

Biggest Asian wildlife traffickers are untouchable

August 15 2012, by DENIS D. GRAY



In this photo taken June 2, 2011, a young Indian roofed turtle crawls on the fingers of a custom officer during a news conference on wildlife seized in Bangkok, Thailand. Officials at Thailand's gateway airport proudly tick off the illegally trafficked wildlife they have seized over the past two years. But Thai and foreign law enforcement officers tell another story: officials working-hand-in-hand with the traffickers ensure that other shipments through Suvarnabhumi International Airport are whisked off before they even reach customs inspection. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong)

(AP) — Squealing tiger cubs stuffed into carry-on bags. Luggage packed with hundreds of squirming tortoises, elephant tusks, even water dragons and American paddlefish. Officials at Thailand's gateway airport proudly tick off the illegally trafficked wildlife they have seized over the past two years.

But Thai and foreign law enforcement officers tell another story: Officials working-hand-in-hand with traffickers ensure that other shipments through Suvarnabhumi International Airport are whisked off before they even reach customs inspection.

It's a murky mix. A 10-fold increase in wildlife law enforcement actions, including seizures, has been reported in the past six years in Southeast Asia. Yet, the trade's Mr. Bigs, masterful in taking advantage of pervasive corruption, appear immune to arrest and continue to orchestrate the decimation of wildlife in Thailand, the region and beyond.

And Southeast Asia's honest cops don't have it easy.

"It is very difficult for me. I have to sit among people who are both good and some who are corrupt, says Chanvut Vajrabukka, a retired police general. "If I say, 'You have to go out and arrest that target,' some in the room may well warn them," says Chanvut, who now advises ASEAN-WEN, the regional wildlife enforcement network.

Several kingpins, says wildlife activist Steven Galster, have recently been confronted by authorities, "but in the end, good uniforms are running into, and often stopped by bad uniforms. It's like a bad Hollywood cop movie.

"Most high-level traffickers remain untouched and continue to replace arrested underlings with new ones," says Galster, who works for the

FREELAND Foundation, an anti-trafficking group.

Galster, who earlier worked undercover in Asia and elsewhere, heaps praise on the region's dedicated, honest officers because they persevere knowing they could be sidelined for their efforts.



In this photo taken June 2, 2011, a Thai custom officer shows an Indian gharial, a type of crocodile native of India, with its mouth tied at a news conference on wildlife seized in Bangkok, Thailand. Officials at Thailand's gateway airport proudly tick off the illegally trafficked wildlife they have seized over the past two years. But Thai and foreign law enforcement officers tell another story: officials working-hand-in-hand with the traffickers ensure that other shipments through Suvarnabhumi International Airport are whisked off before they even reach customs inspection. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong)

Recently, Lt. Col. Adtaphon Sudsai, a highly regarded, outspoken

officer, was instructed to lay off what had seemed an open-and-shut case he cracked four years ago when he penetrated a gang along the Mekong River smuggling pangolin.

This led him to Mrs. Daoreung Chaimas, alleged by conservation groups to be one of Southeast Asia's biggest tiger dealers. Despite being arrested twice, having her own assistants testify against her and DNA testing that showed two cubs were not offsprings from zoo-bred parents as she claimed, Daoreung remains free and the case may never go to the prosecutor's office.

"Her husband has been exercising his influence," says Adtaphon, referring to her police officer spouse. "It seems that no policeman wants to get involved with this case." The day the officer went to arrest her the second time, his transfer to another post was announced.

"Maybe it was a coincidence," the colonel says.

In another not uncommon case, a former Thai police officer who tried to crack down on traders at Bangkok's vast Chatuchak Market got a visit from a senior police general who told him to "chill it or get removed."



In this photo taken July 17, 2012, Thai custom officials stand next to a line of ivory that were confiscated and shown at a news conference in Bangkok, Thailand. Officials at Thailand's gateway airport proudly tick off the illegally trafficked wildlife they have seized over the past two years. But Thai and foreign law enforcement officers tell another story: officials working-hand-in-hand with the traffickers ensure that other shipments through Suvarnabhumi International Airport are whisked off before they even reach customs inspection. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong)

"I admit that in many cases, I cannot move against the big guys," Chanvut, the retired general, notes. "The syndicates like all organized crime are built like a pyramid. We can capture the small guys but at the top they have money, the best lawyers, protection. What are we going to do?"

Chanvut's problems are shared by others in Southeast Asia, the prime funnel for wildlife destined for the world's No. 1 consumer — China —

where many animal parts are consumed in the belief they have medicinal or aphrodisiacal properties.

Most recently, a torrent of rhino horn and elephant tusks has poured through it from Africa, which suffers the greatest slaughter of these two endangered animals in decades.

Vietnam was singled out last month by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) as the top destination country for the highly-prized rhino horn.

Tens of thousands of birds, mostly parrots and cockatoos plucked from the wild, are being imported from the Solomon Islands into Singapore, often touted as one of Asia's least corrupt nations, in violation of CITES, the international convention on wildlife trade.



In this photo taken July 17, 2012, a worker rides on a freight car at a cargo warehouse at Suvarhabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, Thailand. Officials at Thailand's gateway airport proudly tick off the illegally trafficked

wildlife they have seized over the past two years. But Thai and foreign law enforcement officers tell another story: officials working-hand-in-hand with the traffickers ensure that other shipments through the international airport are whisked off before they even reach customs inspection. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong)

According to TRAFFIC, the international body monitoring wildlife trade, the imported birds are listed as captive-bred, even though it's widely known that the Pacific Ocean islands have virtually no breeding facilities.

Communist Laos continues to harbor Vixay Keosavang, identified as one of the region's half dozen Mr. Bigs, who has been linked by the South African press to a rhino smuggling ring. The 54-year-old former soldier and provincial official is reported to have close ties to senior government officials in Laos and Vietnam.

Thai and foreign enforcement agents, who insist on anonymity since most work undercover, say they have accumulated unprecedented details of the gangs, which are increasingly linked to drug and human trafficking syndicates.

They say a key Thai smuggler, who runs a shipping company, has a gamut of law enforcement officers in his pocket, allowing him to traffic rhino horns, ivory and tiger parts to China. He frequently entertains his facilitators at a restaurant in his office building.



In this photo taken July 17, 2012, Cargo Custom office Director Chalida Phungravee, left, talks with her staff at a cargo warehouse at Suvarhabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, Thailand. Officials at Thailand's gateway airport proudly tick off the illegally trafficked wildlife they have seized over the past two years. But Thai and foreign law enforcement officers tell another story: officials working-hand-in-hand with the traffickers ensure that other shipments through the airport are whisked off before they even reach customs inspection. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong)

According to the agents, Chinese buyers, informed of incoming shipments, fly to Bangkok, staying at hotels pinpointed by the agents around the Chatuchak Market, where endangered species are openly sold. There they seal deals with known middlemen and freight operators.

The sources say that when they report such investigations seizures are either made for "public relations," sink into a "black hole" — or the information is leaked to the wrongdoers.

Such a tip-off from someone at Bangkok airport customs allowed a trafficker to stop shipment of a live giraffe with powdered rhino horn believed to be implanted in its vagina.

"The 100,000 passengers moving through this airport from around the world everyday are oblivious to the fact that they are standing in one of the world's hottest wildlife trafficking zones," says Galster.

Officials interviewed at the airport, one of Asia's busiest, acknowledge corruption exists, but downplay its extent and say measures are being taken to root it out.



In this photo taken July 17, 2012, workers push boxes of shipment through custom office at Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, Thailand. Officials at Thailand's gateway airport proudly tick off the illegally trafficked wildlife they have seized over the past two years. But Thai and foreign law enforcement officers tell another story: officials working-hand-in-hand with the traffickers ensure that other shipments through the international airport are

whisked off before they even reach customs inspection. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong)

Chanvut says corruption is not the sole culprit, pointing out the multiple agencies which often don't cooperate or share information. Each with a role at Bangkok's airport, are the police, national parks department, customs, immigration, the military and CITES, which regulates international trade in endangered species.

With poor communication between police and immigration, for example, a trader whose passport has been seized at the airport can obtain a forged one and slip across a land border a few days later.

Those arrested frequently abscond by paying bribes or are fined and the case closed without further investigation. "Controlled delivery" — effectively penetrating networks by allowing illicit cargo to pass through to its destination — is rare.

Thailand's decades-old wildlife law also awaits revision and the closing of loopholes, such as the lack of protection for African elephants, and far stiffer penalties.

"The bottom line is that if wildlife traffickers are not treated as serious criminals in Southeast Asia we are just going to lose more wildlife," says Chris Shepherd, TRAFFIC's Southeast Asia deputy director. "How often is anyone arrested? They just run off, they must be the fastest people on Earth."

Chalida Phungravee, who heads the cargo customs bureau at Suvarnabhumi, says just the sheer scale makes her job difficult. The airport each year handles 45 million passengers and 3 million tons of

cargo, only some 3 percent of which is X-rayed on arrival. The main customs warehouse is the size of 27 football fields.

But seizures are made, she said, including boxes of tusks — the remnants of some 50 felled elephants — aboard a recent Kenya Airlines flight declared as handicrafts and addressed to a nonexistent company.

"We have cut down a lot on corruption. It still exists but remains minimal," she said, citing recent computerization which has created a space — dubbed "the Green Line" — between customs officials, cargo and traffickers.

Galster says unlike the past, traffickers are no longer guaranteed safe passage, describing a daily battle at Suvarnabhumi with "undercover officers monitoring corrupt ones and smugglers trying to outwit them all."

Such increased enforcement efforts in the region have slowed decimation of endangered species, he says, "but there is still a crash going on. If corruption is not tackled soon, you can say goodbye to Asia's tigers, elephants and a whole host of other animals."

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