

Kenya: Illegal Insect Trade - 5,300 Ants and a Global Problem



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Messor cephalotes, also known as the Giant African Harvester Ant, is a large, aggressive harvester ant species native to eastern Africa, particularly in countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia.

In Kenya, two ant smuggling cases recently made global headlines. It's part of a growing problem with biopiracy and the illicit trade in wild animals.

In Kenya last week, four young men were [found guilty of attempting to smuggle ants](#). In two separate incidents, the men — two Belgians, a Vietnamese and a Kenyan — were given the choice of a fine of \$7,700 (€6,911) or a year in prison for their misdeeds. The Belgian suspects admitted that they had the ants in their possession but said they were collecting them as a hobby. One of the men is a long-time ant fan and belongs to a Facebook group called "the Ant Gang." However the Kenyan judge didn't believe them.

The Belgian men, both 19 years old, were found with 5,000 live ants, packed into 2,244 small plastic test tubes with cotton wool, in their possession in a guest house near a national park. The Vietnamese and Kenyan men met at the airport and went to buy ants together. They were found with 300 ants in about 140 tubes. The judge in the case described the Vietnamese man as simply a "mule" for the ants.

Valuable ant species

Some of the ants in the men's possession were giant African harvester ants (Messor cephalotes) which are valued at anywhere between around \$100 to as much as \$220 each. Had the ant smugglers been successful, they would have made a lot of money.

The Kenya Wildlife Service, or KWS, said the court ruling against the alleged ant smugglers was a "testament to [Kenya's](#) zero-tolerance stance on wildlife trafficking."

Smuggling ants can also be seen as biopiracy, the KWC said, as it is an infringement of the so-called Nagoya Protocol, "an international agreement which aims at sharing the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources in a fair and equitable way."

Biopiracy is a growing problem in Kenya. The Webster-Merriam dictionary defines it as "the unethical or unlawful appropriation or commercial exploitation of biological materials (such as medicinal plant extracts) that are native to a particular country or territory without providing fair financial compensation to the people or government of that country or territory."

According to the KWS, the latest incident in their country shows how the illegal wildlife trade is potentially changing, moving from "iconic large mammals to lesser-known yet ecologically critical species." This kind of crime is the fourth-largest transnational criminal activity after the trade in drugs and counterfeit goods, and human trafficking.

The illegal trade in insects is considered a smaller part of this illicit trade. There is no way of knowing how big the global insect trade is, because there's no centralized database kept of these sorts of seizures. But there's no doubt that collectors and enthusiasts are willing to pay for illegally imported insects such as ants and spiders.

Prized for building skills

The giant African harvester ant is sought after by ant enthusiasts because, the KWS explains, it exhibits unique behaviors and complex colony-building abilities. Ant collectors observe the latter in what are called formicariums, an art form where the colony can be observed.

Collectors keep them for observation in so-called formicariums. The giant African harvester ant is the largest of the harvester ant species and can be as long as 20 millimeters, with the queen ants as large as 25 millimeters long.

Kenyan magistrate Njeri Thuku said that every species must be protected. "Our wildlife, from ants to elephants, sustains our ecosystems and national heritage," she argued.

The KWS concurs. "Traffickers often underestimate the ecological value of smaller species, but their role in our ecosystems is irreplaceable," the agency said in a statement.

Ants are important players in our ecosystems. They improve soils, control some pests and spread seeds. If they're removed and introduced into new environments the consequences could be fatal under certain circumstances.

The red fire ant is a good example of how. Native to South America, the red fire ant has been found in locations in Europe over the past two years — the first colonies were found in Sicily, Italy, in 2023. If not eradicated, the aggressive ants, who likely arrived in imported fruit or soil, could cause serious environmental damage in Europe. It's unlikely that giant African harvester ants could survive as easily in Europe though because they require higher temperatures to thrive.

Zoonotic danger

The [illegal trade in wild animals](#) brings other risks too, when it comes to human health. The transport of the animals often happens in unhygienic conditions and increased, unsupervised contact between humans and wild animals increases the risks of what is known as zoonosis, an infectious disease transmitted from animals to humans.

There are plenty of examples, including salmonella, coronaviruses, Mpox and bird flu.

Around three-quarters of all emerging human infectious diseases originate from animals, Germany's Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union, or NABU, says. It calls the wildlife trade "a recipe for pandemics."

Researchers have found that there are between 540,000 and 850,000 unknown viruses in mammals and birds that have the potential to infect humans. And scientific studies have also shown that just over a quarter (26.5%) of mammals in the wildlife trade "harbor 75% of known zoonotic viruses, a level much higher than domesticated and non-traded mammals."

This story was originally published in German.