

20 face charges for online wildlife trafficking

Forestry police in southwest China's Yunnan Province have caught 20 people who were involved in online trafficking of wild animals including iguanas, chameleons and pythons.

The suspects, including online traders and buyers of wild animals and animal products, will face charges and penalties according to a newly revised law on wild animal protection that took effect on January 1, said Li Jun, a top forestry police officer in Hani-Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Honghe.

The amended law bans hunting, sale, purchase, and use of state-protected wild animals or derived products, unless for scientific research, captive breeding, population regulation, monitoring of disease, or other legitimate purposes.

"That means anyone involved in illegal wild animal trade will face criminal penalties, whether you are a poacher, a dealer or just a pet owner," said Li Jun.

In September 2016, forestry police in Yunnan Province caught an online animal dealer surnamed Gu in Honghe's Hekou County, and confiscated a number of wild animals, said Li Lili, a police officer in Gejiu City of Honghe who was a member of the investigation team.

He said police had followed information revealed in Gu's advertisements posted on Baidu.com, in which he claimed he had rare pets, including slow lorises and American green iguanas, for sale.

Following Gu's arrest, police spent eight months hunting for his accomplices. As of early May, they had caught 19 suspects in Honghe, Chuxiong, Yuxi and the provincial capital Kunming, said Li.

"More than 90 wild animals were seized in the crackdown, including 52 exotic animals," said Li. "This is the largest online wildlife trafficking case in Yunnan Province in the past decade."

He said the suspects had posted ads on social media and all the transactions were completed online. Some of the animals were shipped to faraway provinces including Guangdong, Fujian, Shanxi and Jilin.

"The suspects often lined packages with newspapers to keep the animals warm during delivery, but still, some animals died on the way from hunger or suffocation," said Li.

In a suspicious parcel on its way to the northern province of Shanxi, Li and his colleagues seized a ball python that had apparently suffocated.

Most of the buyers were young people who wanted an exotic pet, such as a

python, which sold for 3,000 yuan (435 U.S. dollars). Some were parents who were searching for secret remedies for their ailing children, as wild animals such as lizards were often used in traditional Chinese medicine.

“Captive breeding of wild animals is subject to approval by forestry authorities,” said Li. “If you want to keep a cool pet, you should get it in a legitimate way.”

He said the seized animals have been handed over to a wildlife refuge center in Kunming. While the exotic animals will be bred in captivity, indigenous species may be released if they are fit to survive in the wild and pose no harm to local people or the ecosystem.

Yunnan Province, known for its rich biodiversity, is home to many endangered wild animals and plants.