FACTSHEET ON SNAKE SEIZURES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA FROM 2012-2021
Nearly a million endangered and threatened snakes, on average are estimated to be sold on the international market every year. That however, this is likely far lower than the true scale of the trade that is both legal and illegal. Snakes have always intrigued humans – love them or hate or fear them. For many, it's the first, which drives the collection, harvest and trade of snakes worldwide. This is especially so for the exotic pet trade where deaths caused by snake bites to pet owners and the issue of keeping such pets is a growing issue.

The World Health Organisation notes that up to 2 million people are bitten by venomous snakes in Asia each year¹.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

**OVER 3,700 SNAKE SPECIES HAVE BEEN DESCRIBED IN THE WORLD SO FAR.**

International commercial trade is regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Currently, 164 snake species are regulated under CITES. Analysis of CITES trade data from 1975 to 2018 showed that trade involved:

- 6.2 million CITES-listed live snakes
- 34.5 million snake skins (either whole or processed into products such as handbags and belts)
- over 48,000 snake bodies, and hundreds of skulls, heads and other body parts.

Pythons dominated the global snake trade, accounting for almost 40% of all traded snakes. Live snakes were largely imported by China and the USA. Trade in venomous snakes was also popular, with over 75% of wild-sourced venomous snakes being sourced from Indonesia. The study highlighted that while captive-bred specimens were increasingly reported in trade, the majority of the snake trade assessed over the period were wild-sourced (over 65% from 2015-2017).

The level of protection and regulation for snakes around the world is disparate. Some countries offer strong regulation and protection from unsustainable collection and trade, while others have minimum standards, or even lesser. When regulation and control is not harmonious across the world, and the business and economic gains are high, it opens the door for loopholes and malpractice, giving rise to illegal trade and laundering of specimens in trade.


¹ The World Health Organisation notes that up to 2 million people are bitten by venomous snakes in Asia each year.
The illegal trade in snakes is rife in Southeast Asia. Analysis of snake confiscations in the region shows that at least 292 seizures occurred between 2012 and 2021 (Figure 1). Over half of these occurred in Indonesia and Viet Nam (Figure 2). Governments do not always report successful action, and the covert nature of any illicit activity and the many variables that influence crime and detection effort means that the true extent is likely to be far greater than those reflected by these seizure records alone.

**SEIZURES OF SNAKES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

- **Viet Nam**: 111 seizures
- **Indonesia**: 74 seizures
- **Philippines**: 34 seizures
- **Thailand**: 26 seizures
- **Malaysia**: 24 seizures
- **Cambodia**: 9 seizures
- **Myanmar**: 8 seizures
- **Singapore**: 2 seizures
- **Lao PDR**: 2 seizures

**Graphs**

- **Figure 1**: Number of snake seizure incidents in Southeast Asia from 2012-2021
- **Figure 2**: Distribution of snake seizures across Southeast Asia from 2012-2021

**Seizures in SEA**

15% of all confiscated snakes

195 incidents involved

CITES Appendix II listed species
Routes for snake trafficking involving Southeast Asia from 2012-2021

Reported trade destinations

Reported trade source/origin

*Unconnected locations did not have a corresponding source or destination reported
COMMODITIES SEIZED

Over 84% of all incidents included whole snakes (live and dead). Skins were by far the most voluminous individual item confiscated, comprising both skin pieces and whole skins (Figure 3).

Snakes were also often reported by weight confiscated, with individual snakes accounting for over 5,445kg (84%) seized during this period.

Figure 3
Top commodity forms seized in Southeast Asia

NUMBER OF ITEMS

Form
- Skin (piece)
- Individual - Unknown
- Individual - Live
- Skin (whole)
- Body parts (Other)
- Gall Bladder
- Individual - Dead
- Meat

69,759
4,534
1,648
1,091
321
300
275
27
1,721
10,831
7,459

WEIGHT (KG)

TAXA SEIZED

Pythons (Pythonidae) were the top skins seized, accounting for over 74,200 skins and skin pieces.

Over 14,000 cobras (Elapidae) and vipers (Viperidae), which are venomous, featured among the seized taxa.
Issues surrounding the global snake trade are complex. Given the high level of trade, both legal and illegal, improved management and control are needed.

Countries trading in CITES-listed snakes should establish non-detrimental findings (NDF) for wild-caught snakes. Guidance on this is available, including by TRAFFIC.

Governments are also encouraged to set trade and harvest quotas based on scientifically robust and accurate data. Periodic inspections of captive-breeding facilities are needed to verify sourcing, trade and legality. Governments should consider CITES listings when appropriate to guide responsible trade and regulation for snake species that are impacted by international commercial trade. Further reading on recommendations from CITES: https://cites.org/sites/default/files/document/E-Res-17-12_0.pdf.

More comprehensive research into this voluminous trade is needed, to help government and practitioners manage legal trade responsibly, and reduce illegal and unsustainable trade.

Governments and private sector bodies involved in this trade are encouraged to be vigilant. Take firm action on illegal and unsustainable trade.

Consumers must make responsible choices.

SUGGESTED CITATION

SOURCE
1  https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/snakebite-envenoming

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WORKING TO ENSURE THE TRADE IN WILD PLANTS AND ANIMALS IS NOT A THREAT TO THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE