

LEBANON - BACK ON THE ILLEGAL WILD ANIMAL TRADE MAP

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Introduction

The international law governing trade in endangered species, the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) focuses on a single cause of species loss, and contains a generally clearer, stronger and more straight forward targets and corresponding regulations in contrast to broader biodiversity regimes.¹ International trade in exotic wildlife is a large money-spinning business. Hundreds of millions of individual plants and animals, their parts and derivatives, are bought and sold each year.² CITES categorizes species into three Appendixes according to how trade is affecting their existence, and has created various levels of control. Appendix I includes the most threatened species. Appendix II are species that are not yet endangered, but are considered to be affected by trade if left unregulated and a scientific authority must determine that the proposed export quota will not be detrimental to the survival to the species. Appendix III species are listed voluntarily by range states¹.

Case Study - Lebanon

Lebanon, a non-party to CITES, is a hub for international, and sometimes illegal, wild animal trade. Tens of thousands of animals are imported, exported or re-exported from Lebanon each year. Animals that enter its ports officially must have CITES certificates and those being exported also need to have CITES entry certificates to other party countries. Therefore, Lebanon has two focal CITES personnel based in the Ministry of Agriculture, who issue the required certificates.

Even though the law in Lebanon demands that CITES certificates are necessary when wild animals are traded, various species enter and leave the country illegally or with questionable CITES certificates. Cases of chimpanzees entering the country with no CITES certificates have been reported. Some wildlife breeding centers are purporting to be breeding owls *Tyto alba* for export.. There is little transparency and considerable corruption involved in the wild animal trade in Lebanon. Stories exist of lions entering the country through the VIP airport lounges, of animals being smuggled in suitcases, and shipments filled with various mammals entering and leaving the country. But maybe what has captured the attention of the international community' is the Lebanese trade in the [Spur thighed](#) tortoise (*Testudo graeca*). CITES receives conflicting reports which adds to the uncertainty of the trade in this species. Two reports showed two different gross exports amounts for this species for the years 1996 – 2002. For some years the difference exceeds 7,000 individuals.^{3,4}

In 2008, the CITES Animals Committee engaged IUCN to compile information about the biology and management of and the trade in Spur thighed tortoises in Lebanon. This species is widely spread in northern Africa, southern Europe and South-west Asia, inhabiting over 25 countries in total⁴. The Lebanese CITES Management Authority reported that no population status studies had been carried out and therefore the status of the species in the wild is not known and that although captive breeding facilities exist in Lebanon, it is not clear whether they have the capacity to produce the number exported.³



Fig 1. Charlie: Illegally smuggled chimpanzee into Lebanon (©IndyACT/Hmaidan).

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Testudo graeca are popular in the pet trade.³ In Lebanon local demand is not significant, but the large numbers of wild and captive bred specimens exported has raised concerns by biologists in Lebanon and this lead to an export ban in 2004. The Lebanese Management Authority reported to CITES Secretariat that since there are no export quotas, no export is permitted, and that this ban will remain in place and will not be lifted until appropriate regulations are in place. In view of this statement, trade in this species from the Lebanon was decided by CITES to be of Least Concern.³

However, last November, IndyACT learned that despite the ban a shipment of 'claimed' cap-



Fig 2. A tortoise more than ten years old in a farm in Lebanon (©IndyACT/Hmaidan).

tive-bred Spur thighed tortoises was being exported, and started to investigate the issue further. The organization visited the breeding centre that has previously been questioned on its production capacity and found it to be well below standard. Dead tortoises were found all over the farm. The age range was above 6 years, which indicates that there has been no breeding program. The farm appeared to be abandoned, and without maintenance for a long period of time. After documenting the situation, IndyACT filed a complaint to the Ministry of Agriculture and requested answers to the questionable practices. No answers were given and the export process continued, therefore IndyACT campaigned and succeeded in stopping the shipment at the airport prior to export. Later on, an independent scientist from the American University of Beirut investigated the breeding centre in question again and confirmed that most of the tortoises maintained there were at least five years of age, and thus most probably were caught from the wild and not bred in this facility. Furthermore, it was found that the exporting quotas for the species were not determined on sound scientific basis, and that no national study has been conducted to detail population data on Spur thighed tortoise, which was one of the commitments of the Lebanese CITES Authority.

Recommendations

IndyACT suspects that Lebanon is being used as a hub for wild animal 'laundering', where some species are being imported illegally, and then tagged with a legal stamp before being re-exported. In the Arab region, only Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain are the countries that have not ratified CITES, making them international loopholes. Therefore, IndyACT is requesting that the Lebanese authority ratify CITES, and conduct research at a National level to scientifically

assess the situation of each species being exported, and accordingly determine sustainable export quotas. Also all wildlife breeding centers need to be strictly monitored by an independent committee that includes stakeholders from different sectors (public, non-governmental, academic, etc.). Additionally the process of certification should be more transparent and accessible to general public. Until then all trade in wild animals should be put on hold.

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- ³ CITES. 2008. Review of Significant Trade in specimens of Appendix-II species, Species Selected Following CoP13, Twenty-third meeting of the Animals Committee. Geneva. Switzerland. 1-6. <http://www.cites.org/eng/com/AC/23/E23-08-04.pdf>
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