



The Internet Trader

In a dimly lit office in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur, Chris Shepherd is surfing the Internet in search of rare and exotic animals. Names of pet shops flash up on the screen. Some sell cats and dogs; others offer more interesting possibilities. Scrolling down lists of dealers, it does not take long to find what he is looking for. On one website, finest quality pythons from Indonesia are for sale; on another, slithering iguanas and rare butterflies.

And that's just the small stuff. To find the more valuable species, like rare Burmese star tortoises (U.S.\$13,000 per pair) or Timor monitors, involves more time and effort. It may take several hours or days of negotiating in an Internet chat room followed by a covert phone conversation and a faxed message of confirmation. For the dedicated buyer of endangered species, however, there are few real obstacles.

"All the dealers claim that they breed the animals themselves," says Shepherd, a veteran wildlife investigator who works for TRAFFIC, an organization that monitors the wildlife trade. In many cases, it's an entirely legal occupation. But there are no shortage of illegal operators who obtain their animals from the wild.

The Internet has revolutionized international trafficking of rare and endangered species like nothing before. In the days before dealers went high tech, purchasing illegal animals was a long drawn-out affair. Now every type of exotic creature is just a click away, transforming cyberspace into a gigantic animal wildlife supermarket. Better still for dealers, it's safe and anonymous.

Estimating the size of the illegal trade is almost impossible. However there's little doubt about one thing: trading over the Internet is the fastest growing area of wildlife crime. Live reptiles and traditional Chinese medicine containing illegal wildlife parts are commonly sold online throughout Europe and the U.S. Items ranging from tiger skins to the shell of the critically endangered hawksbill turtle even appear occasionally on the world's biggest

online auction house, eBay. Meanwhile, in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, it is believed to be a virtual free-for-all.

Once a deal has been reached and a money transfer arranged, the animals will probably be sent by courier, packed in specially perforated boxes. Smart dealers obtain real or phony permits saying that the animals are captive bred and therefore legal. Or they may hide the animals deep inside crates of common species. These days, to the alarm of postal workers, growing numbers of snakes and other small reptiles are sent by mail.

If it is so easy to order illegal wildlife, why doesn't someone stop it? For a start, most enforcement agencies do not have the time or expertise to check up on the tens of thousands of cross-border transactions that take place every day. Furthermore, there are enough loopholes in most country's wildlife laws for an elephant to jump through.

What is not available on the Internet is generally advertised by word of mouth or through networks of wildlife collectors who distribute price lists among themselves and exchange information at international forums. In the U.S. alone, about 400 wild-pet and breeding fairs are held around the country every year. Many of the big events, like the Florida International Reptile Expo in Orlando attract the big international wildlife dealers who go to enlarge their circle of contacts. Once again, it's all aboveboard except that most of the illegal deals are arranged on the sidelines.

As fast as wildlife investigators like Shepherd can gather information about the trade, dealers find alternative ways to circumvent the laws. "Wildlife dealers use fake names and log in from Internet cafes," he says. "These people know the laws. They attend CITES conferences and they exploit the loopholes."