing federal charges for the second time for allegedly importing nearly 130 rare reptiles such as tortoises and pythons, some of which died after they were hidden in Federal Express packages that passed through the company's Oakland facility.

Beau Lee Lewis, 26, of Buckeye, Ariz., ran a wildlife import-export business out of his home, called "Beau Lewis Rare Reptiles," and was part of an international smuggling ring busted in 1998 in a five-year sting called "Operation Chameleon," authorities said.

Most of the defendants were charged and convicted, including Lewis, a herpetologist who was sentenced to three years in prison by U.S. District Judge Martin Jenkins in San Francisco. But a federal appeals court reversed the conviction last November for failing to grant him a speedy trial.

Federal prosecutors in San Francisco refiled charges against Lewis last month, saying he had been paid in 1997 and 1998 to illegally import and resell 126 reptiles into the country, including Indian star tortoises, radiated tortoises found only on Madagascar, Fly River turtles, a false gaviial similar to a crocodile, Boelen's pythons, green tree pythons and Gray's monitors.

Lewis faces charges of conspiracy, smuggling, sale and purchase of illegal wildlife and money laundering.

His attorney, Dean Paik of San Francisco, said Tuesday, "We're back to where we started. In the first trial, his defense was he was entrapped. I imagine he's going to raise that again."

The animals were shipped by FedEx through Oakland in packages with false invoices and shipping documents, with the help of a then-employee of the shipping company, authorities said.

An August 1998 shipment containing 11 reptiles -- and intentionally mislabeled -- wasn't picked up and remained at the FedEx facility "until all but two of the animals inside it had died," according to the 10-count indictment handed up by a federal grand jury in San Francisco.

A false gaviial and several Indian star tortoises died in a package that was shipped in December 1997, the indictment said.

In all, the smuggling ring allegedly imported 300 animals, including Komodo dragons and Chinese alligators that inhabit the lower course of the Yangtze River.

A key figure in the ring, Ken Liang "Anson" Wong of Malaysia, was sentenced to 71 months in prison and a fine of \$60,000 after pleading guilty to 40 felony charges. Wong was arrested in 1998 in Mexico City as he prepared to meet with an international wild animal buyer who was really a federal Fish and Wildlife Service agent working undercover.

Former FedEx employee Robert Paluch was convicted of facilitating the importation of shipments from Wong. Another defendant, James Burroughs of San Francisco, was convicted for his role as a human courier of smuggled animals in airline baggage.

"This is an ongoing problem. It's all for profit without consideration to the suffering of the animals," said Leroy Moyer, president and founder of Voices for Pets, a Walnut Creek animal advocacy group. "It's just the bottom line. They buy them so cheaply, and they sell them for a lot of money."

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