

An international treaty called the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) was established in 1973 for the purpose of preventing or regulating trade between countries in species that are considered to be endangered by extinction, or for which international trade would threaten the species with extinction. It regulates both animals and plants, and allows trade in only limited circumstances (for example, for scientific collection or study, or for captive-breeding purposes). At present, 181 countries are “Parties” to the treaty, which must then implement the treaty with their own national legislation. Thailand ratified the treaty and became a Party in 1983, and has established an office in the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP), Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment that enforces bans on import or export of CITES-listed species, but does not prevent possession or sale of such species within the country.

A commentary by Vincent Nijman and Chris Shepherd (from Oxford Brookes University and TRAFFIC-South East Asia office, respectively) in this issue draws attention to Thailand’s continuing role in facilitating the sale of wildlife (specifically turtles) in which international trade is forbidden under CITES. Close to half of the turtles observed by the authors were globally threatened species, with international trade being totally banned in many species. Although Thailand has ratified CITES, the country has remained a persistent offender in its chronic, half-hearted adherence to the terms of the Convention. If non-native, but CITES-listed, species are not intercepted at Thailand’s borders, no action can be taken once they are inside the country unless illegal importation can be proven.

It is not only CITES-listed exotic wildlife that is openly offered for sale, but protected native species too. Thailand’s 1992 revision of The Wild Animals Reservations and Protection Act (WARPA), originally precipitated by trade sanctions imposed upon Thailand by CITES (precisely because of its failure to adhere to the terms of the convention) and implemented during the 1992 Anand Panyarachun government, strengthened domestic wildlife protection legislation greatly. For the first time, the capture, sale or acquisition of protected Thai mammals and birds was prohibited. This revision of WARPA undoubtedly did much to put Thailand’s formerly large animal trading companies out of business.

But trade in protected wildlife for the domestic market conducted by small-scale sellers nevertheless continues to flourish, and indeed the trade in many species has even increased in spite of the 1992 revision of the law. Several hundred thousand Red-whiskered Bulbul fanciers nationwide hold a captive population of the species that probably numbers in the millions. This once-common bird has now practically vanished from the wild in Thailand, yet demand is still increasing. Ironically the 1992 legislation may have worsened the situation, since it allows for the registration of captive birds. This has created a loophole and imposed an impossibly large and useless administrative burden on wildlife officers.

The internet has also facilitated the trade in endangered species, where dealers and enthusiasts can interact largely unmonitored by wildlife enforcement agencies. For example, foreign falconry hobbyists can now obtain raptor chicks from nests in Thai forests while local dealers line their pockets from the illegal trade.

Nijman and Shepherd undertook their survey of traded turtles at Bangkok’s Chatuchak Market, a notorious “shop-window” for wildlife, where practically any weekend it is still possible to see both exotic and native protected Thai wildlife offered for sale. Native wildlife species, nominally protected in law, are less prominent but can be found or ordered by anybody who cares to enquire. While Chatuchak Park is only one of many illegal wildlife

outlets nationwide, the continued sale and displayed of protected native species at Chatuchak is especially offensive given its location in the vicinity of the DNP, and its international prominence. Although DNP has an entire section devoted to wildlife law enforcement, it appears to lack the manpower, the proper procedures and the will to suppress the trade.

Enforcement is a thankless and unpleasant task, but it is not being done vigorously and professionally. When illegal vendors are caught by wildlife officials, they receive light fines and no jail sentences. When asked what happens if they are caught a second time, an official replied “Oh, we’ve never caught anyone twice. The traders know our faces, now.” It has not occurred to them to use undercover agents or sting operations. Wildlife enforcement requires the same methods as illegal drug enforcement.

We should not overlook the State Railway of Thailand which administers the huge Suan Chatuchak weekend market, which must also take its share of the blame. It knows illegal activity is taking place, yet it does nothing to stop it.

Among the most pressing problems that CITES has faced is the continued huge trade in smuggled ivory, for which Thailand is a major *entrepôt*, especially because of its long-standing ivory-carving industry. Poaching pressure threatens remaining African elephants with extinction. The present government has recently received plaudits for developing a National Ivory Action Plan and for crushing and disposing of approximately two tons of illegal ivory that was confiscated by DNP. All ivory held privately or commercially in the country (reportedly a staggering 225 tons) has been registered, possibly making it less easy to launder any further illegal imports. Other species currently of concern are the large numbers of Indonesian parrots, smuggled into the country on fishing boats, and the hawks and owls sold at Chatuchak Market in what appears to be a new fad.

Violations of CITES regularly surface in Thailand and continue to embarrass the country and its conservation-minded people. The root of the problem can be solved by passing a law that prohibits people from possessing any CITES-restricted species (or their parts) without proper importation papers. The burden of proof of legal importation must be shifted to the holder of the animals or plants in question. Much more effective enforcement of laws is also needed, which calls for more professional training of wildlife officials in legal aspects of enforcement and policing techniques.

*The Editors*