

# UK's wildlife crimefighters

Fighting the trade in animal parts doesn't just happen abroad – vast quantities are seized coming into, or in transit through, the UK. James Fair reports.

**T**he issue of the illegal wildlife trade brings to mind exotic products such as ivory, rhino horns and tiger bones, but an inventory of items seized by UK customs officials between April 2012–13 demonstrates how much broader the problem is.

During that period, for example, nearly four tonnes of medicinal products containing extracts of endangered species, mainly plants, and 500kg of face cream made from caviar (50g pots can sell for \$425) were confiscated at Heathrow and Thames and Felixstowe Ports.

Seizures also included 466 live Hermann's tortoises, 126,000 pots of a health supplement that contained extracts from *Dendrobium* orchids and 326 ivory items.

Everything that's taken is controlled under the worldwide treaty known as CITES – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

Grant Miller, senior officer in charge of the Border Force CITES team at Heathrow (pictured), said, "Every animal, every tortoise, every reptile, matters. It's not just the big shipments that we're after. Clearly, some stuff is getting through, but we will endeavour to secure our borders."



## RHINO HORN

The majority of the rhino-horn trade is bound for the Far East from Southern Africa, so how do any items end up at Heathrow? First, because Heathrow is a transport hub, so some air freight passes through wherever it's going; and second, because as horn has increased in value in recent years, criminals have started to target museums and stately homes in the UK that have rhino heads on their walls. There was even a case in 2009 of an antiques dealer who tried to smuggle out a horn that he had obtained from a zoo rhino that had died.

## HEADS, SKULLS AND TROPHIES

Items seized include the bear heads, wolves and bobcats, plus lion and caracal skulls, as well as stuffed crocodiles and alligators. As with much of what customs officials see passing through Heathrow, all of these can be legally imported into the UK with the right paperwork. "We do have people who make no endeavour to get the right papers who are straight smugglers," said Miller, "and these are the people we are going after."

## TIMBER

Customs seized 2.3 tonnes of Indian red sandalwood passing through Heathrow on its way to Hong Kong. The fact that it was being transported by courier freight – the most expensive way to ship something – shows how great the potential profits are. Red sandalwood is in demand for furniture, religious icons and incense. Other woods confiscated include Brazilian mahoganies and rosewoods, and various ramin species from South-East Asia.

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## TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Regular seizures made by customs officials at Heathrow include bear-bile products, tiger-bone plasters, American ginseng and turtle jelly, a foodstuff that can contain the powdered shell of a rare native Chinese turtle, believed to be good for the skin. British Border Force officers picked up 1.6 tonnes of this product at Thames Port in 2012. Also commonly shipped are health supplements containing controlled substances such as orchids or the costus plant *Saussurea costus*.

## IVORY

Ivory confiscated at Heathrow has mainly been in transit to Hong Kong and Guangzhou in China. Items seized include the tusk of a young elephant that had been carved into a religious icon and ivory bangles concealed in a wooden artefact. The carved tusk had come from Nigeria, and been painted black to make it look like something made of wood, but a little bit of steel wool soon uncovered the truth. "We estimate that we have the ivory of 12 elephants just in this room," said Miller.

## CORAL

This is a growing market. In 2013 a British man was sentenced to six months in prison after trying to smuggle 750kg of hard corals and clams from Vietnam into the UK. "Corals are under threat from many different sources, including loss of reefs, a rise in surface temperatures and overfishing, and it's important not to exploit particular species," said Rachel Jones of ZSL, who works closely with Border Force officials to ensure consignments without the correct paperwork don't get through.

# MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

## Jaws goes Down Under

I have just seen a news report that took me back to 1974, when Peter Benchley's novel *Jaws* was first published.

But this time I wasn't reading about people in a fictional beach resort hunting down a lone 'killer' shark, but about the government of Western Australia actively targeting any shark that happened to swim too close to its shore.

In a disgracefully ill-informed attempt to reduce the number of shark attacks, fishermen have been given a mandate to patrol drum lines (deployed by the state 1km off busy beaches) and shoot all large sharks caught on the baited hooks.

There are so many things wrong with this scheme: the baited hooks will target other wildlife, not just sharks; the three main sharks being targeted (great white, tiger and bull) are all threatened species, and the great white is supposed to be protected; and past experience in other parts of the world proves that culling will not reduce the number of shark attacks anyway.

But, above all, there is no need for Australians to be scared of sharks. Despite claims to the contrary, shark numbers are not increasing in Western Australia. There have been only 92 unprovoked shark attacks (including 20 fatalities) in

the state since 1791 – not many, considering the number of people in the water who are paddling, swimming, snorkelling, diving and surfing.

The best way to reduce the number of attacks is to provide information boards at beaches known to be frequented by large sharks, as they do in California. These explain how to reduce the risk of being attacked, such as staying out of the water when sharks are more



Who's the killer – the great white shark or us?



*The best way to reduce attacks is to provide information at beaches visited by large sharks.*

active, for example – dawn, dusk and during the night.

We can't just remove sharks from the food chain – with no idea of the consequences – simply because we like to play in the sea. Have we learned nothing in 40 years?

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.