

# Online illegal wildlife trade targeting PHL's monitor lizards

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The Asian water monitor, also called common water monitor, is a large varanid lizard native to South and Southeast Asia. It is one of the most common monitor lizards in Asia.

Commonly seen in forests, lakes, ponds, rivers or streams, Philippine “bayawak,” or monitor lizards, are fast-becoming the most common traded wildlife in the Philippines. The Internet and smartphone technologies, with the help of social media, are driving them to the brink of extinction.

Hunted for their skin, meat and parts, these large forest lizards are now fast-becoming a popular pet among so-called hobbyists. They are kept in the aquarium while still young, and later on transferred to man-made lagoons or ponds with steel mesh as they grow older and bigger.

Through the Internet in computers or smartphones, buying and selling of wild monitor lizards are now openly done in social media, pushing the endangered species to the brink of extinction.

While the trade of the monitor lizards in the Philippines is relatively small compared to other markets, such as Japan, Europe and the United States, the authors of the report, “The Trade of Live Monitor Lizards [Varanidae] in the Philippines,” Emerson Y. Sy and Antonio N. Lorenzo of nongovernment group Traffic named the Philippines both as importer and exporter of illegally sourced and traded monitor lizards.

This highlighted the need for authorities to step up the work in curbing illegal wildlife trade in the country.

## Ecosystem function

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources-Biodiversity Management Bureau (DENR-BMB) said it is important to protect and conserve monitor lizards because they are vital constituents of the food web.

Monitor lizards feed on a variety of food types, such as insects, crabs, snakes, fish, etc., thereby controlling the population of their prey.

In turn, they are a source of food to larger predators, such as crocodiles and raptors.

In addition, monitor lizards are also excellent ecological indicators due to their high degree of sensitivity to even a minor change in the environment.

At the same time, as some Philippine monitor lizards are uniquely fruit-eating species, they also play the role of a unique seed disperser in the forest.

## Endemic species

There are 11 known monitor lizard species in the Philippines which are native and endemic to certain restricted areas in the country.

Three of them are the only known frugivorous, or fruit-eating, species in the world. They are the northern Sierra Madre forest, Gray's and Panay monitor lizards.

The others are the Bangon water monitor lizard, Philippine yellow-headed water monitor, Enteng's water monitor lizard, marbled water monitor lizard, Philippine white-headed monitor lizard, Palawan monitor lizard, Rasmussen's water monitor lizard, and Samar water monitor lizard.

## 'Bayawak' for sale

Anchored on the 30-month online study and review of 30 years (1989–2018) of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) trade data, the study revealed that a total of 541 individual bayawak representing 13 species were documented for sale from September 2017 to February 2020.

Sold from as low as \$8 to \$29 (P436.64 to P1,407) to as high as \$16,667 (P808,616.17) depending on the species, the monitor lizards are both imported and exported, the CITES trade data analysis show.

The Philippines imported 671 live individuals of 20 species from at least 20 countries, and exported 144 live individuals of nine species during the period of 1989 to 2018, the study said.

## Online shopping

As social networking sites, such as Facebook, has become the most popular marketplace in the world, online buying and selling has become a breeze for a wide range of products, including illegally sourced or collected wild plants and animals.

It became even more popular during the community lockdowns put in place last year by governments worldwide due to the pandemic.

Ironically, whether they are plants or animals, wildlife trading is illegal in the Philippines unless the trader is armed with special permits from the DENR or the BMB.

Some of the laws that make wildlife trade illegal are the Republic Act 9147, or the Wildlife Act; Republic Act 9072, or the Caves Act, Republic Act 7586, or the National Integrated Protected Areas System (Nipas) Act and its amended version, the Republic Act 11038 or the Expanded Nipas Act.

The DENR or the BMB has not issued a special permit for harvesting monitor lizards in the wild since 2001. Yet the report noted the rampant online trading in Facebook, which became the subject of the online survey.

## Market price

With the market shift from physical to online trade, the report revealed that on Facebook alone, a total of 359 monitor lizard posts by 187 unique accounts involving 13 species and 541 individual animals were documented during the 30-month online survey of 20 Facebook groups.

The quantity of monitor lizards per post ranged from 1 to 40 individuals. The typical price of a juvenile, ranged from P700 to P1,500, or as low as P400 per individual.

One post documented by the authors even offered a CITES Appendix I-listed Komodo dragon for P850,000 in August 2018. CITES Appendix I list include the most endangered species.

The authors noted that out of the 187 unique accounts, at least 11 traders had been observed to use at least two Facebook accounts.

## Deactivated Facebook groups, accounts

Interviewed via Messenger on March 1, Sy noted that Facebook has shut down secret and private groups suspected of promoting online illegal wildlife trade.

By Sy's estimate, 344 groups were deactivated by Facebook so far. The oldest group was created in December 2009 with a membership ranging from 6, which was created a few days before it was deactivated, to nearly 52,000 individual accounts.

While Facebook is a member of the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online and is working with Traffic and others through a multifaceted approach to address the issue, Sy said the system could only do so much.

Encouraging Netizens to report to Facebook via its system the suspicious groups or accounts, he said, it is a “hit or miss.” The system cannot detect groups and accounts that use coded messages in transacting business, he said.

However, although hundreds of accounts have been deactivated, hundreds more are expected to take its place.

“There are now newly created groups. It will be good to ask Facebook what it can do to prevent this? Do they plan to deactivate or suspend the accounts that create these groups also?” he asked.

## **Online surveillance**

Wildlife law enforcers from the DENR-BMB and the DENR-led Task Force Philippine Operations Group on Ivory and Illegal Wildlife (Pogi) are conducting online surveillance to combat illegal wildlife trade, now a P50-billion annual underground economy.

Facebook’s deactivation of secret and private groups used by wildlife traders was confirmed by Rogelio Demelletes, senior science specialist and a member of the Task Force Pogi.

“Even my own accounts which I use in my surveillance operations were deactivated, too,” he said.

## **Gargantuan task**

DENR-BMB Acting Director Amelita D.J. Ortiz said while the department is working to curb the illegal wildlife trade, its limited resources is unable to cover the magnitude and scale of the online illegal business.

“The DENR cannot do this alone, that is why we are working with other government agencies and the law enforcement units like the National Bureau of Investigation,” Ortiz told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on March 1.

She said the DENR is also banking on the help and support of netizens to report suspicious activities so the concerned authorities could act appropriately.

## **Transnational crime**

The online illegal wildlife trade is not unique to the Philippines. It is a global problem as markets go online to reach out to more buyers, said Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim.

Because of the profitability of illegal wildlife trade, it grew into one of the largest transnational crimes next to humans, drugs and arms trafficking over the decades.

Lim told the BusinessMirror via Messenger that the move of illegal wildlife trade to online markets have been reported in recent years.

“Online wildlife trafficking has escalated the illegal trade, with millions of online users potentially having direct access to illegal suppliers all over the world with just a few clicks. This makes it more difficult for authorities to detect and to take effective action,” said Lim, a former DENR-BMB director.

She said that authorities of Asean member states have also reported arrests and convictions of online wildlife traders, and seizures of traded wild animals and their parts.

Lim said last year, the National Bureau of Investigation-Environmental Crime Division of the Philippines arrested two online wildlife traders and seized 42 turtles and tortoises in one operation.

Also last year, an Indonesian court convicted an online wildlife trader caught with over a dozen reptiles, including a critically endangered turtle.

In 2018, Malaysia seized over 680 wildlife and parts in three separate operations against wildlife cybercrime.

## Concerted effort

Lim said there has been a concerted effort by authorities, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and the private sector to regulate online spaces.

In 2018, technology companies, including Google and Facebook, which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp, she said, pledged to combat wildlife cybercrime.

“Yet, a variety of virtual markets are still easily available for those involved in the trade, despite efforts to curb illegal trade online. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2020 report cites an example of this difficulty when in May 2019, Facebook added a functionality to its site enabling the public to report illegal wildlife trade, and subsequently shut down various Indonesian Facebook groups,” she noted.

However, the illegal traders moved to alternative media platforms, even keeping the same group names they had on Facebook.

“These efforts take time to create impact. But we believe that over time and with more users made aware of the effects of illegal trade, there will be more civil society policing to weed out illegal sellers, buyers and groups and put pressure on online companies to take responsibility for illegal activities on their platforms,” Lim said.

“National legislations have to keep up with this trend, as many of the existing laws may not enable enforcers to take action on [the illegal activity] online. Authorities also have to be innovative in their approach to deter wildlife cybercriminals,” she added.

According to Lim, Asean have laudable initiatives that are worth supporting or replicating.

She said online trade, including on wildlife, is regulated by law in Vietnam.

“However, the challenge in the prosecution of these cases is in collecting adequate evidence,” she said.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia and the Philippines, the governments are in the process of amending their respective wildlife laws to address advertising and illegal online trade.

In Thailand, its Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation has established the “Forest Hawk” Task Force that has established a social media group.

It urged all Thai and international wildlife conservation NGOs to share information on suspicious activities, and enforcement action among its members.

## Building capacity

Lim said building capacity among the wildlife and other related authorities to monitor online trade—specializing in investigation and prosecution of online wildlife crimes, infiltrate existing online wildlife markets, collect evidence using digital forensics and develop institutional enforcement strength focused on wildlife and cybercrimes—is needed to address the gaps in combatting illegal wildlife trade.

“New technology should be constantly learned and employed to strengthen these efforts and keep up with the changes,” she said.

In parallel to these efforts, Lim added that every individual who uses social media should be equipped with the knowledge and appreciation for the importance of species to remain in their natural habitat.

“They should help report such activities to the authorities as well as put pressure on sellers, buyers and those who create spaces for illegal wildlife trade in order to drive them out of the virtual marketplace, just like how they are being driven out of physical markets, shops and trade shows, she said.

“At the regional level, it would be beneficial to implement mechanisms to develop capacity and share information among countries on the presence of online illegal wildlife trade operations and identified online criminal organizations, especially those with transnational illicit operations,” Lim said.

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