



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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RESULTS OF REPTILE "STING" ENCOURAGING, WILDLIFE OFFICIALS SAY;  
UNDERCOVER TECHNIQUES PART OF INCREASED EFFORT  
TO CURB ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Inconspicuously located in a suburban Atlanta industrial park, the "Atlanta Wildlife Exchange" was just a couple of rooms lined with caged reptiles and operated by two or three employees. With a sign on the door reading "Wholesale Only," it wasn't the sort of place that would attract families looking for pets.

But business at the Exchange was brisk. A typical day might bring calls from dealers who wanted to sell endangered San Francisco garter snakes or large quantities of other Western reptiles. In return, they would ask the Exchange to ship out some rare Eastern indigo snakes. Or the Exchange might purchase a shipment of North American wood turtles from some Eastern collectors and then let another interested buyer know the turtles were available. There was only one drawback, the Exchange would advise its customer: the turtles had been collected and shipped in violation of the laws of various States. Usually such problems didn't matter to the customer, and the Exchange would soon receive several hundred dollars in payment for the turtles.

The Exchange was being offered more business than it could handle until one day this summer, when it suddenly closed its doors. On July 16, Federal and State wildlife agents began serving search and arrest warrants. The snake dealers, the Eastern collectors, the turtle buyer, and many other Exchange customers--175 in all--found themselves under investigation for violating Federal and State laws against collection, shipment, and interstate commerce in protected species of reptiles. The Exchange had been a front, operated by undercover agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Twenty-seven people have been charged in the case thus far, and more than 1,000 live reptiles have been seized as evidence. "Agents who are analyzing evidence obtained during this case believe the investigation has broken up a major portion of the black market in protected American reptiles," says F. Eugene Hester, acting deputy director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "And more people are expected to be charged," he notes.

"The public response to this case has been overwhelming," Hester adds. "Many people were surprised by the volume of illicit traffic in native reptiles--as many as 100,000 animals a year. But I think people were equally surprised to learn that wildlife law enforcement agents conduct this type of covert operation."

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"In fact, wildlife agents have worked undercover for many years. But in the last decade or so violators of wildlife laws have gotten more sophisticated, so we've had to get more sophisticated to catch them."

While the undercover reptile investigation was highly successful, it exposed agents to a unique occupational hazard: collecting the evidence. Agents who were to serve search warrants in the case knew they were likely to encounter dangerous venomous snakes, and, while trained in police work and wildlife management, most were not expert snake handlers. They had to practice handling techniques, learn what to do if bitten by a variety of poisonous snakes, and were issued protective goggles in case they encountered species that spit venom.

All of this came in handy during the searches when agents did in fact find themselves face to face with scores of rattlesnakes; a cobra; saw-scaled vipers, known for their irritable disposition and ability to strike rapidly; huge Indian pythons; and many other snakes that were less intimidating but nonetheless capable of delivering a painful bite. Agents later said some of the most dangerous snakes were kept in homes, apartments, and office buildings, and that many were not securely caged. They managed to collect all the required "evidence" without mishap, however.

The illicit market for large numbers of reptiles is part of a more widespread problem of illegal commercialization of wildlife, according to law enforcement officials. There is a huge demand for wildlife items, demonstrated by the fact that more than \$530 million worth of live wildlife and wildlife products were imported and exported to and from the United States in 1980. While most of this trade was legal, it includes many illegal items. The \$530 million does not include the value of interstate trade in American species, nor does it take into account live wildlife and products that are smuggled into and out of the country. While the total value of illegal wildlife trade is difficult to determine, the Justice Department estimates the figure at between \$50 and \$100 million annually.

In response to this problem, the United States and 70 other nations have joined in an agreement designed to control the exploitation of wildlife in international commerce. Under this agreement, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), species from all over the world are listed according to degree of threat, and commercial trade in the most severely threatened species is prohibited. CITES nations require export, and in some cases, import documents for listed species to certify that the importation or exportation of the species is in accordance with CITES and will not be detrimental to the survival of the species.

While the international system of monitoring wildlife trade has only been in effect in this country since 1977, the United States has long restricted commercialization of wild animals through various Federal laws, including the Lacey Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Black Bass Act. Many species are also protected under State laws. In 1979, in an effort to curb illegal wildlife trade, the Justice Department established a new Wildlife Section to concentrate on prosecuting violators of wildlife laws.