

# Investigating the wildlife market on the dark web

July 6 2023, by Béatrice St-Cyr-Leroux

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An Australian research team investigating the trade in wild animals and plants on the dark web scanned about 2 million ads over five years and found nearly 3,500 were for wildlife. In all, over 150 species were for sale, and about 90% were intended for recreational drug use.

The analysis was made possible by the work of David Décary-Hétu, a professor in the School of Criminology at Université de Montréal and director of the Darknet and Anonymity Research Center. His research interests include the impact of technology, particularly the [dark web](#), on

criminal activity.

Over the past 10 years, Décary-Héту has developed software that can peer into the buried recesses of the web to scrape data that is normally accessible only through complicated configurations or processes.

With his help, the Australian researchers were able to determine that the species most frequently sold on the dark web are those with psychedelic properties, such as plants containing dimethyltryptamine (or DMT, a powerful psychotropic substance), psilocybin mushrooms (a hallucinogen) and toads that secrete bufotoxin (a toxin believed to have psychoactive effects).

## **A dangerous but marginal trade**

According to the study, the [illegal trade](#) in [wild species](#) is problematic for several reasons. It can jeopardize [human health](#) and biosecurity, since these species can be toxic or carry pathogens. It also threatens biodiversity, as some of these species are invasive and others are endangered.

However, the research team considers the buying and selling of plants and [wildlife](#) on the dark web to be of minor concern because it is relatively rare.

"Given the small number of ads, we believe the current risks to conservation and biosecurity on the dark web are low," said Décary-Héту. "Let's just say I wouldn't deploy a task force tomorrow morning to tackle this problem."

At the same time, the findings add significantly to the list of [species](#) known to be traded on the dark web and help map the channels through which the trade is conducted.

## Dark web not the main problem

While wildlife trafficking is not rampant on the dark web, it does flourish in other regions of the Internet, such as e-commerce sites and social media.

"Trade is all about profit, so people want to have as many customers and sales outlets as possible," Décary-Hétu observed.

"Only a tiny fraction of the population is comfortable with the dark web; it's a very small pool of potential customers compared with, say, Facebook, which has many subscribers and little or no risk. This sense of impunity is precisely the problem: sellers don't feel they need the anonymity of the dark web to peddle their illicit wares."

According to Décary-Hétu, business on the dark web could increase if stricter law enforcement or other measures make it more difficult for the vendors to use the more popular platforms. He therefore recommends monitoring both [social media](#) and the dark web in order to track changes in the wildlife [trade](#) in the hidden precincts of the Internet.

Provided by University of Montreal

Citation: Investigating the wildlife market on the dark web (2023, July 6) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-07-wildlife-dark-web.html>

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