

# The Dark World of Animal Trafficking



by Kirk V. Bhajan

In late June, Coast Guard officers intercepted a pirogue headed for the Cedros shore carrying forty goats and two sheep. Four men were detained. All the animals eventually had to be euthanized. Pictures of the dying animals were posted on Minister of Agriculture, Clarence Rambharat's Facebook page. Rambharat warned, "Each animal, often diseased and malnourished, has a local buyer. Perhaps it's your local butcher, meat market vendor, roadside meat vendor or livestock farmer. Without a local hand to pass an illegally trafficked animal into, there is no illegal trade in animals."

According to Abby Karim, a member of The Hunter's Association of Trinidad and Tobago, the majority of people involved in poaching are not actual hunters. Karim explained that poaching is but a single piece to a larger puzzle that constitutes the criminal underworld. He said, "The illegal animal trade is tied very closely to the illegal gun, ammunition and narcotics trade. Prostitution, human trafficking, everything that takes place cross borders between Trinidad and Venezuela. What you find is that trade is conducted by persons that go across there to bring contraband".

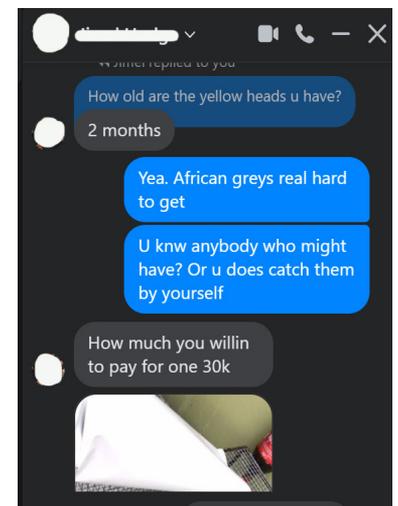
Information was provided to The Voice of Agriculture (VOA) which explained that when additional cargo space is available, animals are smuggled with contraband shipments as a way for traffickers to earn extra money. Animals that are more difficult to obtain such as jaguars, ocelots and African Greys fetch higher prices. More common animals such as the Orange Winged Amazon and Yellow Crowned Amazon parrots, macaws or Tufted Capuchin Monkeys are sometimes traded with mainland residents for items such as toilet paper or flour. Traffickers employ a variety of methods to smuggle wildlife, many of which are extremely inhumane. In July, images of drowned parrots which went viral on social media sparked the ire of many animal lovers.

## How easy is it to get an exotic animal?

VOA contacted a Cedros resident whose uncle is a poacher. We were warned to exercise great caution when gathering information saying, "It have death in that (the exotic animal trade)". We were told areas such as Cedros, Fullerton and Icacos are rife with poachers. Drug lords and affluent, powerful members of society place orders for these exotic animals. "Some of them just like having a luxury animal. Price is not an issue. You will be surprised at some of the people who put in orders. Once you have money, you can get anything you want", the source said.

VOA was notified that certain Facebook groups openly advertised protected animals. Contact was made with one such group, Zad and Zarif: Bird Whisperers, which had over 2000 members. The group's admin and founder, Azad Abdool, explained that due to the illegal posting of protected birds he now personally approves all posts. Abdool said, "We report any illegal activity posted on our group but firstly we have a personal discussion with them (the poachers), reminding them of the law. We had to remove some members and they were reported to the Forestry Division. These poachers can be easily caught but wardens need to be more active in these groups. Every day I still see illegal birds/animals being posted on other groups and no one bats an eye or even tries to give an input. If we do come across any illegal posts we report it. It's up to the authorities to take the next step".

It was extremely easy to get a hold of someone who supplies these animals. VOA contacted a man who advertised birds on Facebook. We asked if he had Yellow Crowned parrots and he immediately responded by sending pictures of the captive birds, each costing \$700. We also asked about obtaining an African Grey Parrot to which he responded by saying he can source one for \$30,000.



VOA contacted the Game Warden's office directly by calling 225-3836. A man who identified himself as "Game Warden Maharaj" answered. When asked what could be done with information on suspected poachers from these Facebook groups, Maharaj suggested we leave the information with him and he would "look into it". He also stated the Forestry Division receives "numerous calls" on such cases from the public "all the time".

## Can it be stopped?

There are currently 14 game wardens who serve throughout the island. According to the Forestry Division, during 2019, 176 persons were charged with 645 offences with a total number of fines amounting to \$538,250. Included in these offences were hunting protected animals, as well as possession of an environmentally sensitive species. In recent months there has also been an increase in the number of arrests of poachers.

When asked about some of the work that has been done to limit poaching, Conservator of Forests, Denny Dipchansingh said, "We have done numerous training programs and sensitization programs with Police, Customs, Coast Guards and other state agencies. The end of last year we were able to produce two handbooks to be used by various state agencies guiding them on how to proceed whenever they detect a wildlife offence. This was done in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Environmental Management Authority (EMA) and Forestry Division. Through patrols conducted by Forestry Officers as well as reports and information received from the public and networking agencies, officers are able to detect and investigate persons in possession of protected animals."

Dipchansingh continued, “Forestry Officers have the authority to request persons to show their permits to keep these protected animals. If the animals are found in the conditions contrary to the requirements of the permit, it can be revoked and the animal confiscated. A person can apply for a permit to keep a protected animal. This application will be processed, and if successful a permit to keep protected animals may be granted for a year and must be renewed annually.”

Kristopher Rattansingh, Chairman of The Wildlife and Environmental Protection of Trinidad and Tobago, said their members have frequently provided information to the Wildlife Section of the Forestry Division on matters of the illegal wildlife trade, ensuring authorities know of these occurrences. However, Rattansingh also lamented, “But who is to blame? The poachers? Yes, they do carry a part of the burden, but they aren’t the main part of the problem. Where there is demand, there will be a supply. Our fellow citizens are the problem. By creating the demand for these animals, poachers have a market and a reason to continue destroying the lives of many innocent animals. Authorities should have the the power and ability to adequately investigate ads and requests for illegal animals. We need them to have the ability to monitor communications of those involved and if necessary, obtain warrants to intervene and search those involved because that may be the only way to get to the root of the issue.”

The irony is that most of these Facebook groups are comprised of people who condemn exotic wildlife trade also. In some cases, one can see posts in support of the humane treatment of animals and a few posts later a picture of an illegally obtained bird held in captivity. Our anonymous Cedros source bluntly stated, “Poaching can’t be stopped. This is part of a bigger business; a way to make some quick money. This is just part of the hustle”. Until stricter measures are put in place, the illegal trafficking of animals is just another link to a chain of criminal activities that bind the very economic and cultural landscape of Trinidad.

Under the Conservation of Wildlife Act CHAPTER 67: 01, possession of a protected animal is punishable by law.

Conservation of Wildlife Act Ch.67: 01 major fines are:

- **Hunting in the close season: - \$10,000.00**
- **Hunting a protected animal: - \$10,000.00**
- **Possession of a second schedule animal during the close season: - \$10,000.00**
- **Possession of a protected animal: - \$10,000.00**
- **Hunting in a Game Sanctuary: - \$10,000.00**

Environmental Management Act major fine is:

**Hunting an Environmentally Sensitive Species: - fine is \$100,000.00 and 2 years imprisonment.**

