



# NEWS

*from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

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## U.S. REPTILE DEALER FACES WILDLIFE SMUGGLING AND CONSPIRACY CHARGES

A 5-year investigation by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service special agents of illegal international trade in reptiles resulted in the August 6 arrest of Tommy Edward Crutchfield. Crutchfield, a U.S. reptile dealer, is charged with wildlife smuggling, conspiracy, and money laundering. He is the 18th person charged to date in this wide-reaching case involving wildlife trafficking that spans six continents.

Crutchfield was apprehended by Federal authorities in Miami as he returned to the United States after being expelled from Belize. The former Florida businessman has spent the last 5 months in jail in Belize fighting that country's February 28 expulsion order. He now faces U.S. charges based on his alleged involvement in a major international reptile smuggling ring.

Last October, a Federal grand jury in Orlando, Florida, returned a multi-count indictment against Crutchfield, his wife, two former employees, and two other individuals based on the Service's ongoing scrutiny of the highly lucrative black market reptile trade. The indictment alleges that the six were part of an international smuggling ring that is believed to have brought hundreds of rare and endangered snakes and tortoises out of Madagascar into Germany. From there, the animals, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, were smuggled into the United States and Canada where they were sold to wildlife dealers and private collectors. Protected reptiles from Australia, Indonesia, and various South American and Caribbean countries were also traded.

The smuggled reptiles, which were typically concealed in suitcases and transported aboard commercial airline flights, include highly prized Madagascar tree and ground boas, radiated tortoises, and spider tortoises—species that occur naturally only in Madagascar, an island off the southeastern coast of Africa. These animals, and the other reptiles allegedly smuggled, purchased, and sold, are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)—a global agreement that regulates world wildlife trade.

Crutchfield, who was named in all 10 counts of the indictment returned by the grand jury in October, is charged with multiple offenses of smuggling, violations of the Lacey Act (a Federal statute that allows the United States to prosecute individuals for violating international wildlife protection laws, including CITES), conspiracy, and money laundering.

If found guilty, Crutchfield could be sentenced to up to 5 years in prison and fined as much as \$250,000 on each smuggling and Lacey Act count. Conviction on the money laundering charges could result in prison terms of up to 20 years and penalties as high as \$500,000 per count.

Crutchfield, formerly the president of Tom Crutchfield's Reptile Enterprises, Inc., located in Lake Panasoffkee, Florida, was generally considered one of the largest reptile importer/exporters in the United States before he left the country in the spring of 1997. He was on supervised release following completion of a 5-month prison sentence for a 1995 conviction for smuggling endangered Fiji Island iguanas when he fled to Belize after being notified by the Justice Department that he was under investigation. He also faces potential penalties for violating the supervised release.

The reptile investigation has already produced significant results, according to Service law enforcement officials. In addition to the charges against Crutchfield and his associates, four individuals from Germany, South Africa, Canada, and Japan have been arrested and successfully prosecuted in the United States. Of these, German citizen Wolfgang Michael Kloe received the stiffest sentence--a \$10,000 fine and 46-month prison term--after pleading guilty to six counts including conspiracy, smuggling, money laundering, attempted escape, and Lacey Act violations. Three other Germans charged in the case remain at large.

The Service's investigation of the illegal reptile trade has also led to charges in the United States against three Florida residents and a European for dealing in reptiles. One of the Florida residents, Matthew Lerer, was sentenced June 25 to 6 months electronically monitored home detention, 100 hours of community service, and 3 years' probation. Friedrich Karl Artur Postma of The Netherlands, who was stopped at Orlando International Airport last August when he tried to smuggle in 13 radiated tortoises stuffed inside 5 socks, was sentenced to 1 year in jail and a \$3,000 fine.

In addition to these charges in the U.S., authorities in Germany and Canada have taken legal action against two Germans, a South African, and a Canadian for their involvement in illegal reptile trade.

"As the world's largest importer of wildlife, the United States has a special responsibility to prevent the illegal exploitation of all imperiled species," Clark said. "The record of indictments, arrests, and prosecutions for reptile smuggling from the past 2 years shows that the Service, the Department of Justice, and many of our international counterparts are committed to finding and stopping those who try to profit from protected wildlife. I would like to thank law enforcement authorities in Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, and now Belize for their assistance in and support of this investigation.

"This case should send a clear message to those who traffic in rare and endangered reptiles that profiteering at the expense of wildlife will not be tolerated by the United States or by the world community."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service's nearly 93 million acres include 514 national wildlife refuges, 78 ecological services field stations, 66 national fish hatcheries, 50 wildlife coordination areas, and 38 wetland management districts with waterfowl production areas.

The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes Federal excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies. This program is a cornerstone of the Nation's wildlife management efforts, funding fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, shooting ranges, and related projects across America.