

# The U.S. Role in the International Live Reptile Trade: Amazon Tree Boas to Zululand Dwarf Chameleons

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international trade in live reptiles has grown dramatically in the last decade. The import, export, and re-export of live reptiles predominantly supplies the pet trade, but also supplies the demand for reptiles for food, educational and research purposes, breeding facilities, zoos, and aquariums.

The causes of the substantial rise in the international trade in live reptiles are difficult to quantify but may include an increase in the availability and variety of species, improved reptile husbandry practices due to advanced technology and scientific knowledge, increased restrictions on other wildlife trade, changing lifestyles that make reptiles more suitable pets than other fauna, or simply an increased popularity that has made reptiles today's fashionable pets.

In 1970, prior to the passage of laws such as the U.S. Endangered Species Act, and adoption of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), U.S. importations of live reptiles approached 2 million animals. Based on analysis of trade data for a number of species, it is clear that the trade subsequently declined significantly and remained low throughout the 1980s. However, imports increased again and in 1995 more than 2.5 million live reptiles were imported to the United States. By far the most commonly imported species was the green iguana (*Iguana iguana*), which made up more than 45 percent of the total trade in 1995.

The United States is also a significant and growing supplier of live reptiles to the rest of the world. In 1996, the United States exported or re-exported over 9.5 million reptiles, primarily to Europe and Southeast Asia. Over 88 percent of this trade consisted of one species: the red-eared slider turtle (*Trachemys scripta*), at a volume of nearly 8.4 million animals. Second only to red-eared slider turtles, the United States also re-exported more than 270,000 iguanas that were previously imported. Both iguanas and red-eared slider turtles are produced on farms, though it is unclear how much wild stock is needed to sustain these farms and what impact such operations have on wild populations.

U.S. trade in live reptiles also appears to make up a substantial portion of the world trade in live reptiles. A comparison of trade data for certain CITES-listed species indicates that U.S. trade constituted approximately 28 percent of the total world trade in 1983, but constituted more than 82 percent of the world trade by 1992. However, these numbers may be artificially high given the failure of many countries to accurately report such trade.



Photo: TRAFFIC Southeast Asia

Red-eared Slider Turtles in Malaysia

Prices for many live reptile species found in trade in the United States have fluctuated significantly, though no clear trends have been identified. Price data indicate that prices are influenced by a number of factors, including restrictions on trade, captive breeding, increased legal protection of species, fluctuations in demand, and species abundance or rarity.

There appears to have been an increase in illegal as well as legal trade. Based on a review of press releases, wildlife trade journals, and other sources, from 1970 to 1990 there were only 11 reported investigations of international live reptile smuggling, while from 1991 to 1997 there were at least 23 such cases reported.

Based on these findings, TRAFFIC North America recommends that the appropriate parties take these actions:

- Increase emphasis on the monitoring and protection of native species found in trade, with special attention to North American turtle species;
- Investigate commercial captive breeding, farming, and ranching operations around the world to determine their productivity and assess their impact on wild populations;
- Analyze the threat posed by exotic species introductions and identify any legislative gaps in the United States' ability to deal with these potential threats to native fauna;
- Review legislation, assessing effectiveness of implementation and enforcement, for identified "hot spots" where reptile species continue to be threatened by trade, and recommend improvements or pursue trade bans.