

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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INTERNATIONAL ALLIGATOR SMUGGLING OPERATION ALLEGED

In what may be the largest case yet under the Endangered Species Act, three corporations and four individuals have been indicted for alleged international trafficking in the hides of 2,500 American alligators, worth \$700,000, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

The indictment, handed down by a grand jury in the Eastern District of New York, December 6, caps a major 3-year joint investigation by special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Customs Service.

Named in the indictment are Meg Import Corporation, a New Jersey firm specializing in the buying, selling, brokering, and exporting of skins of wild animals; Gunze New York, Inc., a New York import-export concern that is a subsidiary of the Japanese company, Gunze Sangyo Company, Ltd.; and Egawa International Company, Ltd., a New York import-export concern that is a subsidiary of the Japanese company, Union Sales Company.

The individuals named include Jacques Klapisch of Leona, New Jersey, principal employee of Meg Import; Kiyoshi Egawa, president of Egawa International; John Kelly of Queens, New York; and William Greenblatt of North Bellmore, New York.

The indictment charges that between June of 1974 and November 8, 1976, the defendants conspired to illegally purchase 2,500 American alligator skins in the Southeastern United States, transport them to New York, prepare them for shipment, and ship them to tanneries in Japan and France.

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It further charges that the hides were surreptitiously shipped out of the United States by the use of false and fictitious shipping documents that used the names of nonexistent firms and did not disclose the fact that alligator skins were in the shipments.

During the course of the alleged conspiracy the American alligator (Alligator mississippians) was listed as an endangered species throughout the United States except for three Louisiana parishes, where it was listed as a threatened species. The possession of unlawfully taken endangered species, and their export or sale in interstate or foreign commerce, are prohibited. Threatened species also may not be exported, but may, under strictly controlled circumstances, be taken.

Hides of American alligators are particularly valued for their quality, appearance, and the ease with which they may be worked. The Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated the commercial value of the hides alleged to have been exported as part of this scheme to be around \$700,000.

In addition to the conspiracy charge, Klapisch and Meg Import are charged with 12 counts of transporting the illegally taken hides in interstate and foreign commerce. Each count carries a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment and a \$10,000 fine. Klapisch and Meg Import are also charged with 12 counts of violating the Endangered Species Act, each count of which carries a maximum penalty of 1 year imprisonment and a \$20,000 fine in addition to forfeiture of the endangered species and vehicles or equipment used in the violation.

Kelly and Greenblatt are charged in the conspiracy count which carries a maximum penalty of 5 years imprisonment and a \$5,000 fine. Gunze New York Corporation is charged with seven counts of violating the Endangered Species Act. Egawa International Company, Ltd., is charged with five counts of violating that Act and Kiyoshi Egawa is charged with one count of violating that Act.