

Traveller jailed for smuggling and cruelty to tortoises

A traveller who smuggled 57 tortoises and was convicted earlier for violating the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance was sentenced to imprisonment today (April 1).

A spokesman for the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) said that the 47-year-old male passenger arrived in Hong Kong on September 28, 2019, from Moroni, Comoros, via Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. A total of 57 tortoises wrapped with plastic tape, comprising 55 radiated tortoises and two Madagascar tortoises, were found in his baggage by Customs officers.

After follow-up examination, a veterinarian of the AFCD opined that the 57 tortoises were subjected to unnecessary suffering and their health and welfare had been severely neglected. The AFCD subsequently charged the man. He was convicted at the District Court on March 30 this year. With 36 months' and 12 months' of imprisonment as the starting point for sentencing for the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance respectively and one-third reduction as he pleaded guilty, the defendant was sentenced to 24 months and eight months behind bars today under the respective ordinances. The sentences are to run concurrently. It is the highest penalty handed out under the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance for illegal import of live endangered species so far.

The radiated tortoise and the Madagascar tortoise are listed in Appendix I to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora and regulated under the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance in Hong Kong. Any person importing, exporting or possessing specimens of endangered species not in accordance with the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance is liable to a maximum fine of \$10 million and imprisonment for 10 years. The specimens will also be forfeited upon conviction.

Under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance, the maximum penalty for cruelty to animals is a fine of \$200,000 and imprisonment for three years.

To enquire about the control of endangered species or to report suspected irregularities, the public can call the AFCD on 1823 or visit the website www.cites.hk.