

African countries, and the United States (UNODC, 2020). The amount and type of trafficked wildlife varies across countries. For reptiles, Asia and the United States are the top destinations, while South America and Africa are the top sources for illegal animals (UNODC, 2020). Figure 1 displays a world map with the top import and export countries of reptiles.

Figure 1. Top Import and Export Countries of Reptiles

Source: UNODC

The largest exporters of big cats (e.g., tigers, lions) are Thailand, India, and South Africa. The largest importers of these animals are China, Thailand, and the United States (UNODC, 2020). For Pangolin scales, the largest exporters are African countries, and the largest importers are Asian countries (UNODC, 2020). Although this data shows that different countries vary widely in their prevalence of trafficking illegal exotic animals, Asia, Africa, and the United States are identified as the largest importers and exporters.

Reptiles

Reptiles are commonly traded as exotic pets. Some trading of reptiles is legal, but many reptiles are trafficked. Trafficked reptiles include reptiles that are wild-caught and then sold and reptiles that are sold in areas where they are banned. Some of the most trafficked reptiles are turtles and tortoises, snakes, lizards, and crocodilians (UNODC, 2020). As

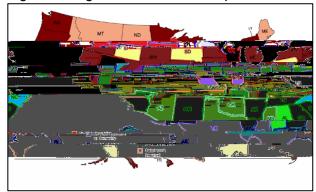
shown in Table 1, turtles and tortoises represent the largest proportion of the 10 most trafficked reptiles. However, these 10 most commonly trafficked reptiles account for only about 33% of all reptiles seized and known to authorities (UNODC, 2020).

Table 1: Top Ten Reptiles Seized

Animal	Percent Among Top 10 Trafficked Reptiles
Yellow -spotted river turtle	29.1%
Indian star tortoise	21.3%
Asian box turtle	11.2%
Russian tortoise	8.9%
Radiated tortoise	8.2%
Black spotted turtle	7.0%
Greek tortoise	6.1%
Pig-nosed turtle	3.0%
False map turtle	2.9%
Mali uromastyx	2.3%



Figure 2. Big Cat State Ownership Laws



Source: Big Cat Rescue

State and Federal Laws

The United States has federal and state laws that try to help control the exotic animal trade. One of the most influential federal laws for animal trading is the Lacey Act. The Lacey Act, "makes it a federal crime to break the wildlife laws of any state, tribe, or foreign country, and then move or trade the wildlife across U.S. borders" (Department of Justice (DOJ), 2022). Wildlife trafficking is treated similarly to drug trafficking. Investigators as part of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) try to stop trafficking through investigations and seizures done at common import and export areas of the United States. Every state has its own laws regarding ownership of exotic animals. Some states have almost no regulation, while others ban almost all exotic animals. Many states laws are very nuanced or outdated. For example, in South Carolina you can own a monkey, but not a lion (FindLaw, 2023). Other states require you to have a permit or license for certain animals. For example, in Vermont you need a license for an anaconda, but not a crocodile (FindLaw, 2023). In Nevada, animals such as elephants and monkeys are allowed to be kept as pets, but foxes and raccoons are not allowed (FindLaw, 2023).

Consequences

The exotic animal trade has many adverse consequences. This includes the death of animals, environmental impacts, and financial impacts. Wildlife trafficking can lead to the extinction of animals in the wild and the death of ecosystems (UNODC, 2019). Animals can be hunted to extinction and the loss of one animal in an environment can lead to the loss of other animals as food sources change (UNODC, 2019). Non-native animals can also be released into an environment and destroy the local ecosystem. An example is Burmese pythons being released into the Florida everglades and threatening the local ecosystem there by becoming an apex predator. Table 2 shows the dramatic decline in species due to the introduction of Burmese pythons. The -100% means that, currently, there are no known signs of rabbits or foxes in the Florida everglades.

Table 2: Consequences of Burmese Pythons in Florida Ecosystem

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Animals	Decline in Population
Bobcats	-87.5%
Opossums	-98.9%
Raccoons	-99.3%
Rabbits	-100%
Foxes	-100%

Source: USGS

Wildlife trafficked animals also face animal cruelty. Many animals are killed in transit, while many others are underfed and not taken care of (UNODC, 2019). The exotic animal trade also can involve human injury and death because hunters are commonly armed and will fight each other and law enforcement in order to keep their animals



(UNODC, 2019). Wildlife traffickers can also make a large amount of money which can affect the local economy by taking resources away from local communities (ICE, 2023).

Data Sources and Limitations

Data for this Research in Brief were taken from a variety of sources, but the major sources used were United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), National Humane Education Society (NHES), Big Cat Rescue, and the Department of Justice (DOJ). All these data sources have several limitations. First, wildlife trafficking is only tracked by animals that are seized, seriously undercounting the number of animals trafficked that are known to these authorities. Second, there is no comprehensive data on the true fiscal aspects of the industry and the number of animals seized for each year. Without this data, it is difficult to make statements about the growth or decline of wildlife trafficking over time. Third, since the exotic animal trade is international, not all countries report their data for illegal animal trafficking. As a consequence, it is difficult to get accurate data from many countries and compare it to data from other countries.

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