

SHORT NOTE

RECENT SEIZURES OF LIVE OTTERS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract: The recent spate of otter seizures in Southeast Asia highlight the potential threat of the pet trade on the Small-clawed Otter including the need to further investigate the source of otters in trade and its impact on wild populations.

There has been a recent spate of otter seizures occurring across Southeast Asia, which all took place within the space of a month. In each case the seizures were of juvenile otters. Most of these were Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus*, a species increasingly favoured in the illegal pet trade.

In Indonesia, a live otter, along with 14 other wildlife species, was seized on 22 February 2017 during a raid carried out by Indonesian authorities in a village in North Tangerang, Sumatra (Anonymous, 2017). The exact otter species however was not reported. One suspect was arrested and has been charged under Article 29 of Law No. 5/1990 on the conservation of natural resources. The public alerted the Indonesia authorities (i.e. Nature Conservation Agency or Balai Besar Konservasi Sumberdaya Alam (BBKSDA) and Law Enforcement Agency - Region II Sumatra KLHK or Balai Penegakan Hukum Wilayah II Sumatera KLHK) to the suspect who was selling the animals on Facebook.

In Malaysia, also taking place in February 2017, the wildlife authorities undertook a series of raids that led to the seizure of 209 live wild animals destined for the illegal exotic pet trade (TRAFFIC, 2017). In one of these raids, a juvenile Small-clawed Otter was confiscated from a local woman who has been arrested and will be investigated under the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 (TRAFFIC, 2017).

In Thailand, 26 February 2017, 12 live otters were seized at the Don Mueang International Airport in Bangkok as reported by the Bangkok Post. A Japanese national was arrested for trying to smuggle the live animals into Japan in his luggage. He claimed to have bought the animals at the notorious Chatuchak weekend market (known for the availability of illegal wildlife) for THB15 000 (USD435 as of 28 March 2017) with the intention of raising them as pets back home in Japan. Four of the otters were identified as juvenile Small-clawed Otters, based on a photo of the otters seized (ASEAN-WEN, 2017). However it's uncertain whether the remaining eight otters belonged to the same species. There has only been one other incident where live otters have been seized in Thailand that were intended for international trade-in 2013, TRAFFIC reported five Small-clawed and six Smooth-coated Otter pups seized at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Shepherd and Tansom, 2013). They were discovered when Customs officers scanned a bag that had been left at the oversized luggage area of the airport. Interestingly, these too were bound for Japan, likely to be sold as exotic pets (Shepherd and Tansom, 2013). Additionally, during recent surveys carried out by TRAFFIC at exotic pet shops and a reptile fair in Japan at least three full-grown Small-clawed Otters were observed for sale.

Lastly in Viet Nam, in March 2017 three juvenile Small-clawed Otters were seized at a wildlife trader's house. Vinh Long Environmental Police together with the Vinh Long Forest Protection Department checked the house after a tip-off received through Education for Nature Vietnam's Wildlife Crime Hotline (Education for Nature Vietnam, 2017). Following this seizure, the trader has declared on Facebook he is shutting down his wildlife trading business. It is unclear from the report whether the authorities are taking any action against the trader.

These cases highlight the threat of the exotic pet industry to otter species: in particular the Small-clawed Otter. Based on a TRAFFIC and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Otter Specialist Group preliminary assessment of illegal trade of otters in Asia, there has been a recent spike in the seizure of live otters, which has mostly occurred in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Viet Nam (Gomez et al., 2016). Additionally, there has been a noticeable shift in the trade of wildlife from physical markets to online markets such as Facebook (Anonymous, 2014; Krishnasamy and Stoner, 2016) which is also the case in at least three of the above mentioned seizures.

While much of the trade in otters as pets has seemingly been to meet domestic demands, the seizure of otters in Bangkok airport indicates the existence of an international market i.e. an illegal trade chain from Thailand and possibly other Southeast Asian countries to Japan.

The Small-clawed Otter is categorized as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species due to threats caused by pollution of waterways, reduction of prey, habitat destruction and poaching (Wright et al., 2015). It is listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which means international commercial trade in the species is regulated and can only take place with the relevant export permits. This species is native to all four countries where the seizures have occurred and is totally protected in all of them except Indonesia. Other factors that remain uncertain and need to be investigated further are whether these juvenile otters are poached from the wild or are being captive-bred, as well as what effects the trade is having on wild populations.

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RESUMÉ

SAISIES RÉCENTES DE LOUTRES VIVANTES DANS LE SUD-EST DE L'ASIE

La récente série de saisies de loutre dans le Sud-Est de l'Asie souligne la menace potentielle du commerce d'animaux de compagnie sur la loutre cendrée incluant la nécessité d'enquêter plus avant sur la provenance des loutres sur le marché et son impact sur la population sauvage.

RESUMEN

INCAUTACIONES RECIENTES DE NUTRIAS VIVAS EN EL SUDESTE DE ASIA

La reciente oleada de incautaciones en el Sudeste Asiático destacan la potencial amenaza que significa el comercio de mascotas sobre la nutria de uñas pequeñas asiática, incluyendo la necesidad de investigar más a fondo el origen de las nutrias que se comercian y su impacto en las poblaciones silvestres.