



Department of Justice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ENRD (202) 514-2007
FRIDAY, MARCH 10, 2006 USA (206) 553-4110

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TDD (202) 514-1888

SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON MAN SENTENCED TO PRISON FOR ILLEGALLY IMPORTING AND EXPORTING RARE REPTILES

Reptiles sent to and from Thailand in boxes labeled "Stuffed Toys"

WASHINGTON D.C. – Jonathan Corey Sawyer of Camas, Washington, was sentenced in Tacoma today to 15 months in prison and 2 years of supervised release for illegally importing and exporting rare reptiles, the Department of Justice announced today. According to court records, Sawyer illegally smuggled more than 230 reptiles in an eight month period.

Sawyer was indicted in April, 2005, following an investigation into illegal trafficking in rare reptiles. On June 19, 2003, undercover agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service delivered a package to Sawyer's Camas home. The package had been inspected by customs agents in Alaska who found it contained four Burmese Star Tortoises and two Green Tree Monitor Lizards. Both are species whose trade is restricted by international and U.S. law, and importers must obtain special permission to bring them into the United States. Sawyer did not obtain these permits and the live animals were shipped from Thailand in a box labeled "Stuffed Toys." Sawyer, a licensed animal importer and exporter, was aware of the regulations and how to present animals to customs and knowingly violated the law.

"Illegal trade in protected wildlife is a serious violation of our environmental laws," said Sue Ellen Wooldridge, Assistant Attorney General of the Department of Justice's Environment and Natural Resources Division. "The sentence handed down today should serve as evidence of the Department's efforts to put a stop to this illegal activity, and to help prevent future trafficking of rare and endangered wildlife."

Sawyer pleaded guilty in August 2005 to shipping 20 Corn Snakes, 100 Leopard Geckos, one Albino Leopard Gecko, 14 Rhino Iguanas, and 98 Emperor Scorpions in boxes labeled "Stuffed Toy Animals." In his plea agreement, Sawyer admitted that he had shipped reptiles from the U.S. to his supplier, "Lawrence" Wee Soon Chye, of Bangkok, Thailand on seven different occasions between 2002 and 2003. The animals had a monetary value of up to \$30,000.

Authorities also arrested the man responsible for shipping the reptiles from Thailand when he made a trip to Florida in July, 2003. Wee Soon Chye was sentenced in Florida to 37 months in prison for his smuggling with Sawyer and others in the United States.

The case was investigated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and prosecuted by Trial Attorney Wayne D. Hettenbach with the Department of Justice Environmental Crimes Section, and Assistant United States Attorney Helen J. Brunner of the United States Attorney's Office.

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