

Demise of coral, salamander show impact of Web

March 21 2010, By MICHAEL CASEY , AP Environmental Writer



In this Nov. 26, 2009 photo, orange-colored ringed rice coral, or *montipora patula*, is seen in waters off Waimanalo, Hawaii. Ringed rice coral is among 82 coral species the federal government is considering listing as endangered or threatened. (AP Photo/Keoki Stender)

(AP) -- The Internet has emerged as one of the greatest threats to rare species, fueling the illegal wildlife trade and making it easier to buy everything from live baby lions to wine made from tiger bones, conservationists and law enforcement officers said Sunday.

The Web's impact was made clear at the meeting of the 175-nation Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES. Delegates voted overwhelmingly Sunday to ban the trade of the Kaiser's spotted newt, which the World Wildlife Fund says has been devastated by the Internet trade.

A proposal from the United States and Sweden to regulate the trade in red and pink coral - which is crafted into expensive jewelry and sold extensively on the Web - was defeated. Delegates voted the idea down mostly over concerns the increased regulations might impact poor fishing communities.

Trade on the Web poses "one of the biggest challenges facing CITES," said Paul Todd, a campaign manager for the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

"The Internet is becoming the dominant factor overall in the global trade in protected species," he said. "There will come a time when country to country trade of large shipments between big buyers and big sellers in different countries is a thing of the past."

The IFAW has done several surveys of illegal trade on the Web and a three-month survey in 2008 found more than 7,000 species worth \$3.8 million sold on auction sites, classified ads and chat rooms, mostly in the United States but also Europe, China, Russia and Australia. Most of what is traded is illegal African ivory but the group has also found exotic birds along with rare products such as tiger-bone wine and pelts from protected species like polar bears and leopards.

A separate 2009 survey by the group Campaign Against the Cruelty to Animals targeted the Internet trade in Ecuador, finding offers to sell live [capuchin monkeys](#), lion cubs and ocelots.

"As the Internet knows no borders, it causes several new problems regarding the enforcement of the protection of endangered species," the group said in its report.

John Sellar, CITES' chief law enforcement officer, argued the impact of the Web was overblown and that many species that appear illegal may in

fact may be legal. He also said many big traders were reluctant to use the Internet, since payments can be traced and they can be ensnared in undercover operations.

"There seems to be little evidence that there are commercial operations using the Internet," Sellar said. "Although the risks may be small depending on which country you are living in, you can be identified when using the Internet. So there are clearly risks there."

Still, a CITES committee endorsed an e-commerce proposal Sunday that calls on governments to draft measures to address the Internet trade and law enforcement agencies to dedicate a unit to focus on it.

The private sector has also moved to limit the illegal trade.

EBay, which was singled out in the IFAW survey as being a main source of much of the ivory sales, said in a statement that it instituted a complete ban on the ivory trade in 2008, which activists said has helped slow the trade in tusks on the Web.

The newt is a textbook example of what can happen to one species through trade on the Web. According to a study by the WWF, the black and brown salamander with white spots is coveted in the pet trade. They number only around 1,000 and live in Iran's Zagros Mountains. About 200 have been traded annually over the years, mostly through a Web site operated out of Ukraine. Their population has fallen 80 percent.

"The Internet itself isn't the threat, but it's another way to market the product," said Ernie Cooper, who spearhead the investigation into the newt for TRAFFIC Canada. "Most people are not willing to pay \$300 for a salamander. But through the power of the Internet, tapping into the global market, you can find buyers."

The red and pink coral, which consist of 32 species, are harvested in deep Mediterranean waters and turned into expensive jewelry either in Italy or cheaper place like Taiwan and China, according to the marine conservation group SeaWeb.

It is the most widely traded and valuable of all precious corals but has no international protection, resulting in a brisk international trade in the species, the group said.

Opposition to the coral proposal was led by Japan, which also successfully spearheaded efforts last week to defeat a proposed ban on the international export of Atlantic bluefin tuna, a key ingredient in sushi. They were joined by several coastal states including Indonesia, Malaysia and Iceland, all of whom argued the corals are crucial to the survival of local communities and are not overharvested.

Meanwhile, delegates approved a voluntary conservation plan for endangered tigers that calls for tougher legislation in countries home to the big cats to tackle widespread smuggling and boost money spent on law enforcement.

The British plan also calls for countries to better control tiger farms and to phase out traditional medicine markets which fuel demand for tiger parts. The proposal includes no funding for the 13 tiger range countries, only a request for donor assistance.

The [Tiger](#) population has plummeted because of human encroachment, the loss of nine-tenths of their habitat and poaching to supply the illegal trade. Their numbers have fallen from 100,000 at the beginning of the 20th century to around 3,600 today.

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