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TOP STORIES



Slow loris quick bust

UNDERCOVER EXCLUSIVE

This endangered animal would have been sold on the Net if not for the AVA and The New Paper

By Kua Chee Siong and Teh Jen Lee

FANCY shopping for an endangered animal right here in Singapore?

For less than \$500, you can buy one - without even stepping out of your home.

An Internet Relay Chat (IRC) posting last Sunday offered exotic pets for sale.

The list included endangered species like the star tortoise, green tree python and alligator snapping turtle.



A reader, Chris, called The New Paper Hotline when he saw the posting.

'I had never seen such a posting and wanted to know if it was for real,' said the junior college student who then

messaged the seller, pretending to be interested.

The first animal offered to him was a slow loris, an endangered monkey-like creature, for \$480. (See picture above.)

This included instant delivery, although it was already 8.50pm, the seller promised.

He later also sent a picture of the animal through an e-mail account under the name 'Kenny Tan'.

'It's like the one you see on Discovery (channel)... no need to prepare environment, cage can... cause mine captive-bred, not wild caught,' he told our reader.

He also claimed to have over 50 animals from the US and Argentina.

The New Paper then alerted the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA).

Chris arranged to meet the seller with an AVA officer

TODAY'S NEWS!

S'POREAN SWEPT AWAY BY JB FLASH FLOOD

He hung onto rescuer's hand in strong current. But Mr Yeong Poh Heong's arm grew weak and...

Then he let go

.....
Breast cancer shock after polls

VP candidate John Edward's wife waited till after election results to check lump

.....
Big breast woes & mum's tears

S'porean waited for 17 years to

posing as his friend.

The first appointment Line is overdrawn was 9.30am at the Chinatown OG taxi stand on Wednesday. Line is overdrawn

Other AVA officers waited nearby.

But no-one showed up.

Then the seller called again in the afternoon.

Another appointment was made at 5pm at the same place.

Changed meeting place

Around 5.15pm, the seller called Chris to meet instead at a nearby fast-food outlet.

Finally, the seller showed up with a large cardboard box.

Once the AVA officer identified the animal inside as a slow loris, it was game over for 'Kenny Tan'.



The suspect, 20, works part-time in Chinatown and earns about \$1,000 a month.

According to the AVA, the youth said he did not have any other wildlife.

He added that the slow loris was bought 1 1/2 years ago for \$350 from someone called 'Glenn'.

'Kenny' decided to sell it to make a fast buck before starting national service.

Ms Lye Fong Keng, head of AVA's wildlife regulatory branch, said action will be taken against him within the next two weeks for possessing an illegally imported slow loris.

Slow lorises are listed under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna & Flora (Cites). You need a Cites permit from the AVA to have such animals.

Fine up to \$5,000

Under the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act, the penalty for illegal import or export of endangered species is a fine of up to of \$5,000 (or \$10,000 for repeat offences) and/or jail of up to one year.

Offenders can also be charged under the Wild Animals and Birds Act for keeping a wild animal without a licence and fined up to \$1,000 per animal.

Ms Lye said five cases of Internet trade in exotic pets

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have been detected by AVA in recent years.

A new breed of exotic animal sellers seem to be operating undercover online.

Mr Victor Wu of international conservation group WildAid has seen wildlife products sold over Ebay.

He said: 'A quick five-minute browse and I found lots of ivory, stuffed crocodiles, lion skin or teeth, white-shark jaws, snake-head walking sticks.'

'Many of the websites that buy or sell animals over the Internet have a variety of Cites-protected species. The extent to which it is happening in countries like the US is absolutely phenomenal.'

Activists are calling for tougher laws against illegal wildlife trading.

Last year, 663 animals were confiscated by AVA in 33 cases.

In 2002, there were 31 cases involving almost 3,000 animals, including 2,193 star tortoises smuggled by two Indian nationals.

Why are there constantly cases of exotic animals or products smuggled into or through Singapore?

Ms Lye said it's a lucrative trade.

Some pet owners like exotic animals.

'Wildlife can also be used for food, medicines, skin, fur, wool (fashion) trade, ornaments and trophies,' she said.

She added that AVA and the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) conduct spot-checks on suspicious cases.

AVA also responds to information on any illegal wildlife trade activities. If you have any information, call 6227-0670.

Small fines, big profits

TOUGH laws should be put in place to curb the illegal wildlife trade. A fine of a few thousand dollars is but a mere slap on the wrist when millions can be made from each shipment.

Interpol estimates the worldwide illegal trade in wildlife products is worth US\$6 to 10 billion dollars (\$16.5 billion) annually. It is second only to the illicit drug trade.

A major loophole in the Endangered Species Act is how offenders are charged by species instead of per animal or specimen, said Mr Louis Ng, president of the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres).

On Wednesday, Acres officially launched its 24-hour hotline (9783-7782) for people to report illegal pet trading.

Mr Ng wants a change in the law.

He said: 'It can't be by species because then traders will just bring in one species at a time. At most they get a \$5,000 fine or one-year jail.'

'Considering that 1,000 star tortoises can be sold for \$60, they can make \$60,000. So they just have to get one large shipment through to see huge profits.'

That indeed seems the case.

On Sunday, Customs officers caught an Indonesian vessel which tried to smuggle about 40,000 pieces of dried python and monitor lizard skins into Singapore.

The skins, worth about \$800,000, were to be sold here but the ship's captain was only fined \$5,000 and jailed three months.

Mr Chris Shepherd of Traffic South-east Asia, a wildlife trade monitoring network based in Kuala Lumpur, said: 'Some countries penalise per head or unit (of animal/animal product smuggled) and this obviously serves as a more powerful deterrent.'

Mr Victor Wu of WildAid pointed out another problem: Trade in pre-Cites specimens is allowed, but it's not easy to tell apart old and new stock.

'It makes Cites almost unenforceable,' he said.

When wildlife laws have no teeth, it's the animals that suffer.

I remember the 34 emaciated pangolins found in boxes by Changi Airport staff a year ago. They could not be saved.

These harmless anteaters had been caught, tied up and not fed for weeks until a large enough shipment could be made from Jakarta.

They were headed for a local company, probably to be eaten.

So just because people wanted to have a taste of wildmeat, all 34 pangolins starved to death.

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