

Illegal South African abalone flowing into Hong Kong: report

February 8 2018



Abalone is prized in many Chinese cuisines causing rampant illegal poaching around the world

Illegally poached abalone from South Africa is pouring into Hong Kong where the gastronomic gastropods are a traditional and expensive banquet favourite, a new study warned Friday.

The report by wildlife [trade](#) monitoring network TRAFFIC, released just before Chinese New Year, estimated that 65 percent of South African

[abalone](#) imported to Hong Kong in 2015 was illicitly harvested and trafficked.

The high-end delicacy, a chewy sea snail with a distinctive salty taste, is popular at Lunar New Year feasts and wedding banquets along with other dishes that have long riled conservationists such as [shark fin soup](#).

Severe restrictions on wild abalone harvests have failed to rein in the trade with criminal networks poaching and smuggling wild abalone into Hong Kong, the report said.

"Right now, in preparation for the upcoming Chinese New Year, thousands of people are buying abalone in Hong Kong," report author Wilson Lau said in a statement.

The city alone imported 90 percent of all South African dried abalone, researchers said.

"Unfortunately, if it's dried abalone from South Africa, it may have been poached and trafficked, meaning consumers run the risk of unwittingly supporting organised crime," Lau added.

Hong Kong remains a key regional hub for both the legal and black market [wildlife trade](#).

A landmark ban on ivory sales passed last month was seen as a major—if belated—step forward to shut down illegal networks and protect endangered species.

The report found that illegal trade routes have emerged to smuggle poached abalone to nearby countries like Mozambique and Zimbabwe before re-exporting them, after regulations were introduced in 2007 and 2008 in South Africa to protect the plummeting marine population.

Markus Burgener of TRAFFIC East Southern Africa said there are currently no laws in Hong Kong to block the sales of illegally sourced abalone. But limiting the trade with a listing on CITES could help rectify the problem, he added.

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Citation: Illegal South African abalone flowing into Hong Kong: report (2018, February 8)
retrieved 30 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2018-02-illegal-south-african-abalone-hong.html>

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