

Malaysia Seizes Nearly \$1 Million in Trafficked Wildlife at Airport

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By REUTERS

KUALA LUMPUR — Malaysian authorities seized trafficked ivory tusks and pangolin scales worth nearly \$1 million over the weekend, airport customs officials said on Wednesday, the latest in a series of seizures in Asia of products made from endangered animals.

Malaysia has been singled out by conservationists as a major transit point for the illegal trafficking of endangered species, as well as products made from them. Last month, Hong Kong seized more than 7,200 kilograms (kg) of ivory tusks shipped from Malaysia, the largest single seizure in 30 years.

Officials on Sunday afternoon found 23 ivory tusks, weighing about 76 kg, in a cargo warehouse at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), the Customs Department's assistant director-general of enforcement, Mohammad Pudzi Man, told reporters.

The tusks, valued at 275,000 ringgit (\$64,162), had been shipped on an Etihad Airways flight from Lagos, Nigeria, via Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Later on Sunday, six sacks containing 300.9 kg of pangolin scales worth 3.9 million ringgit (\$909,939), were found in the same cargo warehouse. The scales were shipped from the Democratic Republic of Congo on Ethiopian Airlines.

Both shipments were sent to fake addresses and their recipients could not be traced, Mohammad Pudzi said.

It was not clear if Malaysia was the final destination for the shipments, he said.

Multiple wildlife seizures have been made at KLIA this year, and investigators said airport personnel could be involved in the illegal trade.

"We don't have proof but I believe that they (trafficking syndicates) exploit our systems and procedures in these smuggling activities," Mohammad Pudzi said, adding that steps were being taken to strengthen screening and enforcement.

KLIA officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Sunday's discoveries or the alleged potential involvement of airport staff.

Scales from pangolins, the world's most poached animal, are prized in some Asian countries for their use in traditional medicines. All eight pangolin species worldwide are threatened with extinction.

In May, Malaysia seized over 700 kg of pangolin scales in the largest haul seen in the country. Wildlife experts say scales from the mammal could fetch up to 1,500 ringgit (\$346) a kg on the local black market.

Globally, up to 30,000 elephants are killed illegally every year to feed demand for expensive ivory products in countries such as China and Hong Kong, according to WildAid, a wildlife nongovernmental organization.

China, the world's largest importer and end-user of ivory tusks, plans to close all its ivory carving factories and retail stores by the end of the year.

(Reporting by Rozanna Latiff; Editing by Tom Hogue)

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