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'Tiger Pelt' and hedgehog for (illegal) sale

By Grace Chua

'Tiger Pelt' and hedgehog for (illegal) sale – Sting operations catch 3 individuals hawking such wares online

Sting operations by wildlife activist here have caught three individuals trying separately to sell pieces of tiger skin a whole tiger pelt, and a hedgehog.

It is not known yet whether the skins found by undercover officers of the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) are real, but the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) has seized the items and launched investigations.

No one has been arrested yet.

The haul was the result of Acres' first operation to nab people who advertise such illegal ware online. They follow an exercise completed this year, which homes in on people selling tiger parts in shops, the authorities then clamped down on jewellery shops selling ornaments allegedly made of tiger parts.

The sale of tiger parts is blamed world-wide, all six tiger species are highly endangered; by some statistics, just 3200 are left in the wild.

They are protected under Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which 175 countries ratified, including Singapore.

Singapore law provides another layer of protection in the form of the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act, which states that importing, exporting, re-exporting or possessing any Cites species without a permit, can land one a fine of up to \$50,000 per species with a cap of \$500,000 and/or two years in jail.

Traders may not know that the penalties apply even if the parts are fake.

Acres investigators, posing as buyers, met individuals whom they had contacted via email or phone after seeing online ads selling "tiger skin".

One investigator inquiring about the whole pelt met his contact in a Choa Chu Kang void deck; the one seeking to buy pieces of skin went to a Serangoon flat.

The pelt was going for \$400, and the pieces at \$128 each.

Acres' shaky, hidden camera video footage showed both sellers were aware they were breaking the law.

One, remarking that his trade was “quite sensitive”, avoided putting the skin out in the open, and led the investigator up a flight of stairs to view it.

“One buyer in Geylang asked me to bring it down, but I didn’t want to take risks,” the seller said.

The other seller said she smuggles tiger-skin amulets from Thailand through customs and immigration by wearing them like they are her own.

“Most of the time, I make it through,” She said in a matter-of-fact tone.

During Acres’ operations, its investigators give the signal for AVA officers to swoop the moment the items are presented and their asking prices are declared.

AVA wildlife regulatory head Lye Fong Keng said the whole “tiger skin” has been sent to the lab, but appeared to be domestic-animal hide with stripes painted on it.

The hedgehog was seized in Acres’ operation in Hougang on Sept 15. A man was trying to sell it for \$150. The AVA also seized from him two Indian star tortoises, an alligator snapping turtle and an elongated tortoise – all Cites-listed species.

Acres head Louis Ng, noting that technology has given fillip to the trade, said: “We’ve been doing undercover ops on traditional Chinese medicine shops, but technology has caught up with us. It’s alarming how easy it is to buy these protected species online.”

He urged members of the public to report such posting to Acres.

A search of such online listings turned up the tiger-pelt post, along with advertisements for exotic pets such a capuchin monkeys and sugar gilders. Some date back to 2007.

Under the Wild Animals and Birds Act, these creatures cannot be sold or kept as pets without a licence, for fear they may spread exotic disease or that these alien species might escape or be released into the wild, upsetting the local ecology.

Those convicted of keeping such animal may be fined up to \$1000 per animal, and the creatures seized.