

TRAFFIC

WILDLIFE UNBOXED

POSTAL SMUGGLING IN ASIA AND ASIA PACIFIC – A CASE STUDY COMPILATION



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CASE STUDY COMPILATION

ABOUT US

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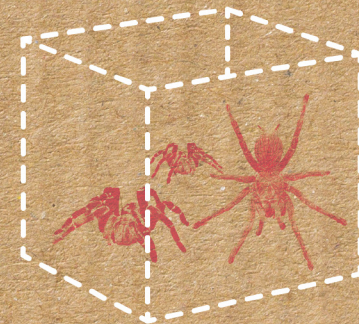
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TRAFFIC



SUMBANGAN DARIPADA
KERAJAAN AMERIKA SYARIKAT



INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a source, consumer, and transit country for various live wildlife, parts, and products. Smuggling occurs through various means, including the use of postal services, with traffickers exploiting Malaysia's international and domestic postal services to transport illegal goods.

In 2019, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia initiated a novel project, "Out of the Box – Removing the Risk of Wildlife Smuggling from Malaysia's International Mail Service", working primarily with Pos Malaysia to stem this problem. We equipped the staff working at the international postal hubs with training and awareness materials and tools. Four years into the project, we are witnessing at least ten-fold increase in postal staff-reported wildlife confiscation in year 2023 (year to July) compared to year 2019. We are engaging with more companies and producing more easy-to-use tools for companies, including this case study compilation.

This compilation is a reference guide for a quick look into wildlife smuggling through the post. It highlights seizure cases, hotspots and routes, types of trafficked species, concealment methods and detection methods discovered by postal services and enforcement agencies. This information is relevant to law enforcement officers and staff working at the postal hubs to identify and stop the illegal conveyance of wildlife amongst the millions of items that pass through postal services.



**Training,
tools, and
awareness**
empower postal
staff to help stop
wildlife trafficking.

Definitions

Seizure:

The interception or confiscation of wildlife, parts or their products.

Origin:

The identifiable starting point of a trafficking incident.

Incidents:

The occurrence of a wildlife trafficking confiscation or seizure.

Destination:

The intended endpoint of a trafficking incident.

Implicate:

The involvement of a location in a wildlife trafficking incident anywhere along the chain, either as the origin, transit or destination. One seizure can implicate multiple locations.

Misdeclare:

Intentionally providing false or inaccurate information about the contents or nature of a shipment or package containing wildlife, parts, and products to evade detection and law enforcement efforts.

Transit:

The transit location(s) for a trafficking incident during its journey from the place of origin to the intended destination.

Red flags:

Indicators and warning signals, which may be explicit or implicit, suggesting that something is not quite right and may require further investigation.

Detection method:

Technique or approach used to identify and uncover instances of suspicious or illegal shipments or packages containing wildlife.

APPROACH

The dataset for this compilation was obtained from TRAFFIC's WiTIS (Wildlife Trade Information System) database. These sources mainly consist of publicly available news articles, published reports, and records of government agencies and non-government organisations or partners.

The compilation covers the period between January 2010 – December 2022 within Asia Pacific countries and territories (Table 1), with highlights on cases implicating Malaysia, given the primary target audience of postal and enforcement agencies here. Postal-related incidents considered in this analysis are any seizures of wildlife, parts, and products at a point of origin, transit or destination that were sent by postal or courier services.

The covert nature of the illicit activity and the variables that influence crime, detection and reporting effort means that the seizure records vary in completeness, which may cause bias in the analysis.

An increase in seizures in one country may not necessarily imply higher wildlife trafficking levels in comparison to other countries. It however reflects the scale of the recorded illegality taking place within that specific country at a particular point in time.

Table 1. List of the Asia and Asia Pacific countries included in the compilation.

Afghanistan	Jordan	Qatar
Armenia	Kazakhstan	Republic of Korea
Australia	Kiribati	Samoa
Azerbaijan	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia
Bahrain	Kyrgyzstan	Singapore
Bangladesh	Lao People's Democratic Republic	Solomon Islands
Bhutan	Lebanon	Sri Lanka
Brunei Darussalam	Malaysia	State of Palestine
Cambodia	Maldives	Syrian Arab Republic
China	Marshall Islands	Taiwan Province of China
Cyprus	Micronesia	Tajikistan
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	Mongolia	Thailand
Fiji	Myanmar	Timor-Leste
Georgia	Nauru	Tonga
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China	Nepal	Turkey
India	New Caledonia	Turkmenistan
Indonesia	New Zealand	Tuvalu
Iraq	Oman	United Arab Emirates
Islamic Republic of Iran	Pakistan	Uzbekistan
Israel	Palau	Vanuatu
Japan	Papua New Guinea	Viet Nam
	Philippines	Yemen

RED FLAG INDICATORS

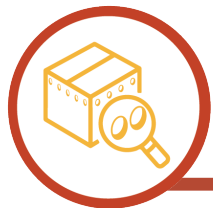
Past seizures tell us how to pick out suspicious postal parcels. Here are a few red flags or signs that should cause you to pause and check parcels for wildlife:



Unusual organic material under **x-ray scan**.



Unusual smell.



Air holes present.
(to allow live animals to breathe)



Sound, and movement from the package.



Wetness or **moisture**.



A **mismatch** between the declared weight and its description.

Red flags related to wildlife trafficking can differ depending on the type of commodity and its movement across different regions. These patterns change over time as traffickers adjust their methods to evade detection.

Therefore, it is crucial to periodically review and update these red flags. Additionally, the resources and web links mentioned in this report may become outdated, so users should always verify if more current information is available.

OVERALL SEIZURE TREND IN ASIA & ASIA PACIFIC REGION

Table 2: Number of seizures involving Asia and Asia Pacific countries and territories between 2010-2022.

Asia and Asia Pacific Country/ Territory	Number of in-country seizures	Number of implicated seizures globally
China	526	644
Hong Kong (SAR)	90	162
Indonesia	55	81
Philippines	32	40
India	29	40
Australia	20	27
Malaysia	11	43
Viet Nam	9	38
Taiwan Province of China	9	17
Singapore	5	11
Thailand	4	55
Pakistan	2	8
Japan	2	86
Sri Lanka	2	2
New Zealand	2	4
Israel	0	16

Asia and Asia Pacific Country/ Territory	Number of in-country seizures	Number of implicated seizures globally
United Arab Emirates	0	8
Cambodia	0	4
Lao People's Democratic Republic	0	3
Turkey	0	4
Saudi Arabia	0	2
Armenia	0	1
Bahrain	0	1
Kazakhstan	0	1
Lebanon	0	1
Mongolia	0	1
Myanmar	0	1
Nepal	0	1
Qatar	0	1
New Caledonia	0	1
Papua New Guinea	0	1

1,042 global seizures

Implicated Asia and Asia Pacific countries



Data from TRAFFIC's seizure database showed there were 1,042 global seizures of wildlife in parcels that implicated Asia and Asia Pacific countries. Around 76.6% (n=798) were seized in the region itself, with the rest seized elsewhere but implicating Asia and Asia Pacific. The number of implicated seizures is usually higher than the in-country seizures (refer to the definition of implicate in the Introduction section).

Wildlife seizures using postal services

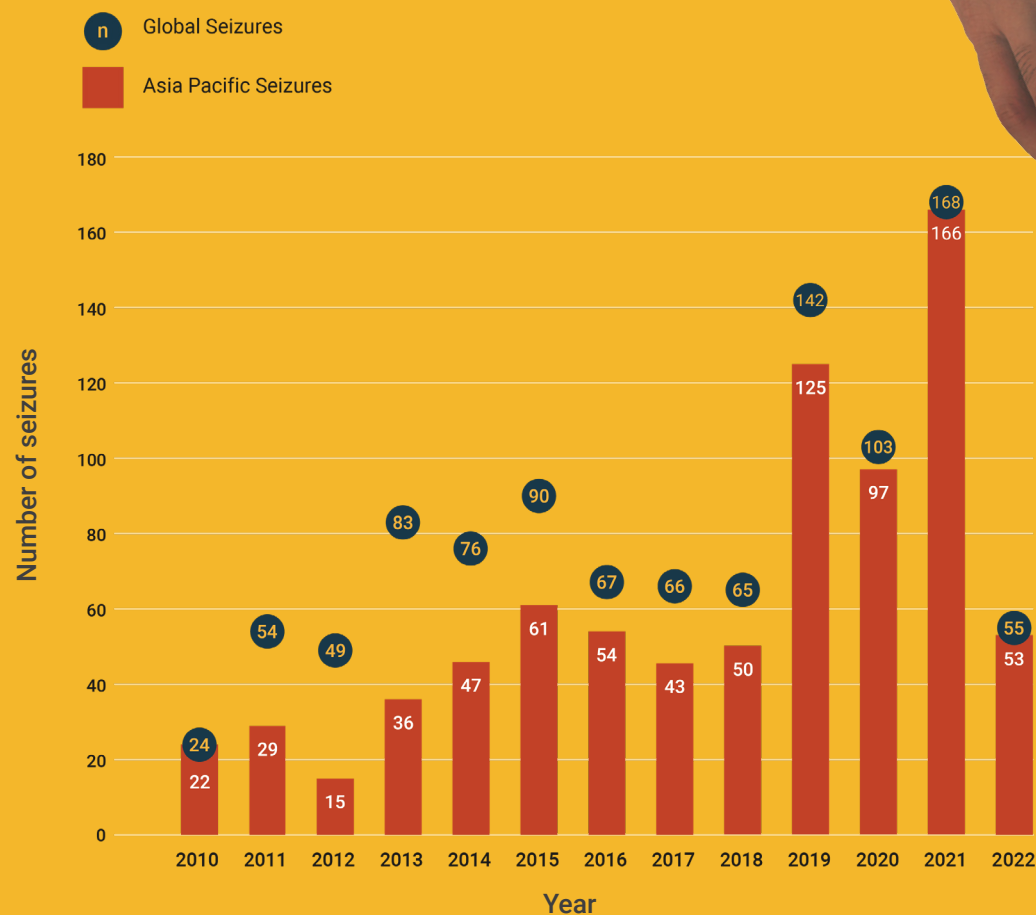


Figure 1: Seizures of wildlife using postal services involving Asia and Asia Pacific countries and territories 2010 – 2022.



Over the decade, seizures in countries in Asia and Asia Pacific showed a **general increase** (Figure 1), including during the height of the pandemic – consistent with the increased demand for postal services in the same period amidst travel restrictions. However, recorded seizures in 2022 were lower, comparable to a decade prior, reasons for which are unknown.

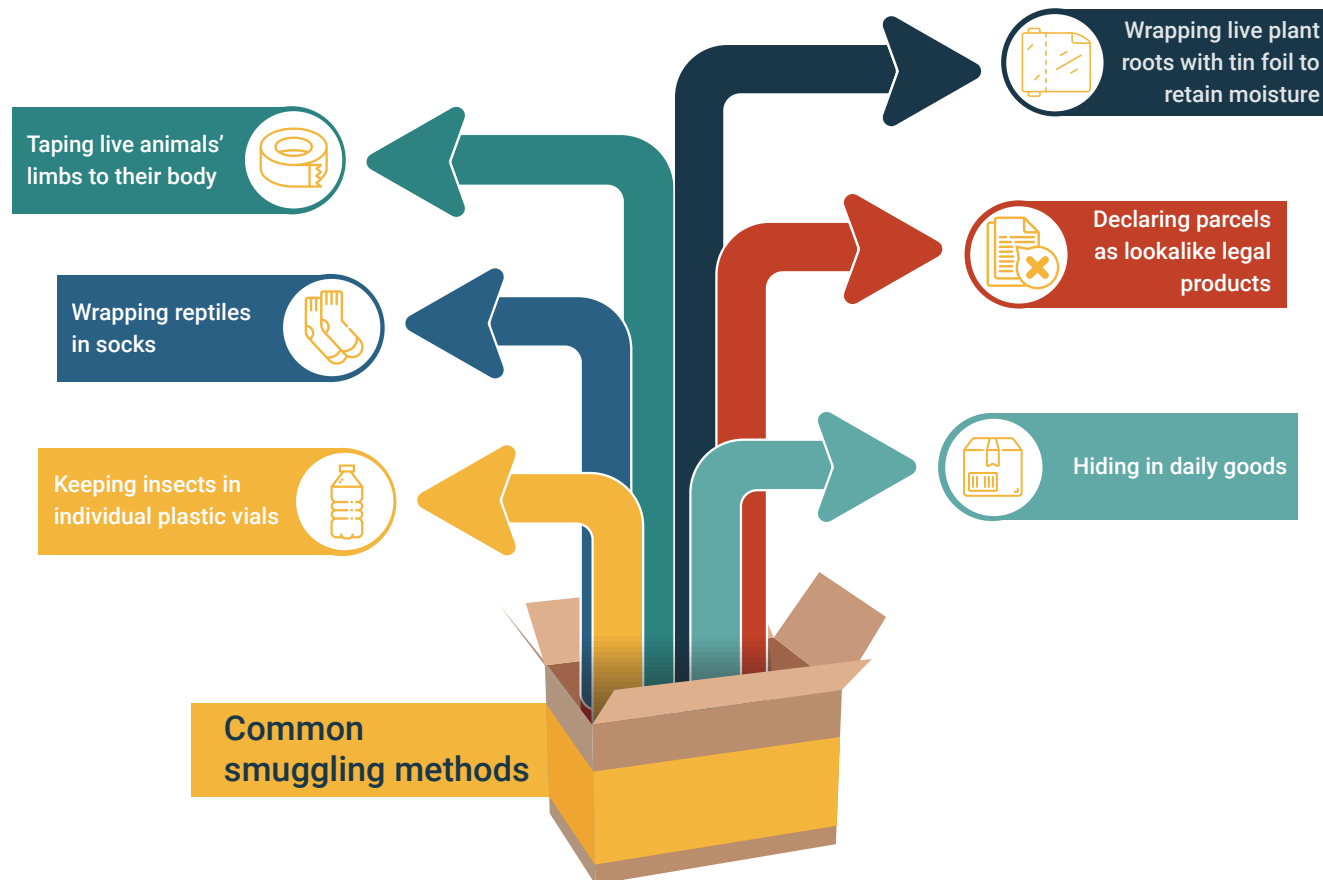
Malaysian law enforcement authorities made 11 seizures in this period. However, there were 32 other seizures that implicated Malaysia in its trade route. The top three most frequent routes used were: Malaysia to China (12 seizures), Malaysia to Hong Kong SAR (5 seizures) and Malaysia to the Philippines (3 seizures), with China, Hong Kong SAR and the Philippines being locations of seizure and end destinations.



Figure 2: Known global seizures (n=49) for wildlife trafficking in post with Malaysia as part of its trade route between 2010 and 2022. The thicker line represents higher counts of confiscations.

CASE STUDIES

The following section highlights different case studies of wildlife seizures in the post, presenting methods of smuggling, concealment, detection and the different types of wildlife species, parts and products involved.



Icons used in the following sections



Detection method



Wildlife involved



Date of seizure



Seizure location



News link

MODUS OPERANDI

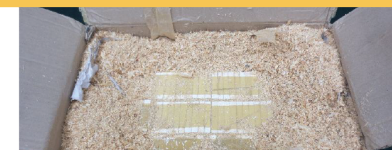
Traffickers change the way they operate to evade detection by authorities. Related trade routes, methods and declarations have been used to ship the same item – cut pieces of ivory. All these processed ivory were sent to the same location.



2 SEPTEMBER 2015

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination): Zimbabwe – Amsterdam, Netherlands – Hong Kong	Seizure location: Hong Kong International Airport	Wildlife involved: Elephant	Condition/ Type of Commodity: 24 kg ivory – cut pieces
---	--	---	--

Detection method: Through x-ray inspection	Misdeclared as: Decorative tiles	Case details: Ivory cut pieces were covered with sawdust and packed in a parcel.	News link: Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department
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6 SEPTEMBER 2015

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination): Zimbabwe – Amsterdam, Netherlands – Hong Kong	Seizure location: Hong Kong International Airport	Wildlife involved: Elephant	Condition/ Type of Commodity: 51 kg ivory – cut pieces
---	--	---	--

Detection method: Through x-ray inspection	Misdeclared as: Decorative tiles	Case details: Ivory cut pieces were covered with sawdust and packed in a parcel.	News link: Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department
--	--	--	--



2 NOVEMBER 2015

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination): Malaysia – Hong Kong	Seizure location: Hong Kong International Airport	Wildlife involved: Elephant	Condition/ Type of Commodity: 38.6 kg ivory – cut pieces
---	--	---	---

Detection method: Routine inspection	Misdeclared as: Pet food	Case details: Ivory cut pieces were covered with pet food. A man receiving the package has been arrested and released on bail.	News link: Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department
--	------------------------------------	---	--



In another case, two similar parcels arrived in the Philippines from Thailand, which contained similar wildlife. Traffickers may use a false declaration again if it has worked for them before. These two illegal parcels are declared as "teaching materials".



30 June 2021

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination):	Seizure location:	Wildlife involved:	Condition/ Type of Commodity:
Thailand – Pasay City, Metro Manila, Philippines	Philpost Central Mail Exchange Center (CMEC)	25 tarantulas, 12 spiderlings, five centipedes, and two ornithoctonus black spiders	Live animals
Detection method:	Misdeclared as:	Case details:	News link:
The claimant abandoned the parcel at the CMEC, leading to discovery by the Bureau of Customs (BOC)	Plastic Teaching Materials for University	These live animals were each kept in plastic containers and test tubes, trying to pass as teaching materials.	Bureau of Customs Philippines



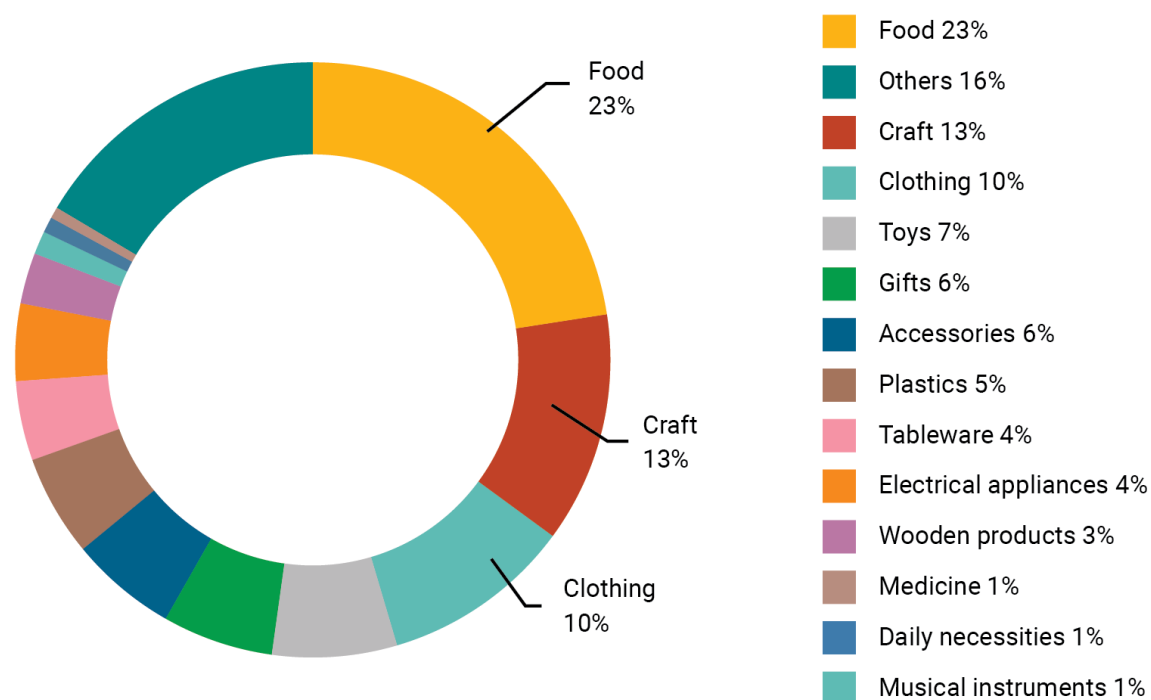
6 January 2021

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination):	Seizure location:	Wildlife involved:	Condition/ Type of Commodity:
Samut Prakan, Thailand – Manila, Philippines	Philpost Central Mail Exchange Center (CMEC)	20 endangered tarantula spiders and eight scorpions	Live animals
Detection method:	Misdeclared as:	Case details:	News link:
Routine inspection	Teaching equipment	The spiders and scorpions were kept individually in plastic containers.	Bureau of Customs Philippines



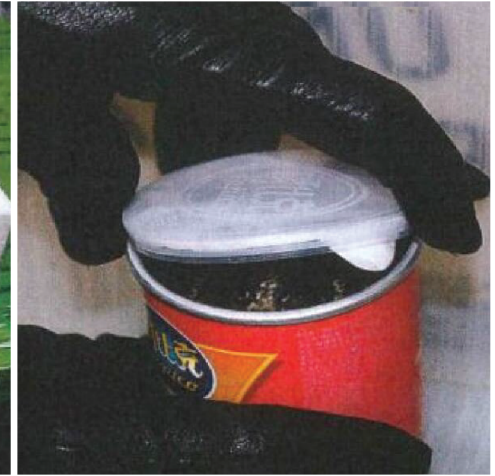
CONCEALMENT METHODS

Figure 3: Commonly reported concealment methods of wildlife in parcels in Asia and the Asia Pacific from 2010-2022, based on 317 incidents. The illegal parcels are either declared as these legitimate goods or were hidden in them.



Traffickers declare their parcels as anything else but wildlife. Traffickers can conceal by **falsely declaring** the parcel as something else or by **hiding it amongst legitimate goods**, or both. From the overall dataset of 1042 seizures, 317 cases reported the concealment method of the illegal shipment.

FOOD



Case details:

The package had been sent using U.S. Postal Service. After discovering the wildlife in the parcel, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Homeland Security Department arranged a controlled delivery and carried out a raid at the trafficker's home. More animals were found in the home, including a baby Morelet's crocodile, two types of snapping turtles and five terrapins. On the same day the parcel was seized, the trafficker also shipped six turtles to Hong Kong, which were intercepted too. The trafficker revealed that he received two shipments with 20 king cobras earlier on. He was sentenced to five months in jail, two years of supervised release and a USD 4,500 fine.

Detection method:

An agriculture specialist of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection opened the parcel under suspicion of drug trafficking based on the shipper address. The specialist sensed movement when they handled the parcel. The snakes were concealed in potato chip cans.

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination):

Hong Kong - Los Angeles, California, United States

Misdeclared as:

N/A



• March 2017



• Los Angeles, United States.



- Three King Cobra and three albino Chinese Soft-shelled Turtles.
- Live animals



• [NPR; Los Angeles Daily News](#)

CRAFT



Case details:

The snake was found inside a rattan basket. Some trafficked wildlife are hidden in the declared items. In this case, the Philippines Bureau of Customs did a 100% physical examination. This increased the chance of detecting wildlife in parcels.

Detection method:

Routine inspection

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination):

Manila, Philippines – New York, United States.

Misdeclared as:

Wood curtains, lanterns, rattan basket.



• October 2020



DHL warehouse, Ninoy
• Aquino International
Airport (NAIA) Complex



- One Reticulated python
- Live animals



• [Bureau of Customs](#)

CLOTHING



Case details:

Many of these plants are listed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) appendices. Some of the plants are protected under Appendix I of CITES and cannot be traded commercially. The rest are listed in Appendix II, and they require permits and phytosanitary certifications to cross international borders. Plants with roots and soil pose risks to native plants and crops through the introduction of pathogens.

Detection method:

Routine inspection

Trade route

(Origin-Transit-Destination):

Thailand – Washington, United States

Misdeclared as:

Fabrics



• July 2020



• Washington Dulles International Airport



- 129 cactus plants and succulents and eight peyote plants
- Live plants with roots



• [U.S. Customs and Border Protection](#)

TOYS



Case details:

All these shipments packed black ants in similar ways – in specimen tubes. The shipments departing from Manila came from the same sender. Tarantulas and other types of spiders have also been smuggled in a similar way through small tubes or vials.

Detection method:

Routine inspection

Trade route

(Origin-Transit-Destination):

Four shipments of black ants smuggled in specimen tubes, using four routes where the first three were from the same sender to different end destinations:

- Manila, Philippines – France
- Manila, Philippines – Singapore
- Manila, Philippines – Italy
- Wroclaw, Poland – Manila, Philippines

Misdeclared as:

Lego toys



- January 2022 and February 2022



- Central Mail Exchange Center (CMEC)



- 396 black ants in total
- Live animals



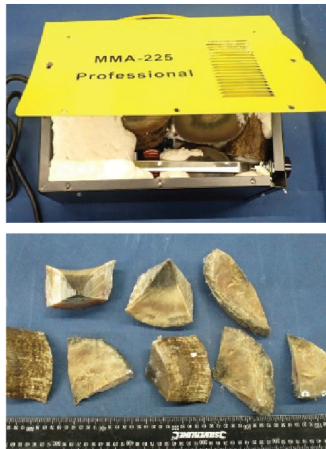
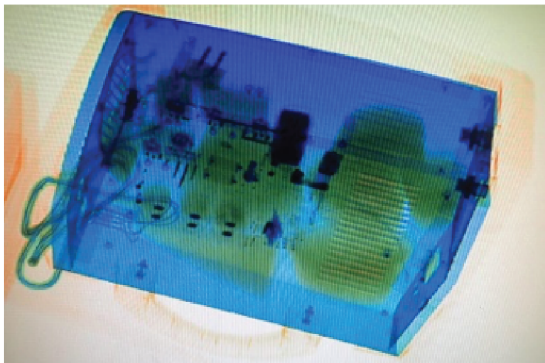
- [Bureau of Customs Philippines; Coconuts Manila](#)

DETECTION METHODS

Successful seizures are the result of actions ranging from diligent postal workers, routine checks and coordinated or targeted law enforcement to intelligence-led operations and risk assessments. A few examples are highlighted here.

X-RAY SCANNING OF PARCELS

"Welding device"



Trade route
(Origin-Transit-Destination):

Angola – Germany – Viet Nam

Condition:

Cut pieces of rhino horn

Case details:

Seven pieces of rhino horn cut pieces were found in the welding machine, while the other eight pieces were found in the speaker hidden among foam.

Misdeclared

Welding device and speaker



December 2021



Leipzig/Halle Airport, Germany

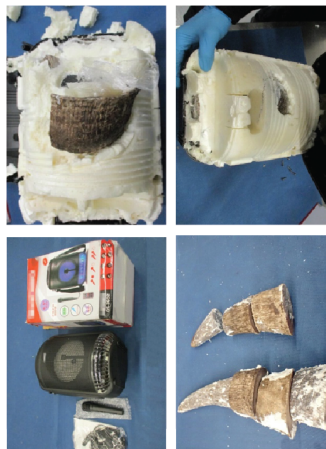
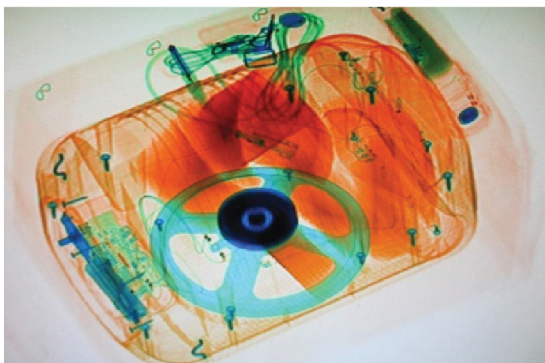


15 pieces of rhino horn,
weighing 3.8 kg



Through x-ray inspection

"Speaker"



News Link:

nordsachsen24.de

BOX 1:

NEED MORE EXAMPLES?

We have a guide full of x-ray images of smuggled wildlife and parts, which also shows how they were transported. Pos Malaysia security staff has used this guide in daily operations.

Detection of wildlife parcels has gone up in the company's main international hub thanks to the use of the guide jointly with awareness activities. The guide was produced under the INL-funded "Out of the Box" project.

Contact tsea@traffic.org for a copy



REPORTING BY POSTAL SERVICES STAFF

Staff working in the postal services play an important role in helping interdict parcels that contain wildlife. The following cases highlight the staff's contribution to stopping illegal shipments. There are a few indicators that postal staff can look out for when they handle parcels (Box 2).



Case details:

The three snakes were discovered in two parcels from the same sender to two different receivers.

Detection method:

Operation staff at the hub noticed suspicious movements from the parcels

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination):

Penang, Malaysia – Shah Alam, Malaysia – United States of America

Misdeclared as:

Gaming earphones



• January 2020



• Shah Alam, Malaysia



- Three snakes
- Live animals



• N/A



SEPTEMBER 2018

Trade route

(Origin-Transit-Destination):

New South Wales, Australia - Hong Kong

Seizure location:

Sydney post office

Wildlife involved:

6 lizards (Shingleback Lizards, Blue-Tongue Lizards, Spiny Tail Skinks, Gidgee Skinks, Western Slender Tail Blue Tongue Lizards and geckos)

Condition:

Live animals

Detection method:

Surveillance through Operation Barcoo, a collaboration between the Department of Environment and Energy, Australian Border Force and Australia Post

Misdeclared as:

N/A

Case details:

The lizards were packed in plastic chip tubes, wrapped in paper towels, with their legs taped with brown paper. The smuggler got a 15-month jail term for attempting to smuggle 11 parcels of different lizards at various Australia Post offices between August and September 2018.

News link:

nordsachsen24.de



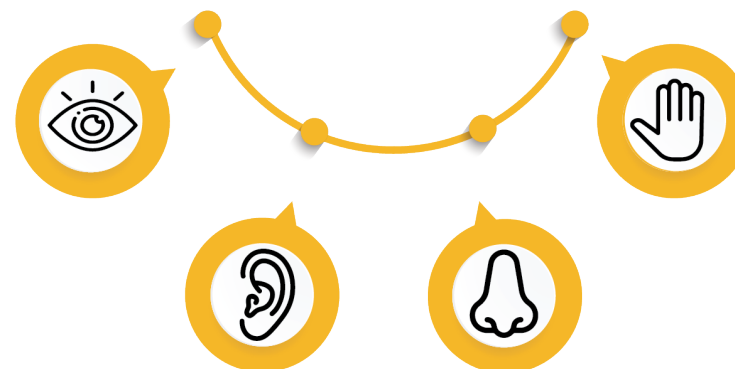
BOX 2:

In seizures reported by postal services staff, they usually noticed odd smells, movement or noise in parcels which might indicate the presence of live wildlife.

Other indicators include:

- Presence of air holes to allow the animal to breathe during the journey (except fish which are often transported in closed plastic bags). Why would air holes be needed if the declared contents do not include live animals?
- Parcel origin does not match the declared contents (e.g. bananas from Canada or rough jade from Africa)

Use your senses during a physical inspection or examination of parcels



TYPE OF WILDLIFE, THEIR PARTS AND PRODUCTS FOUND IN PARCELS

From living animals to wood chips, seizure records show that various wild plants and animals have been transported using postal services. The following types of wildlife are commonly transported through postal services (note this includes a combination of whole wildlife, their parts and products).

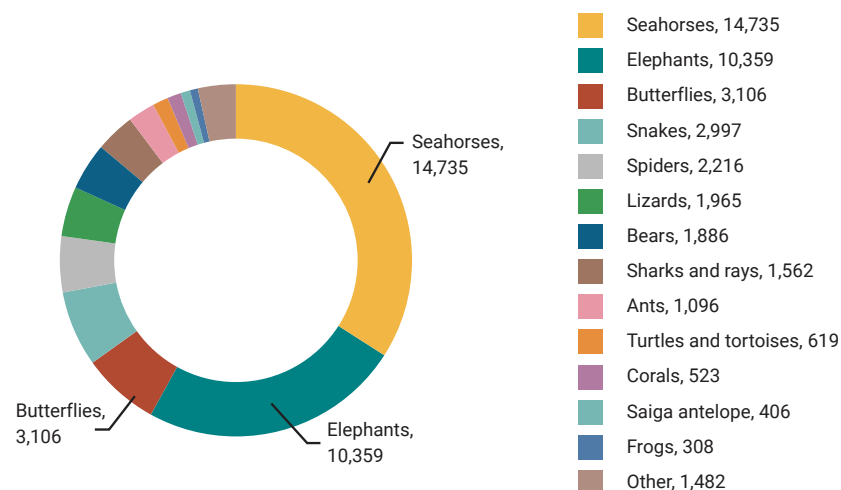


Figure 4: The number of specimens seized in postal parcels by taxa, in Asia Pacific between 2010-2022

Note: “Other” includes the following commodity groups: big cats, horn-bills, scorpions, cactus, other fish species, mantises, crocodiles, beetles, rhinoceros, other bird species, snails, pangolins, dugongs, kingfishers, sugar glider, salamanders, agarwood, rosewood, deer, centipedes, primates, nautilus, wolves, hippopotamus, sperm whales, giant clam, narwhals, sharks and ray, hedgehogs, parrots and pelicans.

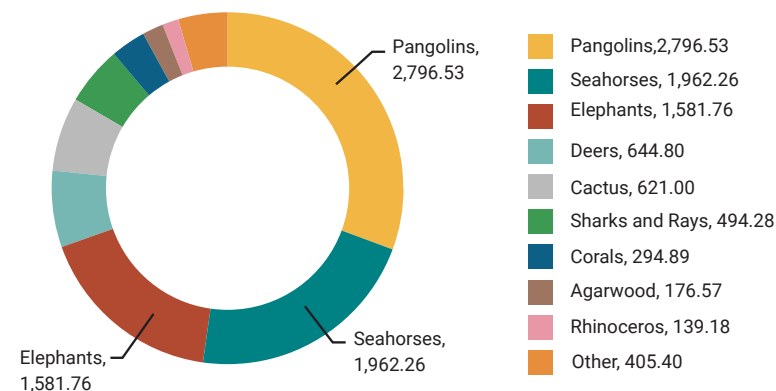


Figure 5: The weight (kg) of specimens seized in postal parcels by taxa, in Asia Pacific between 2010-2022

Note: “Other” includes the following commodity groups: saiga, other fish species, sea cucumbers, rosewood, big cats, turtles and tortoises, khat, giant clams, bears, narwhal, sperm whale, swifts, peafowls, snails, scorpions, crocodiles, hippopotamus and insects.

PANGOLIN SCALES

Pangolins are among the world's most trafficked mammal. One million pangolins are estimated to have been poached in the last decade. Pangolin scales are widely used for traditional medicine, highly sought after in many Asian countries. Here are a few seizure cases involving Malaysia where large quantities of pangolin scales were broken down into several lighter-weight parcels.



Total weight:	136.38 kg of pangolin scales	100kg of pangolin scales and parts	337kg of pangolin scales	240kg of pangolin scales	31.9kg of pangolin scales and 1.98kg of bird's nest
Case details:	The pangolin scales were packed in 10 woven bags, divided between 4 parcels, sent from the same person in Malaysia to some seafood markets and medicine markets in Guangzhou.	The pangolin scales and parts were packed into 11 boxes and mixed with mahogany tree seeds to conceal the illegal parts.	The scales were seized in two separate shipments (16 November: two boxes from Sabah and three from Sarawak; 17 November: two boxes from Sabah and six from Sarawak), originating from different addresses but headed to same receiver in Hong Kong.	The scales were packed in 12 parcels. One man and three women were arrested and a further 200kg of pangolin scales were seized upon investigation.	Both scales and bird's nest were packed together into several parcels.
Misdeclared as:	Food	Tropical fruits	Samples	Mascara	N/A
	 July 2010	 December 2014	 November 2017	 December 2019	 June 2019
	 Guangzhou, China	 Pending Postal Centre, Sarawak	 Pos Malaysia International Hub, Kuala Lumpur	 Hong Kong International Airport	 Sibu Airport, Sarawak
	 Pangolin	 Pangolin	 Pangolin	 Pangolin	 Pangolin and swiftlets
	 Through x-ray inspection China News: TRAFFIC	 N/A The Borneo Post	 Through x-ray inspection TRAFFIC	 Routine inspection The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region	 Routine inspection The Star

DRIED SEAHORSES

The international seahorse trade revolves around selling dried seahorses for use in traditional Chinese medicine. The demand for these seahorses drives their exploitation from various origin countries, including Malaysia. Hong Kong acts as a major transit hub and the world's largest importer and re-exporter of dried seahorses (Louw, S. & Burgener, M., 2021).



Case details:

An undercover customs officer delivered the parcel to a 63-year-old man who was listed as the recipient, who was subsequently arrested. A further 50kg of dried seahorse was seized at his premise.

Detection method:

Intelligence and controlled

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination):

Indonesia – Shen Zhen, China – Tuen Mun, Hong Kong

Misdeclared as:

Body scrub

Louw, S., & Bürgener, M. (2021). *Seahorse Trade Dynamics from Africa to Asia*. TRAFFIC International, Cambridge, United Kingdom.
<https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/13501/seahorses-africa-asia-final-1.pdf>



• November 2020



• Lok Ma Chau Control Point



• Seahorse
• 25kg of dried seahorse



• [The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region](https://www.hkma.gov.hk/en/our-work/anti-money-laundering-and-counter-terrorist-financing/)

BUTTERFLY SPECIMENS



Case details:

A special taskforce was formed after the seizure. The taskforce seized another four parcels from Malaysia and Indonesia containing 829 butterflies. The taskforce raided the receiver's premises and seized around 2,000 butterflies. Four people were arrested as part of the smuggling ring.

Detection method:

Through x-ray inspection

Trade route (Origin-Transit-Destination):

Malaysia – Jinan, China

Misdeclared as:

Dresses



• November 2020



• Jinan International Mail Processing Center



- Butterflies
- 261 preserved butterflies specimen



• [South China Morning Post](#)

PLANTS SPECIES

Pitcher plants



Case details:

The parcel was sent through FedEx. The roots of the pitcher plant were wrapped in wet paper towels for replanting at the point of destination.

Detection method:

Routine inspection

Trade route

(Origin-Transit-Destination):

Malaysia – Honolulu, United States

Misdeclared as:

N/A



• August 2021



• Honolulu, United States



- Pitcher plant
- Nine pitcher plants and a seed pod



• [U.S. Customs and Border Protection](#)

IMAGE CREDITS

8	Lovelyday12 Dreamstime.com
11	Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
12	Philippines Bureau of Customs Ninoy Aquino International Airport
14	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
15	Philippines Bureau of Customs Ninoy Aquino International Airport
16	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
17	Philippines Bureau of Customs Ninoy Aquino International Airport
18	Customs Germany Zoll Deutschland
19	TRAFFIC
20	Pos Malaysia Berhad
21	Australia Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
23	Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, TRAFFIC file photo
24	Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
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