

Protecting the world's endangered species

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND CONSERVATION DEPARTMENT CUSTOMS AND EXCISE DEPARTMENT

October 13, 2002: Customs Launch No. 9 was on patrol near Lamma Island.

A fishing vessel came into view. There was nothing out of the ordinary about that, not in these waters.

But call it intuition; call it a well-developed sixth sense – something about this particular boat did not look right to the experienced officers of Launch No. 9.

As the launch approached for a closer look, the officers' curiosity grew. Why were there only two crewmen on a vessel this large? Weren't their complexions too pale for people who work on the water?

Shifting into full-alert mode, the patrol crew under the command of Senior Inspector of the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), Mr Raymond Tam Wai-man, manoeuvred alongside the suspicious vessel. A team of eight officers clambered on board to search the suspect vessel, while the others remained on guard on the launch.

Mr Tam said that once on board, the team's suspicions grew. "There appeared to be no fishing equipment on board, and no catch. And why was there no fishy smell?"

Finally amid the clutter of the engine room, the officers found a concealed compartment and began to remove its contents. Wah! The officers stared in astonishment at the illegal haul lying at their feet – 81 pieces of precious elephant tusk – a veritable elephants' graveyard of ivory. Once carved into jewellery and ornaments, the 506 kilograms of ivory would have a market value of more than \$1 million in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, the two "fishermen" registered looks of utter dejection. The perpetrator of the aborted smuggling venture has since been sentenced to 16 months in jail.

March 5, 2003: The territory's exemplary efforts to combat the illegal trade in endangered species have been recognised with two Certificates of Commendation from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, commonly known as CITES.



Commander of the Marine Enforcement Division of C&ED Mr Kwok Yim-kwan displays the seized ivory tusks.

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), which is the local CITES Management Authority, and C&ED, which enforces the laws against smuggling, received the certificates.

In his letter of commendation, the Secretary-General of CITES, Mr Willem Wijnstekers, wrote:

“My colleagues and I are well aware that Hong Kong has a long history of commitment to the implementation of CITES ... it has been a very strong supporter of the Secretariat’s work ...”

The ivory seizure “was particularly deserving of recognition because it demonstrated the close working relationship that clearly exists between the CITES Management Authority of Hong Kong and the Customs officers of Hong Kong”.

“The honour was beyond our expectations,” Mr Tam said. “When we are on duty, the only thing in our mind is how to do our jobs effectively.”



Mr Lay Chik-chuen, AFCD's Assistant Director (fifth from left), awarded the Certificates of Commendation to C&ED officers on behalf of the CITES Secretary-General.

In the 1960s, as concerns grew about the protection of the environment, CITES was born. Today, 165 states, including China, are signatories to the convention, which aims to ensure that trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. CITES was implemented in Hong Kong in 1976. It continues to apply to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region after June 30, 1997 through diplomatic notification by China.

The Animals and Plants (Protection of Endangered Species) Ordinance is the local legislation that gives effect to CITES in Hong Kong. The ordinance is administered by AFCD and enforced by C&ED.

Elephants and their ivory tusks are just some of the animals, plants and related products protected by CITES. Other endangered species that fall under its purview are sea turtles, bears and tigers as well as orchids and certain cactuses.



The tiger is one of the CITES-protected species.

According to C&ED, from 1999 to mid-2003, there were more than 500 prosecutions under the Animals and Plants (Protection of Endangered Species) Ordinance in relation to the illegal import and export of endangered species. Though Hong Kong is not a native source of endangered species, over 1,300 seizures have been made with a value of more than \$76 million. Six of these cases involved a total of about 700 kilograms of ivory, with a market value of \$1.5 million.



The orchid (Laelia purpurata) is also protected under CITES.

Acting Senior Forestry Officer of AFCD, Mr C S Cheung, said orchids, American ginseng root and crocodile meat were among the most commonly intercepted species at control points. “They are common souvenir items brought in by travellers. Large quantities of freshwater turtles are also smuggled for food,” Mr Cheung said.

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Group Head (Marine Enforcement) of C&ED, Mr F H Fong said: “Only on July 9, 2003, we seized more than 10,000 endangered turtles and tortoises.”

Mr Fong is full of praise for the way the two frontline departments co-operate. “Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation works hand in hand with us in the enforcement of CITES in Hong Kong,” he said.

Yet protecting endangered species takes more than law enforcement alone. Publicity and education also play an important role in enlisting the support of the community. Public awareness and compliance are what count the most.

It was with this mission in mind that the Endangered Species Resource Centre at Cheung Sha Wan Government Offices was opened in May 2001.

The centre displays about 500 specimens of some 100 endangered species – and products derived from them – which have been confiscated under CITES.



The Endangered Species Resource Centre houses 500 specimens.

Visitors to the centre can see the tragic consequences of smugglers' greed – giant panda skins, rhinoceros horn and shahtoosh shawls. There are also some live animals on display, such as a hill myna, box turtle, chameleon, iguana, python and leopard tortoise. A number of stuffed specimens are also exhibited. There are three aquariums – one for live coral, one for Asiatic bony tongue and one for sea turtles.

“We organise guided tours at the resource centre for traders, students and the public as well as enforcement agencies and foreign organisations,” Mr Cheung said. “They can learn more about different endangered species by seeing the samples or live species displays.”