Thai customs seizes thousands of endangered animals

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This handout picture released by the wildlife conservation group Freeland Foundation shows seized monitor lizards in a cage during a press conference held at the Customs Department in Bangkok. Nearly 2,000 monitor lizards, hundreds of turtles and 20 snakes were among a huge haul of live endangered animals found hidden in a truck by Thai authorities, a wildlife group said.

Nearly 2,000 monitor lizards, hundreds of turtles and 20 snakes were among a huge haul of live endangered animals found hidden in a truck by Thai authorities, a wildlife group said Wednesday.

The vehicle is believed to have been on its way across Thailand to Laos when it was intercepted by customs officers at a checkpoint in Pranburi, central Thailand, on Tuesday evening, Freeland Foundation said.

The creatures, valued at $132,000 on the black market, were being

transported on a well known route, the wildlife group said, adding that it was the second seizure at the checkpoint this year.

"These seizures highlight the urgent need for regional cooperation to stop the criminal gangs behind the transport of wildlife along this route," a statement from the wildlife counter-trafficking organisation said.

In total, officers found 1,940 monitor lizards, 717 turtles, 44 civets -- a small mammal -- 15 cobras and five pythons. The statement said the driver of the van was arrested.

Thailand's fisheries department will release the turtles back into the wild and the other animals will be sent to a government park centre, Freeland said.

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