

## RESEARCH IN BRIEF

# The Illegal Exotic Animal Trade

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### Introduction

The exotic animal trade is a growing industry in the United States and the world. This growth, however, has also led to an increase in the illegal exotic animal trade. This *Research in Brief* examines the illegal exotic animal trade, common trade routes, types of common animals involved in the trade, and the consequences of the trade.

### Definition

An exotic pet is any wild animal that is kept for human pleasure (National Humane Education Society (NHES), 2016). The exotic animal trade is the trading of exotic animals from one entity to another. The illegal exotic animal trade is when an animal is either caught or killed illegally from the wild then traded or when an animal that is banned in a certain area is brought and sold into that area (NHES, 2016). Wildlife trafficking includes any animals or plants that are illegally taken, possessed, transported, or sold (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), 2023). This includes fish, reptiles, large cats, plants, and timber. Trafficked animals can be used as pets, for medicine, jewelry, food, furs, and trophies.

### Overview

Illegal wildlife trafficking is estimated to be at least an \$8-\$10 billion industry every year (ICE, 2023). This makes it the fourth largest illegal trade behind narcotics, human trafficking, and counterfeit products (ICE, 2023). Many animals are killed or poached every year for their animal products and many more die in transit to different locations. An example is over 100,000

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Wildlife trafficking is at least a \$10 billion industry. Within the U.S., the number of cases continues to grow every year (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), 2023).
- Millions of animals are killed or die in transit every year due to wildlife trafficking (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2020).
- Wildlife trafficking leads to the extinction of animals, destruction of local ecosystems, and animal cruelty (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2019).
- There are very few laws on the federal and state levels against wildlife trafficking and the protection of animals (Department of Justice (DOJ), 2022).

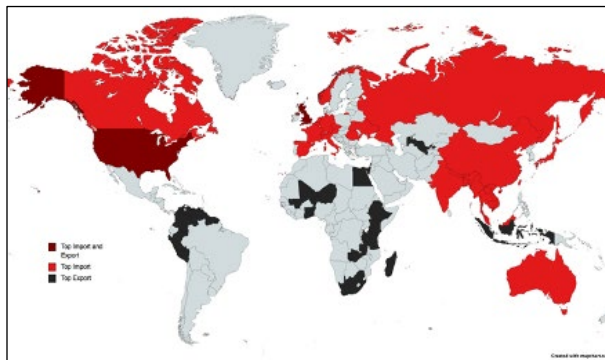
sharks and 20,000 African elephants are killed every year as part of the illegal exotic animal trade (ICE, 2023). The most trafficked wildlife are African elephant tusks, rhinoceros' horns, Pangolin scales, live reptiles, big cats, European glass eels, and Rosewood timber (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2020).

### Common Import and Export Countries

Wildlife trafficking is an international trade. Almost every country has some illegal animal trading, but the areas with the highest rates of trafficking are found within Asian countries,

African countries, and the United States (UNODC, 2020). The amount and type of trafficked wildlife varies across countries. For reptiles, Asia and the United States are the top destinations, while South America and Africa are the top sources for illegal animals (UNODC, 2020). Figure 1 displays a world map with the top import and export countries of reptiles.

**Figure 1. Top Import and Export Countries of Reptiles**



Source: UNODC

The largest *exporters* of big cats (e.g., tigers, lions) are Thailand, India, and South Africa. The largest *importers* of these animals are China, Thailand, and the United States (UNODC, 2020). For Pangolin scales, the largest *exporters* are African countries, and the largest *importers* are Asian countries (UNODC, 2020). Although this data shows that different countries vary widely in their prevalence of trafficking illegal exotic animals, Asia, Africa, and the United States are identified as the largest importers and exporters.

**Reptiles**

Reptiles are commonly traded as exotic pets. Some trading of reptiles is legal, but many reptiles are trafficked. Trafficked reptiles include reptiles that are wild-caught and then sold and reptiles that are sold in areas where they are banned. Some of the most trafficked reptiles are turtles and tortoises, snakes, lizards, and crocodylians (UNODC, 2020). As

shown in Table 1, turtles and tortoises represent the largest proportion of the 10 most trafficked reptiles. However, these 10 most commonly trafficked reptiles account for only about 33% of all reptiles seized and known to authorities (UNODC, 2020).

**Table 1: Top Ten Reptiles Seized**

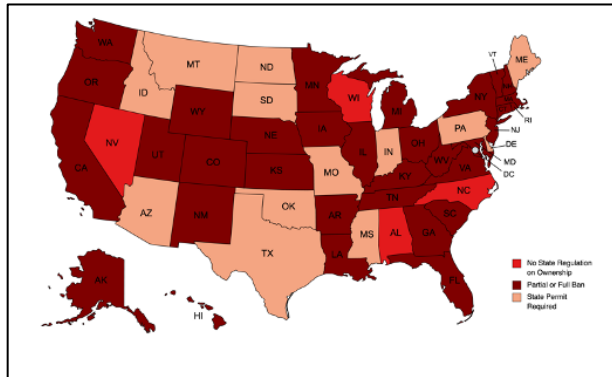
Animal	Percent Among Top 10 Trafficked Reptiles
Yellow-spotted river turtle	29.1%
Indian star tortoise	21.3%
Asian box turtle	11.2%
Russian tortoise	8.9%
Radiated tortoise	8.2%
Black spotted turtle	7.0%
Greek tortoise	6.1%
Pig-nosed turtle	3.0%
False map turtle	2.9%
Mali uromastyx	2.3%

Source: UNODC

**Big Cats**

Big cats are another commonly trafficked animal. Many people like to keep them as pets or trophies. Certain big cat products can also be used in food and medicines (UNODC, 2020). The most trafficked big cats are tigers, lions, jaguars, and cheetahs (UNODC, 2020). The legality of the importation of big cats in the United States varies across states. For example, there are no specific laws regarding the ownership of big cats in Alabama and Nevada. However, other states (e.g., Washington, Oregon) ban the private ownership of big cats (Big Cat Rescue, 2023). Figure 2 identifies the specific states with the most and least restrictive ownership laws for big cats. In the United States, the most common reason for keeping a big cat is as a pet.

**Figure 2. Big Cat State Ownership Laws**



Source: Big Cat Rescue

**State and Federal Laws**

The United States has federal and state laws that try to help control the exotic animal trade. One of the most influential federal laws for animal trading is the Lacey Act. The Lacey Act, “makes it a federal crime to break the wildlife laws of any state, tribe, or foreign country, and then move or trade the wildlife across U.S. borders” (Department of Justice (DOJ), 2022). Wildlife trafficking is treated similarly to drug trafficking. Investigators as part of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) try to stop trafficking through investigations and seizures done at common import and export areas of the United States. Every state has its own laws regarding ownership of exotic animals. Some states have almost no regulation, while others ban almost all exotic animals. Many states laws are very nuanced or outdated. For example, in South Carolina you can own a monkey, but not a lion (FindLaw, 2023). Other states require you to have a permit or license for certain animals. For example, in Vermont you need a license for an anaconda, but not a crocodile (FindLaw, 2023). In Nevada, animals such as elephants and monkeys are allowed to be kept as pets, but foxes and raccoons are not allowed (FindLaw, 2023).

**Consequences**

The exotic animal trade has many adverse consequences. This includes the death of animals, environmental impacts, and financial impacts. Wildlife trafficking can lead to the extinction of animals in the wild and the death of ecosystems (UNODC, 2019). Animals can be hunted to extinction and the loss of one animal in an environment can lead to the loss of other animals as food sources change (UNODC, 2019). Non-native animals can also be released into an environment and destroy the local ecosystem. An example is Burmese pythons being released into the Florida everglades and threatening the local ecosystem there by becoming an apex predator. Table 2 shows the dramatic decline in species due to the introduction of Burmese pythons. The -100% means that, currently, there are no known signs of rabbits or foxes in the Florida everglades.

**Table 2: Consequences of Burmese Pythons in Florida Ecosystem**

Animals	Decline in Population
<b>Bobcats</b>	-87.5%
<b>Opossums</b>	-98.9%
<b>Raccoons</b>	-99.3%
<b>Rabbits</b>	-100%
<b>Foxes</b>	-100%

Source: USGS

Wildlife trafficked animals also face animal cruelty. Many animals are killed in transit, while many others are underfed and not taken care of (UNODC, 2019). The exotic animal trade also can involve human injury and death because hunters are commonly armed and will fight each other and law enforcement in order to keep their animals

(UNODC, 2019). Wildlife traffickers can also make a large amount of money which can affect the local economy by taking resources away from local communities (ICE, 2023).

## Data Sources and Limitations

Data for this *Research in Brief* were taken from a variety of sources, but the major sources used were United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), National Humane Education Society (NHES), Big Cat Rescue, and the Department of Justice (DOJ). All these data sources have several limitations. First, wildlife trafficking is only tracked by animals that are seized, seriously undercounting the number of animals trafficked that are known to these authorities. Second, there is no comprehensive data on the true fiscal aspects of the industry and the number of animals seized for each year. Without this data, it is difficult to make statements about the growth or decline of wildlife trafficking over time. Third, since the exotic animal trade is international, not all countries report their data for illegal animal trafficking. As a consequence, it is difficult to get accurate data from many countries and compare it to data from other countries.

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