

- **Border Security**

## Interpol Op Thunder nabs wildlife criminals

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Among Op Thunder successes were confiscating wild cats.

South Africa is no stranger to wildlife crime as shown in Operation Thunder, an Interpol-led effort against environmental crime in the broadest sense of the words.

The worldwide enforcement operation against wildlife and timber crime co-ordinated by Interpol and the World Customs Organisation (WCO) disrupted crime networks and saw hundreds of arrests internationally, the France-headquartered policing body said.

Codenamed Thunder 2021, the month-long (October) operation involved customs, police, financial intelligence units and wildlife and forestry enforcement agencies in 118 countries: the largest number of participating countries since the annual operation started in 2017.

Thousands of cars, trucks and cargo ships suspected of transporting protected wildlife and timber were searched at checkpoints in all regions, often with specialist sniffer dogs and X-ray scanners.

Searches targeted illegally traded CITES-listed specimens, ranging from timber to live big cats, primates, reptiles and birds, as well as derivative products including clothing, beauty products, food items, traditional medicines and handicrafts.

CITES is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, an international agreement to ensure trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. Trade in breach of CITES is illegal.

With results are still coming in Operation Thunder 2021 has so far seen more than a thousand seizures and identification of 300 suspects, triggering worldwide arrests and investigations linked to illegal trading, processing, exporting and importing CITES-listed wildlife and forestry products.

Further arrests and prosecutions are expected as investigations continue to unfold.

“Organised crime networks generate billions in illicit profits every year, at significant cost to our environment as well as the associated impacts of fraud, corruption and violence,” Interpol Secretary General Jürgen Stock said.

“We are seeing continued globalisation of crime, which means only an international response can be effective, as demonstrated with the latest Operation Thunder. Every one of our 195 member countries has a role in combatting this threat, either directly or in follow-up investigations,” he added.

Total worldwide seizures reported to date include: 478 kg ivory pieces and 487 kg ivory-derived products; 75 big cat parts, 29 live big cats; 856 kg pangolin scales; 531 turtles and tortoise; 171 birds; 336 reptiles; 4,843 kg marine products, including corals; 75,320 kg timber, including 313 cubic metres of rosewood and 1.4 million plant-derived items

“With criminals trafficking endangered species along the same routes used to smuggle other illicit goods, customs is strategically placed at borders to intercept illegally traded CITES-listed products,” said WCO Secretary General Kunio Mikuriya.

On the border with Mozambique, South African authorities seized 460 kg of abalone bound for China. Abalone molluscs are at critically low levels because of over-exploitation.

Myanmar authorities made 13 seizures nationwide totalling 68 tonnes of restricted and endangered hardwood species.

Polish authorities intercepted 29 illegal caviar shipments including one batch valued at US\$ 10,000. International trade in all species of sturgeons is CITES-regulated.

In one of the operation’s largest plant-based seizures, the UK’s Border Force in Felixstowe seized 1.3 million tablets containing CITES-listed *Saussurea Costus* plant from a maritime container.

Spain’s Guardia Civil seized more than 250 CITES-protected items worth EUR 250,000, including turtles, parrots, ivory-based merchandise and timber.

Authorities in the Netherlands intercepted 145 snakes and other reptiles in luggage at Schiphol International Airport, as well as 454 live birds, mostly African songbirds.

In seizures suggesting emerging trafficking routes, Nicaraguan authorities seized 657 cubic metres of rosewood bound for China, while Hong Kong authorities seized 3.2 tonnes of red sandalwood in freight from the United Arab Emirates.

Demonstrating the link between wildlife and drug crime, Operation Thunder 2021 saw Mexican authorities arrest three Chinese nationals smuggling Totoaba bladders, sea cucumber and coral along with methamphetamine and cash.

“The volume of seizures in Operation Thunder 2021 proves how serious the transnational organised crime threat is for wildlife species and ecosystems across range, transit and destination countries,” said CITES Secretary General Ivonne Higuero.

Operation Thunder 2021 is the fifth in a global series initiated by the Interpol Wildlife Crime Working Group. Co-ordinated jointly by WCO and Interpol, with the backing of the CITES Secretariat and the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC), operational efforts are funded by the European Commission’s department for International Partnerships and the UK’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).