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**Animal smuggling on the rise in Singapore**

***by Feng Zengkun***

Numbers climbed from 305 in 2008 to 1,511 last year

DELIVERY within days. New arrivals from overseas. After-sales medical care included.

The item advertised for sale in local online forums? Star tortoises from Australia at \$400 each - but whose import is banned here.

Illegal sellers also offer other prohibited animals, ranging from hedgehogs and monkeys to snakes.

These animals cannot be kept as pets to prevent the spread of diseases and introduction of species which could threaten native wildlife, and to curb illegal trade, especially in endangered animals.

Some smugglers also sell animals which can be obtained legally here, such as pedigree dogs, but at lower prices.

The number of animal-smuggling cases has climbed in recent years - from 14 in 2008 to 23 last year, said the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority (AVA).

The number of animals smuggled in rose from 305 in 2008 to 1,511 last year, with one case involving 1,200 birds, the largest single haul here.

But the actual number of animals smuggled in may be higher. Mr Chris Shepherd, deputy manager of Traffic South-east Asia, a wildlife protection group, said: 'Smuggling reports from other countries tell us there is much more going into and out of Singapore.'

The Straits Times understands that some illegal sellers make several trips a month to get animals from overseas contacts. The animals usually come from India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia, though Syria and the United States were also cited as sources.

Once an order is placed, an overseas supplier is contacted. The animal is flown in as cargo to a country near Singapore because it is difficult to smuggle it directly here.

Animals smuggled into Singapore could be sold by word of mouth or advertised on local websites such as Locanto, SGClub and Pets Fanatics. Some sellers even leave their cellphone numbers. Time from order to delivery takes four days to two weeks.

Some buyers are willing to pay from \$4,000 for a monkey to \$30,000 for a ploughshare tortoise.

Others will pay \$250 for a hedgehog or \$400 for a star tortoise, just for the novelty factor. One such post on Locanto reads: 'Interested in getting a hedgehog for my girlfriend for a Valentine's gift (something different this year).'

There are also buyers looking for a good deal. Mr Ricky Yeo, president of Action for Singapore Dogs, said these people want pedigree animals - like dogs - quickly and cheaply, and do not care whether they come with papers.

He said these dogs can be legally imported but smugglers want to skip the import papers, quarantine period and fees, which can cost at least \$350.

A golden retriever puppy costs \$50 in Thailand but can go for up to \$2,400 in pet stores here. When brought in by smugglers, they go for \$1,000 to \$1,500.

Veterinarians said they have treated banned animals or have heard of others who have done so. But they urge the owners to donate them to the zoo or hand them over to the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA).

The trade's global nature worries activists, including Mr Louis Ng, executive director and founder of the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society.

They said illegal sellers are likely to be part of a syndicate as otherwise it would be difficult for them to bring in an animal from, say, the US.

X-ray machines as well as the police and ICA staff are deployed at Changi Airport and other checkpoints. Mr Ng suggests the use of sniffer dogs which have been deployed with some success in South Korea and Britain. But the AVA said they were less cost-effective than other measures.

AVA also monitors online sources. Smugglers face fines of up to \$500,000 or up to two years' jail, or both.

Ultimately, greater consumer awareness is needed to curb demand for illicit animals. Said Mr Yeo: 'If people insist on papers when they buy pets, then we have a chance.'