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PETALING JAYA: Wildlife trade watchdog TRAFFIC has called for the protection of the *to'keh* (or tokay) gecko, following a sharp boom in illegal smuggling of the lizard in South-East Asia for medicinal purposes.

TRAFFIC Southeast Asia said the demand for the geckos skyrocketed recently, following unfounded claims on Asian websites and blogs

that consuming tokay gecko tongue and internal organs could cure HIV and cancer.

"We are alarmed by the massive increase in trade of these geckos," said TRAFFIC Southeast Asia deputy director Chris R. Shepherd in a statement here.

"If the trade continues to mushroom, it could take years to repair the damage cur-

rently being inflicted on the gecko population," he said, adding that it was urgent to protect these reptiles under CITES - the international convention on endangered species.

The tokay gecko is a nocturnal Asian lizard growing up to 40cm in length and easily identified by its orange-spotted, blue-grey skin and the loud sound it makes.

TRAFFIC said the geckos are being sourced from South-East Asian countries, like the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, to meet demand in China.

It said Indonesia exports an estimated 1.2 million dried tokay geckos from Java each year, exceeding the official export quota of 45,000 live animals for the pet trade.