Germany is a hub of trade in exotic reptiles

From Philip Bethge, for DER SPIEGEL 46/2014
Translated into English and edited by Robert Sprackland, Ph.D.
11 October 2014

Germany is a hub of trade in exotic reptiles. The smugglers risk the extinction of species of many rare lizards, geckos and tree crawl.

When it comes to Lanthanotus borneensis, connoisseurs are quite awesome. They talk about the "Holy Grail" of reptile populations, of a "mythical creature" and a "living fossil". It has created on the Borneo Earless Monitor, never noticed.

The essence is as brown earth. Throughout his life, spends the reptile like munching earthworms, in secret. It is active primarily at night. His legs are short, the eyes small. Ear openings it has not.

All this seems to work irresistible to Kriechtierfans, and therefore the Earless Monitor from the Southeast Asian tropical island is currently the star of the reptile lovers in Europe.

Up to EUR 10 000 to pay collectors for a couple of about 40 centimeter long lizard. Here, the nondescript animal has long been not on the radar of reptile fans. Only in the past two years appeared copies of the lizard suddenly in relevant Internet forums.

"Taubwarane be taken actively by a small group of traders targeting, used couriers to smuggle the reptiles from Borneo," it says in a report of the wildlife conservation organization Traffic. This spring alone, had been collected for the European market 40 copies. Here the Earless Monitor is extremely rare. Between 1877, when it was first described, and 2000 were caught in a very Borneo total of only about a hundred animals.

Conservationists are alarmed. Global Exotics trade threatens some of the rarest reptiles of the planet, be it Japanese Pip tortoises or fringe-tree worm, Mount Kenya Bush Viper or Te Paki-Geckos. They come from countries such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Vietnam, New Zealand and Guatemala. Amateur herpetologists crave the scaly treasures that are often strictly protected in their countries of origin in the European Union, however, may be sold freely.

"Germany is a hub of commerce," says Sandra Altherr of the wildlife conservation organization Pro Wildlife, who wants to send a report on the subject to the EU Commission in Brussels this week. "What is forbidden in the countries of origin may not be here legally," says Altherr. She hopes for a recasting of the European species
protection regulation: "Many of these animals are on the Red List of Threatened Species, the exploitation for the pet market is a serious threat to their survival."

Reptiles dealers implement in Europe million. Especially on Facebook and Internet exchange markets offer the often colorful live goods. Change to relevant reptiles exchanges such as the Terraristika in North Rhine-Westphalia Hamm the animals by the thousands to the owners.

Most Terraristenfreunde are content with this-bred corn snakes, leopard geckos or beard agamas that are neither threatened nor rare. A few of the Kriegtriesammler but forfeited valuable rarities, which are often also just a few clicks.

1200 Euros for example, requires providers "Tom Ch" on the scene site Terraristik.com for two rare Rhino Agamen from the mountain forests of Sri Lanka ("the female lacks the tail tip. Otherwise, both perfectly"). A "Yann bidier" from France recently offered the pinecone lizard from Australia to pay for the collector up to 15 500 euros per copy. "Kirill" from St. Petersburg, in turn, Scene Name "Kruff Kruff", sent by e-mail the same all price lists with dozens of exotic reptiles, including gray-Geckos from New Zealand, the pair to 5300 euros, and - "price on request" - Cnemaspis psychedelica, a gecko with iridescent orange-yellow-green-blue scale pattern, which was discovered on the small Vietnamese island Hon Khoai until 2009.

All these animals should it on the market do not give because their export or fishing is banned and they are protected in their countries of origin. Against the law does not violate their sale in the EU yet. The problem: None of the relevant international agreements, this species under protection.

"It is ethically objectionable, what is being done there, but we have no legal recourse," says Dietrich Jelden, species conservation expert at the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation in Bonn. The business carrying trains "organized by criminal" and was highly lucrative. "Who first opens up a new source of a popular reptile's really a killing," says Jelden.

Stopping can be the smuggling only when the perpetrators are caught already in the exporting country. Just as the British and the Kenyans who were apprehended last year in Kenya with six horn vipers of Bitis Art Worthingtoni. The two could not explain why they had the venomous snakes worth about 2,500 euros in her hotel room. The Briton claimed to make a holiday. It did not help him. A court sentenced the offender to five years in prison.

Many smugglers come off lightly, however. In September this year about police took at the airport of San José, Costa Rica's capital, set a 31-year-old man from Germany. Packaged in cans and plastic bags, he had no fewer than 184 frogs, 42
lizards and snakes in 9 luggage. But instead einzubuchten the Kriechtierdieb that law enforcers ran after him nine days.

In addition to the tidy profit lend rare and red-listed species their providers glory in the world of reptiles fans. "This has very much of a stamp collection," said Sandra Altherr. "The closer you get to the Blue Mauritius, the more prestige it enjoys in the scene."

The herpetological accolade overtakes those who manage to get hold of rare species not only, but also to multiply. Collector "Gunther Hoermann" example advertises on Facebook for even Taubwarane from our own breeding and takes reservations "for the reptile show in Hamm" counter. That the animals can only be descendants of Taubwaranen that were smuggled out of Borneo, is obvious. Hörmann, who probably sold under a pseudonym will not comment on it.

For conservationists are those online offers pure horror, but they boost demand at by reptiles, whose survival is seriously threatened in the wild."There are a lot of red-listed species that are traded demonstrably," said Mark Auliya, a biologist at the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research in Leipzig. This is especially problematic in animals "with very small-scale distribution".

Endemic Biologists call such species. If they come to the attention of collectors, may soon follow the Artentod. Threatened with extinction is for example the Campbell's Tree worm, which is found only in a single forest area in Guatemala. Close to extinction by the reptile trade, the McCord's snake-necked turtle from the island of Roti is south-west of Timor. While trade is prohibited by long-necked freshwater animals since 2001. In the international market, the animals end up yet again.

So what to do? In the case of Taubwarans example Traffic calls for the Listing on the so-called Annex I of the CITES Convention CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). Animals that are listed there, the world must be sent only under very stringent conditions, such as for science.

But Cites has disadvantages. Applications are usually made by those countries where the animals appear, reported Altherr: "And then also internationally enforce such requests politically is very complicated and lengthy." Often ranged in countries like Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Vietnam "neither resources nor passion" to push through trade prohibitions for individual species of reptiles.

"Less than ten percent of the world's reptiles described are listed in the CITES Appendices," complains Altherr. The Artenschützerin will therefore now take a different approach and do not take the country of origin of the species, but the EU as one of the largest markets for the exotic in the duty.
It calls for legislation along the lines of force since the 1900 US Lacey Act, which prohibits it fundamentally to act with animals whose import, export, purchase, sale and transportation is not permitted in any other country in the world. "A similar set of rules in the EU would be a great success," says Altherr. At the same time it calls for a "positive list" for the private consumer, shall stand upon the only safe, easy-held types of offspring.

Last week the Artenschützerin in Berlin advertised at a hearing of the SPD for their ideas. For it is also in the coalition agreement that "imports of wild specimens in the EU" and "commercial animal markets for exotic animals" shall be prohibited.

Can succeed there, to rescue animals like the Earless Monitor? Especially the case of nondescript forest dweller impressively shows can have the dynamism of trade in exotic reptiles.

The story begins on 30 May 2008 at 11.28 clock, as a team of biologists sitting at lunch in the rainforest of West Kalimantan on Borneo and discovered by accident a nondescript reptile in the foliage. Only later did the experts is clear that it was at the pangolin to the extremely rare Earless Monitor.

The biologists led by Betsy Yaap by the Australian James Cook University published their discovery in 2012 in a scientific journal. The location they gave the foresight to only a rough map and concealed the GPS data, because "can not be ruled out that could and abuse reptile collectors traders this additional information".

It has nothing availed. Not long after the animal was first offered for sale in online forums.