

Sting busts wildlife smuggling rings

By Charlotte Wilkins

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Smuggled animal skins at a retail market. Photo / AP.

Sting operations by wildlife activists in central Africa have broken up highly organised smuggling rings sending endangered species abroad, leading to the arrest of key dealers and the recovery of hundreds of kilograms of ivory, turtle shells and animal skins.

Observers said the arrests, coordinated by the Last Great Ape Organisation (Laga), a wildlife law-enforcement NGO, in Cameroon, Gabon, the Central African Republic and Congo-Brazzaville marked a big step towards regional enforcement of laws protecting endangered species.

In Gabon, undercover agents posing as smugglers picked up 16 dealers in possession of 150kg of illegal polished ivory.

The haul was estimated to be worth about £90,000 (\$190,000) on the international market and was probably destined for China, the world's leading market for so-called "white gold", via Nigeria, one of the main smuggling routes. All 16 were remanded in custody.

Luc Mathot, of the agency Palf (Projet d'Appui a l'Application de la Loi sur la Faune), which put pressure on the authorities to take part in the co-ordinated clampdown, said it was the first time ivory dealers in the country had been put in jail.



"The law on ivory dealing in Gabon is finally being enforced."

In Cameroon, three dealers trading 17 turtle shells were arrested.

A cargo of 1000 African grey parrots worth an estimated £65,000 was intercepted being smuggled into Nigeria and a policeman was arrested on suspicion of accepting a £2000 bribe to allow it on its way.

The operation in the Central African Republic recovered seven leopard skins, two lion skins and two tusks concealed beneath a pile of cowhides in a dealer's truck. He was arrested. The skins were thought to be destined for Europe or the United States to decorate wealthy homes.

Activists in Ouezzo, in the north of Congo-Brazzaville, found a further 30kg of ivory.

Laga founder Ofir Drori said the co-ordinated campaign was a breakthrough in a region where

countries often signed up to global protections for animals but poor legislation and weak enforcement meant they failed.

"African governments have started realising international trafficking has to be fought internationally," he said. "These co-ordinated arrests in four neighbouring countries are a warning to the international trafficking rings - no longer can you hide on the other side of a border."

Drori said the slaughter of animals for the trade was driven by demand from overseas. An ivory baron in China, or a trophy hunter in America, would place an order which would trickle down through the criminal network to central Africa.

The smugglers were not lone operators but part of a sophisticated mafia which had grown during the past couple of decades. "Wildlife extinction doesn't start with poachers, it starts with wealthy white-collar criminals who have been operating in central Africa for more than 20 years."

A huge obstacle facing wildlife law enforcement is tackling the corruption endemic within central Africa. Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and the Central African Republic are ranked by Transparency International as some of the most corrupt countries in the world.

Revenue generated from the illegal wildlife trade, the single greatest threat to species survival, is estimated to be about US\$10 billion (\$13.5 billion) to US\$20 billion, just behind illegal drug and firearm sales, according to United Nations figures.

Sometimes drugs and wildlife trafficking work in tandem. A chimpanzee was found sandwiched between 50kg of cocaine and marijuana in one arrest in Cameroon four years ago.

- Observer