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Geckos at risk over AIDS cure claim

KUALA LUMPUR: Wildlife activists have 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.

Demand for the Tokay Gecko has skyrocketed in recent years after online blogs, newspaper articles and wildlife traders extolled the consumption of the lizard's tongue and internal organs as a miracle cure for HIV, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia said in a report.

TRAFFIC said such claims were unfounded and "indicative of an elaborate hoax." The Philippines' government in July also warned that using geckos to treat AIDS and impotence may put patients at risk.

"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.

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.

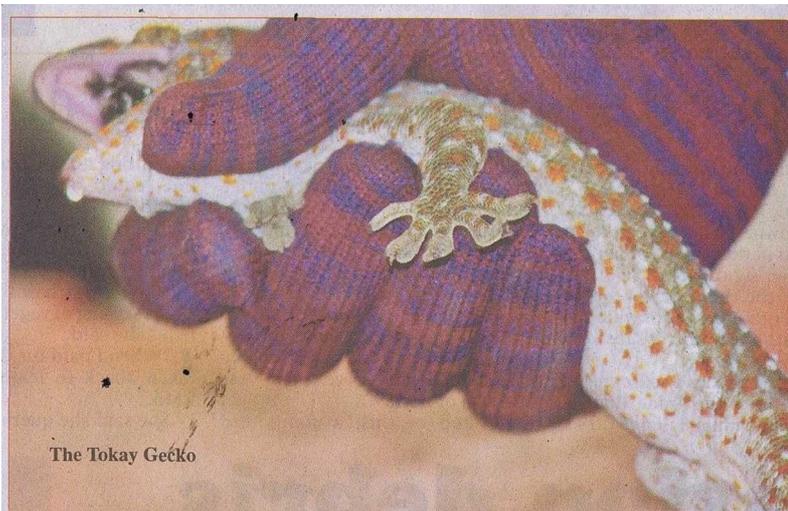
Malaysia has pledged to fight wildlife smuggling, which activists say is rampant in the Southeast Asian nation due to regional demand for exotic dishes, pets, or traditional medicines derived from animals.

TRAFFIC said more than eight and a half tons of dried geckos were legally imported into the United States between 1998 and 2002 for use in traditional medicine.

Huge numbers are traded within Asia and it said Malaysia has emerged as a key hub to meet demand, especially in China.

It said 1,000 geckos believed headed for Malaysia were recently seized in Cambodia; while a couple have been detained for trying to smuggle nearly a \$1 million worth of lizards from Thailand to Malaysia. Customs officers in Indonesia's Java island also recently foiled a bid to smuggle dried Tokay Geckos bound for Hong Kong and China using expired permits.

Shepherd said the Tokay Gecko remained poorly protected by national legislation and called for the lizard to be protected under CITES, the international convention on endangered species, before it becomes extinct.



The Tokay Gecko