

TEXT: U.S. CUSTOMS SERVICE ON ANIMAL SMUGGLING ARRESTS  
(40 persons arrested or indicted)

June 1, 1998

Washington -- The U.S. Customs Service has announced the seizure of more than 660 endangered birds, mostly parrots, and other animals as well as the arrest or indictment, or both, of 40 persons.

A May 29 press release described the action as the dismantling of one of the largest exotic bird and animal smuggling rings ever uncovered.

The three-year undercover operation leading to the arrests concerned smuggling across the U.S.-Mexico border of illegally traded endangered animals for sale in nine U.S. states, Puerto Rico and 10 foreign countries.

Following is the text of the Customs' press release:

(begin text)

CUSTOMS AND FISH AND WILDLIFE AGENTS SNARE HUGE ANIMAL SMUGGLING RING

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The U.S. Customs Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced the dismantling of one of the largest exotic bird and animal smuggling rings ever uncovered by U.S. authorities.

Operation Jungle Trade was a three-year undercover operation, which involved more than 40 investigations both here and abroad and resulted in the seizure of more than 660 endangered and protected birds and animals and the arrest and/or indictment of 40 individuals who were major distributors and traffickers of exotic wildlife in the United States. The Customs-led investigation was a joint operation and included agents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who were instrumental during many critical phases of the operation.

On May 28, 1998, Customs and Fish and Wildlife agents served federal arrest and search and seizure warrants in San Antonio, Texas; Pueblo, Colorado; St. Louis, Missouri; and Nashville, Tennessee. These most recent enforcement actions resulted in an additional eight arrests; the seizure of an additional 20 threatened animals and the seizure of computers and records. Additional warrants and arrests are

anticipated in the near future.

Operation Jungle Trade was worldwide in scope and uncovered the elaborate smuggling network which operated across the U.S.-Mexico border and sold the smuggled animals and birds in nine states as well as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and 10 other countries including: Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Brazil, Ghana, Egypt, Panama, Honduras, Belize, and Costa Rica.

The operation involved 42 Customs and Fish and Wildlife offices in the U.S., Customs foreign attache offices, and several foreign law enforcement agencies including the Australian Federal Police and Customs Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the New Zealand Customs Service and the Panamanian National Police.

According to Bonni Tischler, assistant commissioner, Office of Investigations for Customs, "This case is significant due to the sophistication of this international smuggling network and the magnitude of their operation. It is the largest and most far-reaching exotic animal case ever conducted by the U.S. Customs Service. Pound for pound, there is more profit for smugglers in exotic birds than there is in cocaine."

Kevin Adams, chief, Office of Law Enforcement for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, commented, "This type of joint operation sends a powerful message to wildlife smugglers. It clearly demonstrates the commitment of all U.S. Government agencies to wildlife conservation. The Customs Service in many instances is the lead agency in international and border enforcement efforts. We look forward to continuing our support of any enforcement effort that will ensure wildlife conservation for future generations."

San Antonio Special Agent in Charge Leonard Lindheim, who oversaw the Brownsville operation, added that "most people probably think of Customs agents as bringing down drug and money laundering organizations. This case exemplifies the fact that Customs protects our borders from all types of unique smuggling operations. We are gratified that our special agents were able to stop these traffickers and save these endangered animals."

The prosecution is being handled by the assistant United States attorney, Brownsville Division, United States Attorney's Office, Houston Environmental Crimes Division, and Main Justice Environmental Crimes Division, Washington, D.C.

Due to the perishable nature of live animals, agents had to work around the clock to ensure the seized wildlife remained healthy while in government custody. "Our agents never let up in this case. Everyone took great pains to make sure the animals were well taken care of. It became a real cause for us," said Al Pena, resident agent in charge of the Brownsville Customs office.

Operation Jungle Trade seized more than 600 endangered or threatened psittacine birds with a domestic value in excess of \$600,000. However, many of the animals are considered priceless due to their rarity in the wild. Operation Jungle Trade also netted 20 monkeys, a Mexican lynx, a mountain lion, and a

kinkajou, a small tree-dwelling mammal. Earlier in the operation, Customs agents also intercepted two loads of diseased birds destined for the U.S. market. The diseased birds were destroyed.

According to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), parrots, or psittacines, represent a significant part of the global black market trade in wildlife. "Parrots' beauty, ability to mimic, and tendency to bond with humans make them among the most valued species in illegal trade. And despite national and international laws protecting them, the United States has one of the world's largest black markets," said Ginette Hemley, director of wildlife policy at WWF. She added that, "The fate of many critically endangered birds depends directly on strict monitoring and enforcement as the Customs case graphically demonstrates."

International trade in protected species of wildlife is regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). However, the smuggling of endangered parrot species along the Texas-Mexico border remains an issue of serious conservation concern.

"Endangered wild birds face significant dangers from smugglers," said John Flicker, president of the National Audubon Society. "We commend the Customs Service for their successful Operation Jungle Trade. Smuggling operations typically involve young birds that frequently die before reaching markets. Bird smugglers often destroy habitat, hacking down trees to catch birds." He added that, "Unfortunately, smugglers have found that chicks are easier to smuggle. They can be laundered as captive-bred hatchlings and bring more money than adults."

Those arrested have been charged with violation of 18 USC 545, Smuggling Imports Contrary to Law, and 18 USC 371, Conspiracy. U.S. Fish and Wildlife charges include 16 USC 1538, Endangered Species Act, and 16 USC 3372, Lacey Act violations. Many of the defendants have also been charged with violations of 18 USC 1956, Money Laundering, which carries a criminal penalty of 20 years imprisonment, a \$500,000 fine or both.

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