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Activists urge protection of hunted gecko species

KUALA LUMPUR: Wildlife activists on Wednesday called for the orange-spotted Tokay Gecko to be protected under international laws following a spike in smuggling of the lizard, mainly for medicine in China.

International wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC said in a statement that the trade, both legal and illegal, in the gecko known for its blue-grey skin and loud croak was on the rise across Southeast Asia.

It called for the nocturnal animal to be protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) as a "stitch in time" for the Asian gecko.

"TRAFFIC is alarmed at the massive increase in trade of these geckos," said Chris Shepherd, deputy director of TRAFFIC Southeast Asia.

"If the trade continues to mushroom, it could take years to repair the damage currently being inflicted on gecko populations," he added.

The animals are captured across Southeast Asia,

especially the Philippines as well as Indonesia, according to a new report launched by TRAFFIC, which points out their "rapacious collection."

They are usually killed and dried, and shipped to China for use in traditional medicine billed to cure various diseases, including HIV and cancer. Tokay wine or whiskey is also sold as an energy booster.

"Recently...the medicinal demand for Tokay Geckos has skyrocketed, with dozens of new websites in Malaysia, a major hub of the trade, dedicated to buying and selling Tokay Geckos," the statement said.

TRAFFIC said it would investigate this trade. The TRAFFIC report also said claims of the gecko's potential as a cure "may be indicative of an elaborate hoax."

The Tokay Geckos, which can grow up to 40 centimetres (15.7 inches), are also popular pets.

Malaysia has pledged to fight wildlife smuggling, which activists say is rampant in the Southeast Asian nation due to regional demand for exotic dishes, pets, or traditional medicines derived from animals. — AFP