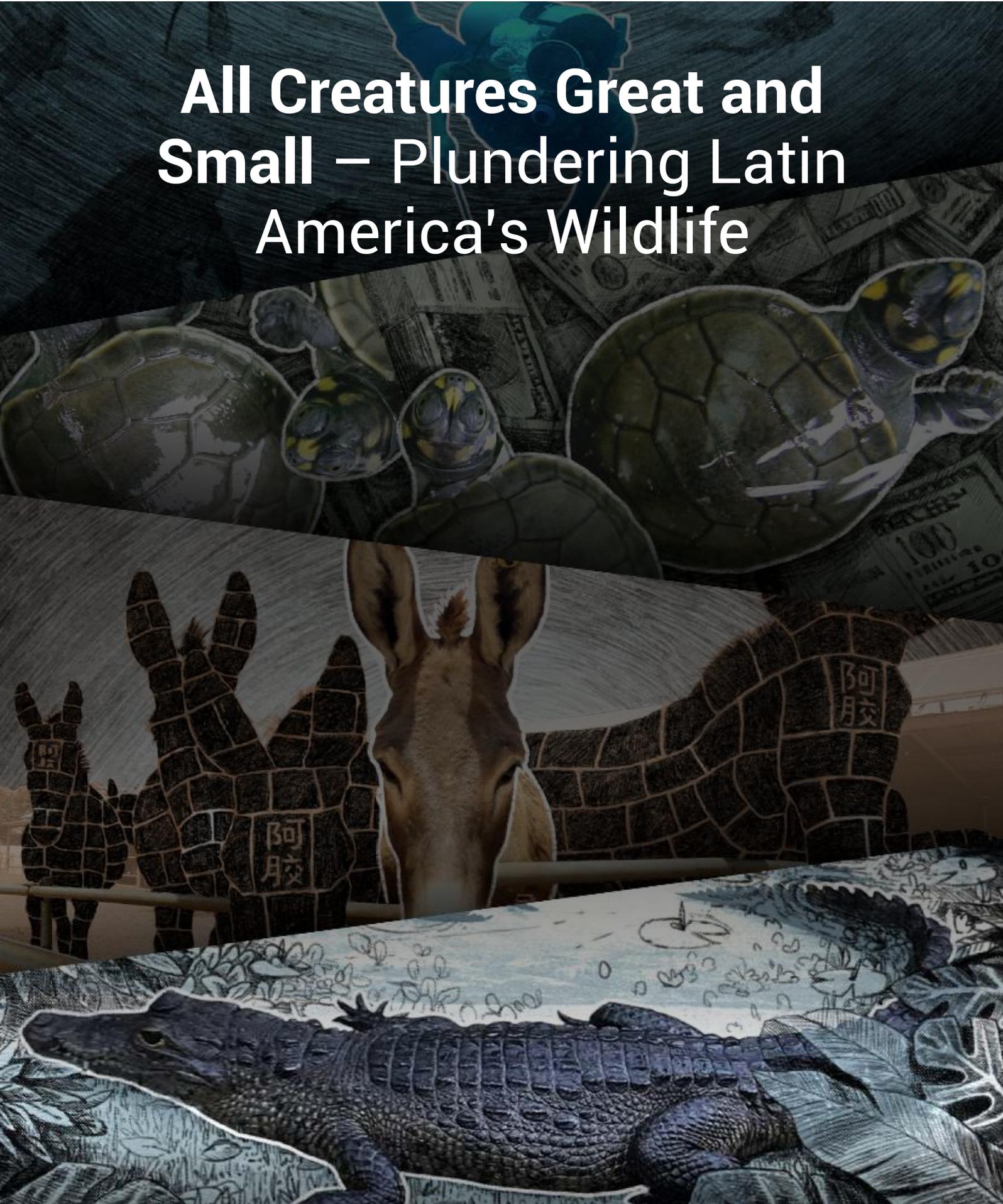


All Creatures Great and Small – Plundering Latin America's Wildlife



All Creatures Great and Small – Plundering Latin America's Wildlife

Wildlife trafficking goes deeper than commonly understood.

Deeper under the sea in Honduras where sea cucumbers are fished by the ton to feed demand in Asia. Deeper into Colombia's hinterlands where the donkey population has plummeted, their skins sold to make gelatin in China. Deeper into Peru's turtle hatcheries and Mexico's crocodile farms, where specimens intended to help restore populations in the wild are being trafficked all the same.

This investigative series was carried out in conjunction with American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS).

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1. Donkey Skin Trafficking on Colombia's Northern Coast

By César Molinares

When hundreds of skinned donkeys appeared on Colombia's northern coast without explanation, locals – and later authorities – started asking questions. The answer, as it was in many of these wildlife cases, was China. But the case also revealed the area was ready-made for this type of trafficking.

The outrage began where it often does: with a cute photograph of the animals in question. In the photo, the donkeys appear to be leaning into the camera for a group shot, their ears pointing in different directions. One appears to be smiling.

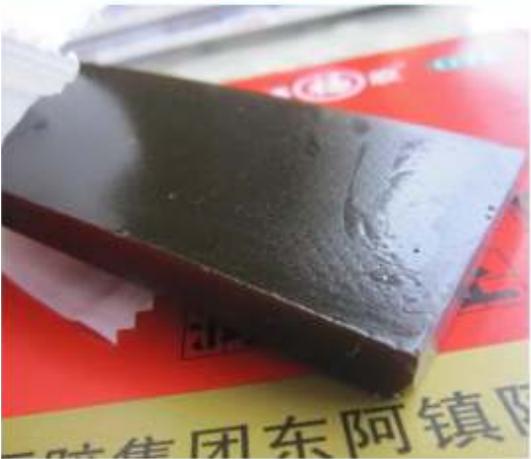
But the reports were not happy. It was October 2016, and El Heraldo, the leading newspaper of Colombia's fourth-largest city, Barranquilla, was [reporting](#) that an increasing number of donkey carcasses were being found along the northern coast. In one municipality alone, locals had counted 55 skinned animals.

The first theories centered on the leather industry. The region has numerous tanneries, and the newspaper quoted a local policeman saying they believed the “hypothesis that they are used for the leather industry.”

The news quickly spread, prompting the country's agriculture regulatory body, the Colombian Agricultural Institute (Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario – [ICA](#)), to issue a [report](#) saying that 180 tons of donkey skins had been exported to China in 2015. ICA added that the main exporters had not complied with the law.

The Attorney General's Office followed, opening an investigation. They set up checkpoints, where they stopped several trucks carrying donkeys. Some had license plates from Medellín and Envigado, two cities hundreds of kilometers south of the Caribbean coast. The trail lengthened.

WHAT IS DONKEY-HIDE GELATIN?



-  Donkey skins are highly sought after in China to make *ejiao*, also known as donkey-hide gelatin.
-  *Ejiao* is an ingredient of traditional Chinese medicine, it is used to treat anemia, dizziness or insomnia.
-  It is either prepared as gelatin or mixed with pollen or oyster shells to form balls of paste.
-  Fake *ejiao* is widely sold in China, made from the skins of mules, horses and pigs, or even from shoe leather.

Later, the Attorney General’s Office flipped a participant in the scheme. The collaborator told authorities that the Sucre case was not an isolated one and that the theft and sale of donkeys was happening in municipalities in the neighboring departments of Córdoba, Sucre, Bolívar, Atlántico and Magdalena.

To be sure, in early 2017, the Atlántico department reported that as many as 600 donkeys had simply “disappeared,” as *Semana* magazine [reported](#). The collaborator told prosecutors from the Attorney General’s Office it was part of a scheme that included clandestine slaughterhouses and international buyers.

In a report that followed, prosecutors made references to the illegal trafficking and unauthorized slaughter of donkeys and horses that went as far back as the 1990s.

“Above all, in Lorica and Sahagún [municipalities of Córdoba], there were and there are illegal companies where these animals are collected and sacrificed without any licenses...[so their] meat, skin, bones and internal organs can be sold,” they reported.

But these more recent cases were different. The massive slaughter and sale of donkeys created a shortage of the animal in a place where they are employed on farms, as well as for the transportation of goods, food and people. It was, in short, a crisis.

Colombia: A Wildlife Trafficker’s Paradise

Colombia is a wildlife trafficker’s paradise. Estimates of the number of trafficked species in Colombia range from 346 to 670; and the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Unit (Unidad de Rescate y Rehabilitación de Animales Silvestres — [URRAS](#)) at Colombia’s National University [estimates](#) that as many as 46,000 animals are trafficked each year with an approximate worth of \$17 million.

Between 2017 and 2020, the government [seized](#) 97,663 trafficked animals (around 25,000 per year), according to the National Police. The department of Sucre had the highest number of seizures with 30,189, followed by Magdalena and Córdoba, which had 18,768 and 13,559 respectively.

However, just using seizures to measure fauna trafficking paints a distorted picture of the real situation. Some of the country's hotspots for wildlife poaching, such as Amazonas or Chocó, have a weak state presence, and thus seize far fewer trafficked animals. Seizures also happen towards the latter end of the supply chain, after many of the animals are dead.

The seizures themselves also tell but a small part of the story. Environmental authorities calculate that they seize between one and ten percent of the total amount of illegally trafficked species in Colombia. And it is getting harder. Seizures over the past few years involved traffickers who switch out ink for water in pens to traffic freshwater fish larvae to Asia. Others use small film canisters to traffic poisonous frogs. Traffickers sedate and tape birds to the inside of suitcases, and they obfuscate trafficking behind falsified or illegally obtained paperwork.

According to [seizure data](#) from the Ministry of Environment, the most trafficked species in Colombia are usually turtles, iguanas, parrots, squirrels, monkeys and various types of venomous frogs.

The animals were sourced throughout the country. The amphibians came primarily from the department of Chocó; the birds were spread up and down the Andes mountains; and the mammals and reptiles were concentrated in the northwestern half of the country along mountains and coastal areas. Most of the animals appeared to be sourced from the north and northwestern departments, while just a few were poached from the south and southeast regions.

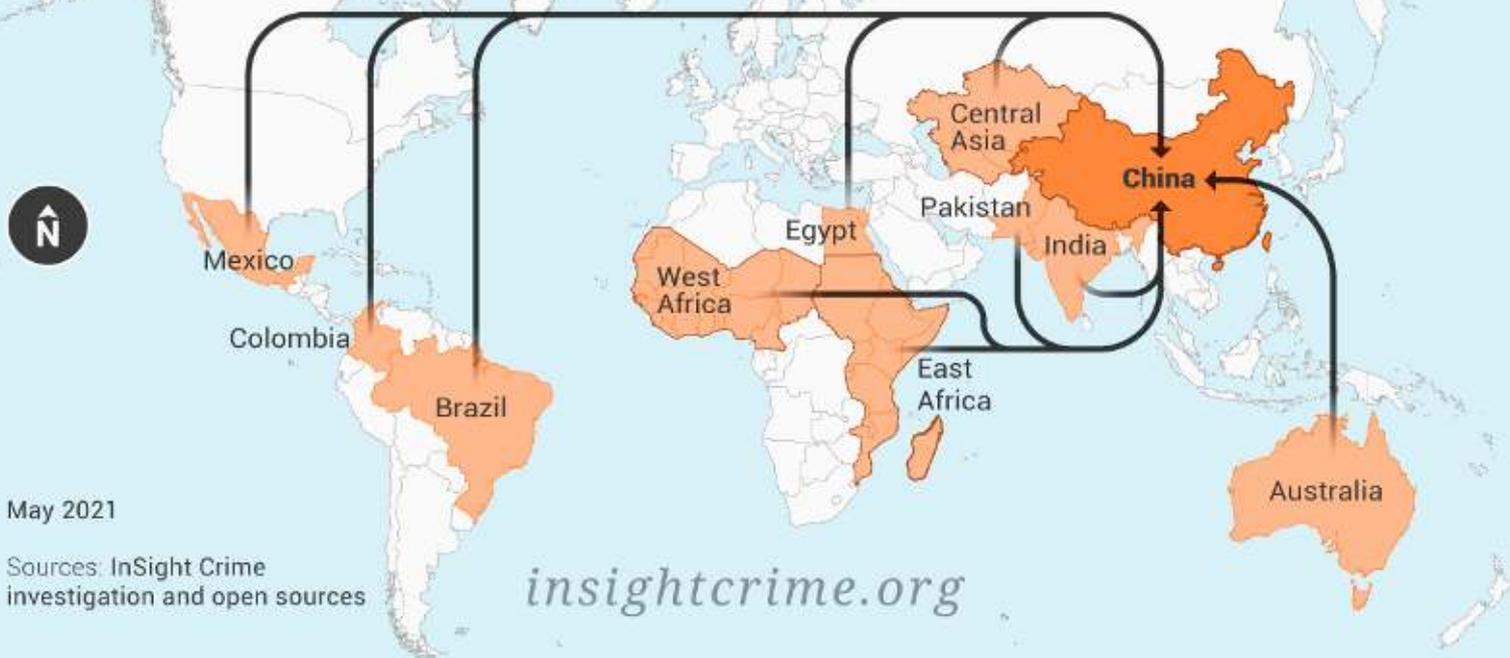
The motives for these trafficking activities are varied. [According to URRAS](#), the species most vulnerable to illegal trafficking are turtles (for their eggs), alligators (for their skin), iguanas and boas (as pets), parrots, macaws, troupials and mockingbirds (as pets), monkeys and sloth bears (as pets), jaguars and tigrillos (for their furs or as pets), and peccaries, tapirs, limpets and deer (for their skins).

The run for donkey skins in northern Colombia had its roots in China. In recent years, the donkey population of China has [experienced](#) a precipitous decline. The [cause](#) of the drop was related to a boom in the use of ejiao, a gel-like substance produced using donkey skins and herbs. [Ejiao](#) is used to treat rare skin ailments in China, as well as a moisturizer; some believe it helps with anemia, menstrual cramps and certain types of cancer. Demand is high. By one [recent estimate](#), China needs near four million donkeys per year but can only supply just under two million.

As China has faced an ejiao shortage, there has been [a run](#) on the donkey population in Africa and Asia: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe were among the hardest hit. Still, demand continued to rise, and purveyors continued

to scramble in Africa and beyond. Soon South America became an option, especially in places with a limited state presence and long traditions of contraband and animal trafficking, like some parts of Colombia.

From Where Does China Get Its Donkey Skins



Backroads, False Paperwork and Clandestine Slaughterhouses

InSight Crime tracked down the investigator from the Attorney General's Office forensics unit who carried out the investigation. The investigator said the criminal networks used the same mountainous back roads as drug and gold traffickers: These routes crisscross high, mountain ridges and jut through tributaries that connect to some of the most important rivers in the country. If they ran into a police checkpoint, they could camouflage their flocks amid the cattle, which also move along the trails.

Initially, the investigator said, the criminal group bought the donkeys and sacrificed them on farms they managed. But as the supply dwindled, they turned to stealing them. According to prosecutors, intermediaries paid between 300,000 and 800,000 pesos (between \$100 and \$250) per donkey, depending on whether it was stolen or purchased. Paradoxically, the price of these animals normally hovers around 50,000 pesos (about \$16).

Prior to creating a storage and slaughter area, they used publicly accessible cattle pens, including one known as corrales negros (unlicensed corrals), located in the municipality of Betulia, Antioquia department. These installations gave them some cover, the investigator said, allowing traffickers to obscure the illicit origins of the animals.



Ejiao products for sale in China. Photo: The Donkey Sanctuary

This was a crucial part of the scheme. To move the donkeys, transporters had to carry two key documents. First, the Internal Sanitary Mobilization Guide (Guía Sanitaria de Movilización Interna – GSMI), which certifies the animals’ origin and their vaccinations. Second, the so-called Transport Guide (Guía de Transporte), which certifies that the transport company, the animals’ point of origin and their final destination are all legitimate. In both cases, the owner or transporter also has to show authorities that the brand on the

animals corresponds with the paperwork. According to Colombian law, the imprint should show the location and date of branding, the name and identification of the brand’s owner, and the symbol or initials of the brand, along with a signature.

However, there are ways to obtain this paperwork illegally. Prosecutors have found in other cases that livestock farmers and transporters pay bribes to ICA officials for vaccine certifications. They have also found brands that do not correspond with ownership – they are new, invented or simply placed on top of the old brand.

“Any of this paperwork can be falsified pretty easily,” one investigator told InSight Crime.

It is a vibrant trade. One man, who asked we identify him as “El Tano,” said that he was from a rural area near where the donkeys were being stolen, and that he and owned a number of small trading stalls. He bought and sold cattle, but he also said he was an intermediary for donkey rustling.

“Any of this paperwork can be falsified pretty easily,”

In practice, this meant he bought donkeys from wholesalers and then sold them to processors. He would load the animals into vehicles, which brought them to local, clandestine slaughterhouses. Neighbors corroborated his account. The area is bereft of authorities, so his activities went undetected.

Exporting the Hides

About 70 kilometers south from these storage points, there is a clandestine slaughterhouse on a farm, which, according to the Attorney General's Office, is owned by a couple who authorities say were among the groups trafficking donkey skins. The slaughterhouse is only two kilometers from the main highway along the Caribbean Coast, just behind a breeding zoo. Prosecutors say the couple also owns a tannery in Barranquilla.

The tannery, breeding zoo and slaughterhouse were complementary businesses. Stolen donkeys were run through the slaughterhouse for their skin, which was processed with a brine, then stored in cold rooms. Later, they were transferred to refrigerated trucks, before being sent abroad alongside the products from the tannery. Their destination, the Attorney General's Office believes, was China. The donkey carcasses were sent to the zoo, where the owners would feed them to the alligators and crocodiles they were breeding, one former employee told InSight Crime.

The Attorney General's Office said the local branch of Colombia's Regional Autonomous Corporation (Corporaciones Autónomas Regionales – CAR) helped the couple. The CARs are supposed to regulate the breeding and sale of animals. There are 33 of them nationwide, stationed in regions where fauna and flora are commercialized.

In this case, prosecutors suspect that CAR representatives were purposely overstating how many animals were born in the breeding zoo, which was legally exporting crocodile and alligator skins. The extra animals on paper gave the exporters extra space in the cargo hold to send the skins.

“There is a market for space” in the cargo hold, the investigator explained to InSight Crime.

This space can be used in more than one way. In addition to sending the treated donkey skins, exporters can send skins and furs of other animals that have been captured and killed illegally. Prosecutors also suspect that money launderers and drug traffickers can buy this space.

The trades overlap in other ways as well. Coincidentally, drug traffickers often use same types of chemicals that animal skin traders do when treating their products, including potassium, hydrochloric acid and sulfuric acid.

“It is a convenient coincidence,” the investigator said.

There are several Colombian companies that export donkey hides. When InSight Crime asked authorities about them, they said they'd found that none of the companies complied completely with the legal requirements for these exports. Many of the hides, for example, did not have a certificate to prove they had been cleaned and sanitized for export.

When InSight Crime inquired about these missing certificates and other violations cited by the authorities, representatives of the companies brushed off the accusations. In response to questions about the sanitary certificate, for instance, they said China did not require it.

ICA, company representatives said, were also remiss. They said the regulators were not asking for certificates of origin for the donkey hides. What’s more, the institute only kept records of bovines and buffalo in breeding farms. Without a registry of the donkey population, it was virtually impossible to keep track of the trafficking.



A pleasing drove of donkeys. Photo: El Heraldo

That left traffickers to commit their crimes in plain sight, according to a salesman of animal skins for one of the export companies who spoke to InSight Crime on the condition of anonymity. The salesman said he knew of a group of about ten buyers who obtained donkey hides from large wholesalers. Still, by the time InSight Crime spoke to him in 2019, the salesman said the crackdown by Colombian authorities was having an impact and that he was seeing fewer and fewer illegally-sourced hides.

What's more, the trade may be mutating. One prosecutor in central Colombia told InSight Crime that in a recent investigation she led, which unearthed a clandestine slaughterhouse, they found a Chinese national who purportedly specialized in camouflaging donkey parts for export, including both the skin and entrails, which have other uses. She added that prosecutors had intercepted phone conversations in which Chinese experts were teaching slaughterhouse employees how to meet all the standards for shipping these products to China without going through the big hide export houses.



2. The Illegal Sea Cucumber Trade in Kaukira, Honduras

By Héctor Silva Ávalos*

With supplies of sea cucumber waning in large parts of East Asia, Honduras has stepped into the breach. Brokers from Vietnam and Taiwan are now incongruous figures in small Honduran fishing villages, financing a thriving black market for the in-demand echinoderm.

Both banks of the salty canal near the town of Kaukira show vestiges of the boom and bust nature of life in this area. A pair of abandoned, two-story buildings lie near the end of the canal. Their rocky exteriors are held together by concrete, a luxury in places like this.

“They were nightclubs,” Rony, a fisherman who has made his life on the boats that navigate these waters, told InSight Crime.

Nightclubs with good drink and prostitution, he specified, where motorboats outnumbered the 4×4 trucks that roam Kaukira – located on a long tongue of land sitting on the northeastern tip of Honduras that can only be reached by boat.

The nightclubs were open until recently, Rony said, who asked that his last name not be used. The final nightclub closed in 2018, after the flow of money that brought cocaine to this archipelago began to fall after a series of raids by the Honduran Army and Navy, working with the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

Even so, some remnants of those luxuries survive. There is, for instance, a metallic yellow Hummer SUV that wanders, indiscreetly, through the dusty streets of the village. And the boats remain in huge numbers, parked next to the small homemade docks that extend to both sides of the canal on which the village is scattered.

It was early May 2019 when we visited, about a month and a half before the beginning of the lobster, shrimp and sea cucumber fishing season. These are the legal products that Kaukira's fishermen collect from the seabed around the coral reefs.

There are docks where up to four boats are parked, some with two outboard engines hanging on their hulls. The captains told us there are about 200 boats in Kaukira, which scoop up as much as 1,600 tons of sea cucumber during a six-month fishing season. These vessels are Kaukira's unofficial navy, its pride.

Its shame are the drugs. There is the [story](#) of Wilter Blanco Neptalí, the son of fishermen who became the head of the Atlantic Cartel. Or the [story](#) of Roberto and Seth Paisano, owners of fishing fleets and managers of the region's ruling National Party, who trafficked drugs and laundered money for the cartel.

The local fishing fleets also played their role. Rony told InSight Crime that he once took a trip as the accountant on a lobster boat. During the trip, the captain, whom he called Edwin, told him that other captains kept in contact with Colombian and Jamaican speedboats who were moving cocaine off the Honduran coast.

Edwin also told him that when the speedboats felt cornered by Honduran or US naval vessels, they would drop the cocaine in the water and contact the boat captains. They would then retrieve the cocaine and store it in Kaukira until someone else would pick it up and send it on its journey north. InSight Crime spoke to other fishermen and a prosecutor who worked similar cases and corroborated this form of operating.

By 2010, with the growth of local drug trafficking groups like Blanco's, these routes were some of the most active on the continent.

But the [bust](#) was coming. Blanco turned himself into authorities in 2016 and [pled guilty](#) to drug trafficking charges in the United States. The Paisano brothers were then [captured](#) in October 2019. And so the local fishermen turned to another product that drew far less law enforcement attention: sea cucumbers.

The trade was not exactly new. In Honduras' Bay Islands department (Islas de la Bahía), and specifically around the Caribbean island of Roatán, fishermen had been [harvesting](#) sea cucumber since 2007, albeit in small quantities.

That all changed when Taiwanese and Vietnamese intermediaries looking to supply their vibrant but depleted market in Asia arrived in Puerto Lempira, the capital of Gracias a Dios, and later in neighboring towns Brus Laguna and Kaukira. The foreigners explained that the sea cucumbers – which have the appearance of large slugs and inhabit the soil around the reef – were considered a delicacy in their part of the world.

And so began the next boom. In 2010, Honduras exported 550 tons of sea cucumber. By 2018, Honduras was exporting an estimated 1,600 tons, according to a report from the Central Bank of Honduras, which InSight Crime had access to. Kaukira is

the epicenter of this trade. The Honduran government estimates that out of every ten tons of sea cucumber exported, eight are from the fishing banks around Kaukira.

Honduras: Too Far and Too Deep

In Honduras, there are two groups of animal species susceptible to illegal extraction and trafficking. One is made up of mammals and birds that inhabit protected forest areas. These are sold mostly on the domestic market as exotic pets. Common species trafficked in this group are red guaras, parrots, medium-sized felines, sloth bears and monkeys, according to experts at the Forest Conservation Institute (Instituto de Conservación Forestal – ICF). It is not big business, they insisted but rather families of poachers eking out a living.



A fisherman dives for lobster in Honduras. Photo: AP

The second group consists of marine species that mostly inhabit the ocean floor on the Honduras Atlantic Coast, specifically lobster, snail, jellyfish and sea cucumber. This is big business. For Honduras, the fishing industry is a lifeline. In 2019, Honduras registered \$341 million in major seafood exports (shrimp, lobster and tilapia), behind only coffee, palm oil and bananas, according to a report from the Central Bank of Honduras which InSight Crime had access to.

Among this second group of legally registered marine exports is sea cucumber. However, millions of dollars of seafood products are also moved off the books, among them the vast majority of sea cucumbers harvested along Honduras' northern coast.

The government has set up mechanisms to monitor and control the trade. It is difficult and expensive to get a license, and there are also [yearly quotas](#) established by Honduras' fishing regulatory agency, the Fishing and Agricultural Administration

(Dirección General de Pesca y Agricultura – *Digepesca*). They also send biologists to monitor the fishing fleets that scour the seafloor for these valuable products. But there are relatively easy ways to bypass the regulators and lawmakers, especially in a place that is so distant.

Kaukira is located in the far northeast of the country where a jungle of precious woods and pines that extends inland towards the mountains gives way to the coastal plain. These open up into salty lagoons, which are hemmed in by small strips of land that separate the lagoons from the Caribbean.

"I knew I was deeper than I should have been, [But I had] the need to find more product."

Kaukira is on one of these archipelagos. It is literally where Honduras ends. What goes on in capital city Tegucigalpa, and other major cities like La Ceiba and San Pedro Sula, has little or no impact on remote Kaukira, its fishing business, the illegal drug trade, its booms, its busts, and the grey area where they all meet.

The sea cucumber trade is typical of this lack of oversight. Its dubious nature begins when divers fetch the slug-like creatures. Previously, when Honduran waters were replete with lobster, shrimp and snail, the divers harvesting this type of seafood mostly did not have to go deeper than 25 meters – a depth that most international experts believe is already testing the human limits.

But that changed quickly with globalization and subsequent overfishing. By the early 1990s, divers had to make repeated trips well below 25 meters. From those depths, divers need to surface slowly or risk getting decompression disease. Going to those depths repeatedly in a single day only heightens the risk. Known popularly as the bends, decompression disease can lead to partial or permanent paralysis, blindness and even death.

One man we met, Erasmo Díaz, said that he'd first suffered from the bends in 1990. He had been diving for lobster for 12 days straight at depths of up to 40 meters. During a typical day, his first dive was at 8:00 a.m. By 4:00 p.m., he would have gone through 18 oxygen tanks.

"I knew I was deeper than I should have been," Díaz recalled. "[But I had] the need to find more product."

Díaz was sitting on a wooden bench in the small dive association premises in Puerto Lempira when he spoke to us. He was flanked by a metal desk, several drawers and a fan, which was turned off despite the sweltering heat sneaking in from the street.

At 5:00 p.m. on that twelfth day of diving, as he climbed from the sea, he couldn't feel one leg. Three hours later, he couldn't feel his body. "Up to here," he said, as

he gestured towards his chest. It took a little while before the boat took him to the mothership, where they put him in an air decompression chamber, a treatment he would continue every day for two hours a day until he returned to shore.

By the time the fishing vessel docked, Erasmo Díaz's life had changed forever. The paralysis of his whole body subsided, but his right side remained substantially weaker and effectively ended his work as a diver. Díaz spent the next few years clamoring for assistance, but the company never responded, and the government never held it accountable, so in 2003, he founded the association of divers in Puerto Lempira. That was the office where we spoke. The association eventually sued the Honduran government, bringing the case of more than 2,000 divers before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

The sea cucumber trade has increased the list of victims. In the last five years, Díaz claimed, the extraction of sea cucumber has killed at least 50 young divers.

“With the sea cucumber, more people have come [to dive],” he said. “There are more injured and dead.”

Rony, the fisherman, agreed. He said the overfishing has pushed the boats further and further into the ocean, which has led to more and more injuries and deaths.

A Largely Illegal Trade

It is the boat captains who pay the divers. On average, 40 scuba divers with 40 assistants travel on these ships. Local recruiters called *saca buzos* (roughly translated as “get-a-diver”) liaise with the divers to agree on what they believe is a base salary. They are usually told to expect around \$300 for 22 days of offshore work. Half of that money is paid in advance. The other half is negotiated on the high seas, where the captains often abuse their power.

“They say that all the time: ‘On the ocean, I make the rules,’” Rony said.

The most common rule is lowering the price per pound when the boat is far away from the shore. But there are other tricks. One way to alleviate the effects of decompression is by smoking marijuana, which captains readily supply but discount from the divers' base salaries. Captains also often pay less for smaller sea cucumbers.

There is some regulation. By law, a government biologist from Digepeca is required to travel on the boats. The biologist is supposed to check the size of the sea cucumber to ensure that the divers are not extracting sea cucumbers that have not reproduced. (The same is true for lobster and other species). The government is also supposed to count the sea cucumbers, to ensure that the captains are not passing their quotas. However, Rony said the captains will often bribe the regulators to turn a blind eye.

The levels of illegal extraction are staggering. In 2018, the Honduran government granted 36 fishing licenses. Each license authorized the extraction of 20,000 pounds of sea cucumbers, or 10 tons. In total, the government authorized 360 tons of sea cucumber extraction; local officials told InSight Crime the captains extracted more than four times that amount.

Part of this system relies on the informal workforce made up of hundreds of divers, which local officials said harvest between 90 and 95 percent of the sea cucumbers in the area. But part of it relies on corruption, malfeasance, and a lack of resources. The government, for example, does not have a significant presence in Kaukira where most of the trading occurs.

Most of the sea cucumbers retrieved from the seabed go from the divers to the captains, and then to ports like Kaukira's, where Honduran and Asian intermediaries pay cash for them. According to dozens of interviews with officials and fishermen in the area, these intermediaries also finance boats, pay for gasoline, give advances to divers, and finance the illegal extraction of the merchandise. They also sometimes cover the divers' equipment costs: 35,000 lempiras (about \$1,400) for each air compressor and 18,000 lempiras (about \$740) per dive tank.

"They say that all the time: 'On the ocean, I make the rules,'"

Captains of the Ship

During a visit to the area, InSight Crime spoke with several ship captains, including one of the most well-known in Kaukira. His name is Fausto Echeverría. When we met, Echeverría was wearing shorts, a T-shirt, and a baseball hat. It's kind of the unofficial captain's uniform, we found, as we made the rounds.

In addition to captaining his own boat, he has several relatives who manage the smaller vessels that take divers out to harvest all kinds of marine life. These days, however, they rely mostly on the sea cucumber trade.

It can be good business. On average, each boat takes in some 3,000 pounds per trip, with middlemen paying a typical rate of 200 lempiras (about \$8) per pound. This means they get about \$25,000 per trip, which usually lasts three weeks. Per season, each boat makes six trips, so the captain can net \$150,000 per season.

Of course, that is far less than what can be made in Asia. In the formal Hong Kong market, according to 2015 estimates by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), one pound of sea cucumber could fetch \$230. At that price, the amount of sea cucumber extracted by a single Honduran fishing boat in an ordinary season could sell for around \$690,000 on the Asian market.

It is an even more profitable business when avoiding the overheads that come with regulation. Fishing licenses are limited and those that are available cost about 100,000 lempiras (about \$4,000). Therefore, the captains told us, it is cheaper to trade illegally. And if the Navy seizes the fishing gear – diving equipment and big, outboard engines, for instance – a captain with the right connections on the ground can get it all back, after paying a fine of 5,000 lempiras (about \$200).



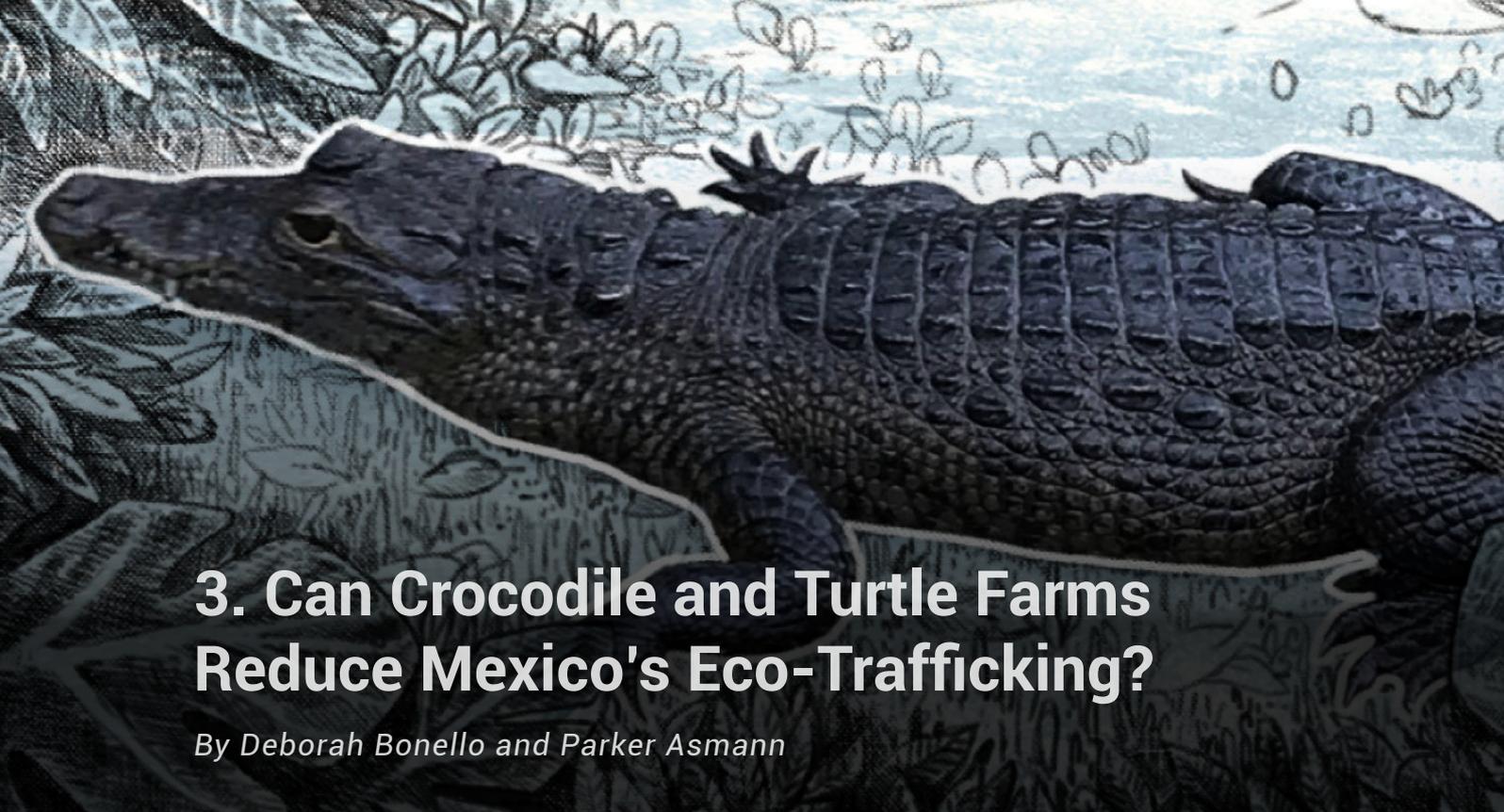
Dried sea cucumbers for sale at a market in Hong Kong. Photo: Stock

What’s more, the market is volatile and subject to manipulation. Sometimes, Echeverría said, the Asian intermediaries undercut the locals, or they send Honduran intermediaries to do so, offering take it or leave it ultimatums.

The intermediaries also have clout because of the money they provide to the fishermen. Captains in Kaukira told InSight Crime that cash from intermediaries allows boats to be readied for several weeks at sea.

And when money is short, or the harvest thin, the boats turn to other products: lobster, snails, jellyfish or drugs. Kaukira’s navy is not about to go hungry.

“We do it quietly,” a captain with a red cap told us. See. Hear. Keep quiet. It is the unwritten law of these waters. “All of us [here] depend on it.”



3. Can Crocodile and Turtle Farms Reduce Mexico's Eco-Trafficking?

By Deborah Bonello and Parker Asmann

Government-regulated crocodile and turtle farms have helped reduce illegal hunting and protect endangered species in Mexico, but the illicit trade continues. Illegally hunted and possibly illegally bred animals and their byproducts still circulate, and are also leaking out into the international market.

The humble house in the rural village of Simón Sarlat in the tropical Mexican state of Tabasco has a sign hanging outside offering fish for sale. Inside, the front room is dark, the walls robin egg blue and dirty. In the corner sits a large freezer, full of frozen fish, but there are other goods available if the right questions are asked.

After a query about turtles and crocodiles, a short, stocky fisherman with stubby, hard hands and weathered skin disappears into a side room. He emerges carrying a small plastic washbowl containing six live turtles of varying shapes and sizes. He offers all of them for 280 pesos — around \$15.

The largest turtle is of the jicotea species. The rest are pochitoques. Both are some of the region's most trafficked. All are now officially protected species but Chico, the hunter, caught them in the wild.

Chico also tells us that he can find us a crocodile. The raw skin will cost us a mere 400 pesos — less than \$20 — even though it's some three full days and nights of arduous work for him in the nearby swamps of Centla, a protected biosphere that's home to the moreletii crocodile species, the primitive-looking pejelagarto fish, and a number of other plant and reptile species.

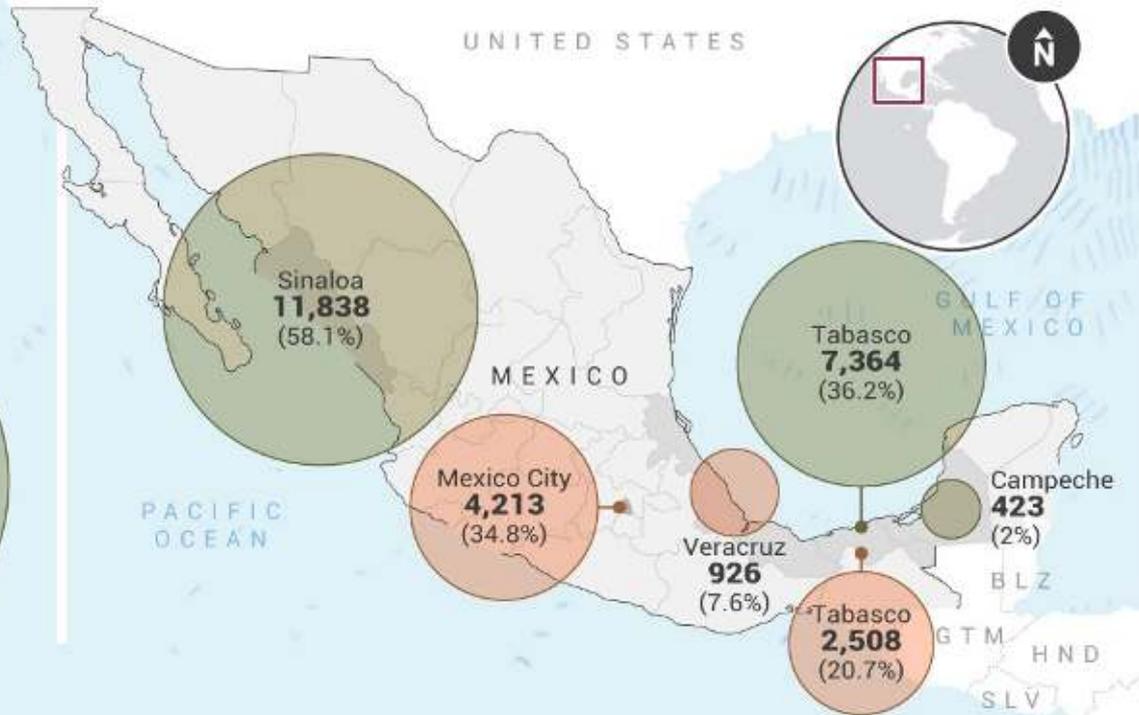
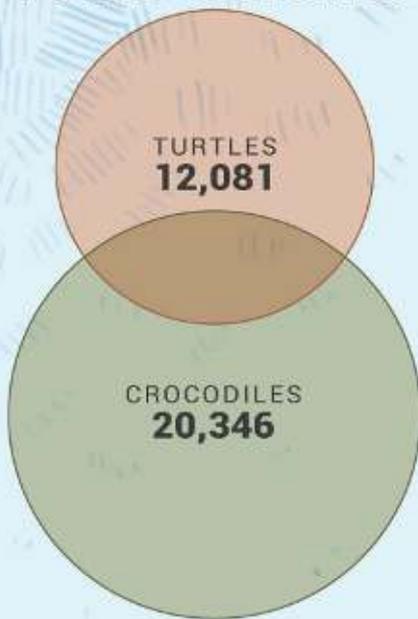
Tabasco accounts for a big chunk of the seizures of illegal turtle and crocodile products in Mexico. Data requested by InSight Crime showed that on a national level, the country's environmental protection agency (Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente – Profepa)

seized 12,081 turtles and 20,346 crocodiles between 2006 and 2015. Of those, around 20 percent of turtles and more than one-third of crocodiles were seized in Tabasco. The other seizures were in Mexico City and the state of Sinaloa.

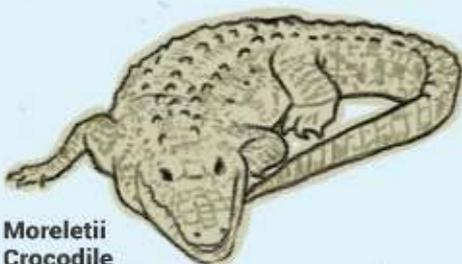
Crocodile and Turtle Seizures in Mexico (2006-2015)

insightcrime.org

TOTAL SEIZURES



MOST TRAFFICKED SPECIES



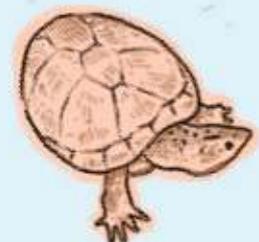
Moreletii Crocodile

The Moreletii is the most sought after crocodile species around the globe. Its skin is considered one of the finest in the world due to its design, resilience, elasticity and flexibility.



Jicotea Turtle

The Jicotea turtle lives in swamps and other freshwater in the eastern United States and northeast Mexico. This species is trafficked in part due to its popularity as a pet.



Pochitoque Turtle

There is a long history of eating the Pochitoque turtle in Tabasco's history. It is commonly roasted and eaten in a green soup with rice, known as "pochitoque en verde."

MOST COMMERCIALIZED PRODUCTS



Wallets



Belts



Shoes



Bags

Humble fishermen like Chico struggle to feed their families by selling fish and rely on the modest income generated by hunting crocodiles and turtles clandestinely. But Chico's is a dying trade in Mexico.

This is in part thanks to the prohibition of crocodile hunting in 1970, but more so the subsequent creation of a government-regulated farming system for turtles, crocodiles and other animals, known as Environmental Management Units (Unidades de Manejo Ambientales – UMAs). The new farms established a legal framework for the breeding and commercial sale of animals that were particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Crocodile and turtle populations in Tabasco are still far from returning to past levels after being ravaged by hunting for decades, but they are recovering.

"The crocodile skins we cultivate here are of the best quality,"

The Gulf state has an important history and culture of turtle and crocodile hunting. The meats of both animals have long been consumed by local communities, who also believe that some of their by-products have curative properties. Crocodile fat, for example,

is believed to be good for asthma when cooked with garlic and orange, placed in a freezer, and then heated up again later to eat. One bottle costs around 800 pesos (about \$40).

Hundreds of thousands of crocodiles were commercialized regularly in decades past, but only some 80,000 adult crocodiles roam the wild across Mexico today, according to Marco Antonio López-Luna, a professor who specializes in crocodiles at the Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco (UJAT). The government farming system, prohibition and cultural shifts, including a declining demand for crocodile skin products, have all contributed to the break away from the illegal hunting of these animals as a way of life.

Eloy Ramírez, who runs Mexico's first ever UMA in Buenavista nestled alongside the lush Pantanos de Centla biosphere reserve, said that these units have significantly brought down illegal hunting in the region.

"The crocodile skins we cultivate here are of the best quality," Ramírez told InSight Crime during an interview, where he showed off the wallets he produces, as well as a thick, cured skin of a six-foot crocodile. "They're free of parasites and the process is much quicker [than on the black market]."

The UMAs have created standards and rules in a once-illegal industry, according to Ramírez, where regulated skins and meat reach higher prices and standards than what's available on the black market.

Carlos Villar, the director of Pantanos de Centla at Mexico's Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales – SEMARNAT), says the UMAs have been instrumental in conserving endangered species and protecting populations.

“The UMAs here in Mexico are very good, they require the same documentation as those in the United States,” Villar said. “Crocodile hunting today isn’t organized crime. It’s largely nothing more than locals selling to other locals.”

But the number of illegal crocodile and turtle products seized in Tabasco over the last few years suggests that animals could also be leaking from the legal farms into the black market. It’s hard to account for the thousands of products and animals seized over the years through illicit hunting alone. Although hunting continues, interviews and field research suggest that it is at a very low level compared to years past.

In 2016, a PROFEPA inspection of an UMA run by Industria Moreletí — one of the main international exporters of crocodile products in the region — resulted in the seizure of [more than 3,000 moreletii crocodiles](#). PROFEPA reported this was due to improper documentation, which could point to potential liberties being taken at these sites. Official production quotas could be exploited, feeding the illegal trade and helping explain the volume of seizures in recent years.

And despite praise of the UMAs from academics, workers and government officials alike, there appears to be a disconnect between fishermen like Chico and the program’s apparent success. Chico says he doesn’t understand the point of the UMAs, that these programs don’t buy from people like him and are robbing him of his livelihood. And he’s not alone.

Walking down the sidewalk in downtown Villahermosa through a stretch of small shops selling clothes, school supplies and other products, it wasn’t hard to see that the illicit sale of crocodile skinned goods is still ongoing.

A local salesman at one such shop selling crocodile belts, wallets, shoes and other goods, who wished to remain anonymous, told InSight Crime that the illicit industry is easy to enter. While the UMAs are required to provide a “factura,” or invoice, detailing the origins of the crocodiles they sell, this seller didn’t have such documentation. He said that he buys his crocodile skins from many different sellers — sometimes fishermen, sometimes UMAs — but he never needs the legal paperwork.



4. Peru's Turtle Traffickers Operate Under Veneer of Legality

By James Bargent

The taricaya turtle conservation program in northern Peru has been heralded as bringing an endangered species back from the brink of extinction while protecting millions of hectares of rainforest from poachers and loggers. Yet investigators suspect it may also have created a multi-million-dollar wildlife trafficking business.

The images are inspirational: thousands upon thousands of tiny yellow-spotted river turtles – known locally as taricaya – squirming out of baskets, wriggling across artificial beaches and slipping into the waterways of the Amazon jungle. Until the taricaya conservation projects took off, these waterways had been emptied out of these turtles and other species targeted by poachers for their meat or eggs, locals say. But today, they are again rich with life.

On the surface, the program, in which local communities are permitted to sell a portion of the turtles they protect, has struck the elusive balance between conserving the rainforest and meeting the needs of the poverty-plagued communities that live there – a balance key to guaranteeing the long-term future of the Amazon. Millions of turtles have been released into the wild, while jungle communities have received desperately needed income and investment.

However, the inspirational images do not tell the whole story. The projects are dogged by allegations they are used as cover for trafficking turtles, and the exporter that has been the driving force behind the trade is currently under investigation for money laundering after authorities discovered millions of dollars from China unaccounted for and flowing through her businesses.

The taricaya business is not unique in operating under the shadow of suspected criminality. Trafficking is rife in Peru's tropical fish and shark fin industries and is

suspected wherever wildlife is exported. In a country where the influence of organized crime and corruption runs deep, attempts at legal, sustainable exploitation of wildlife have created what are likely the country's most lucrative eco-trafficking rackets.

A Promising Conservation Program

The taricaya conservation programs launched in the 1990s, when environmental groups began organizing local communities in the Pacaya Samiria national reserve: 20,800 square kilometers of rainforest in the Peruvian department of Loreto, one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet.

The environmentalists showed the jungle residents how to collect the eggs from riverside beaches and replant them to more secure artificial beaches, and how then to care for the eggs until they hatched. More importantly, they showed how doing so could not only benefit the environment but also the communities themselves: taricaya meat and eggs are an important part of the local diet, but the turtles had become scarce due to over-hunting.



A taricaya turtle. Photo: Francisco Laso

The first grupos de manejo, or management groups, were formed in 1994, but it was not until 2004 that the state approved the plans that laid out the groups' conservation commitments and in return allowed them to sell a proportion of each season's turtles. Opening up the trade to commercialization led to a surge in conservation efforts, and since then, over three million taricaya have been released into the wild.

There are currently 43 **officially recognized management groups**, generating nearly \$1 million a year for the 492 families that work in them. The project has also spread to several other conservation areas in the region.

The groups not only collect and protect taricaya eggs, they also help monitor control points and lead patrols to protect the reserves from poachers and illegal loggers. In return, they are allowed to sell a quota of the eggs – usually between 40 and 60 percent.

For the agency that works with them, the National Service for Areas Protected by the State (Servicio Nacional de Áreas Protegidas por el Estado – Sernanp), it is a clear win-win.

“I conserve two million hectares, not just for Loreto, but for the good of the whole world, and they obtain an economic benefit for managing resources and preventing deforestation,” said Enrique Neyra, the head of Sernanp in Pacaya Samiria.

However, for the conservation groups to make money from their work, one further link in the chain was needed – a market. The solution to this problem came in the form of exotic pet distributors in Hong Kong.

In 2008, Peru exported just 11,832 taricaya, 8,762 of them from the reserves, according to the records of the National Forestry and Wildlife Service (Servicio Nacional Forestal y de Fauna Silvestre – Serfor). However, by 2017, this had risen to 779,024, of which 633,445 came from the reserves.

Almost all of them were sold to Asia – initially to Hong Kong and later to China. From Hong Kong, they were sold to other parts of the world, with **export records** showing shipments from Hong Kong to Kuwait, Japan, the United States, Indonesia, South Korea, Italy, the Philippines and Malaysia.

“What we are doing is opening a window for development while conserving the forest and the animals,”

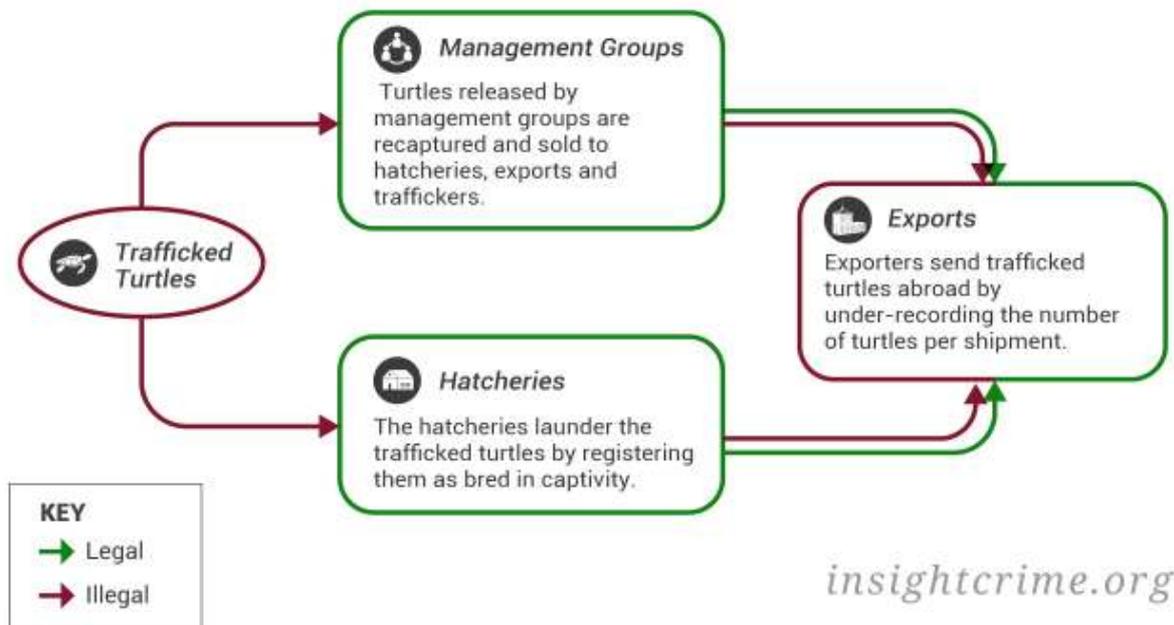
The driving force behind this export explosion was one woman, Milagros Ferreyra Ahuanari.

A poor girl from a jungle community, Ferreyra began working in exotic fish-trading as a teenager, traveling around Loreto's river communities, collecting arowana fish and selling them to aquarium dealers. By 2007, she had set up her own fish trading company, MF Tropical Fish, and began exporting arowana and other species, mainly to clients in Hong Kong.

Sensing an opportunity in the taricaya management plans, she convinced her Asian contacts to front her the capital to invest in the business. She traveled to the communities to speak to the management groups, and backed up her talk of export potential with cash advances and investments in the communities.

Taricaya Turtle Trafficking

Taricaya turtles that have been liberated as part of conservation programs are recaptured, then laundered by hatcheries and management groups that provide falsified registries of their legal origins. They are then combined in shipments with legal turtles and exported abroad.



May 2021

Sources: InSight Crime investigation, Peruvian government data (SERFOR) and open sources

“Nobody would commit to buying our taricaya. She is the only one that wanted to take a chance on them,” said William Maldonado, who set up one of the original management groups in 1994.

Ferreira convinced them, she says, because she understood them.

“I have lived in one of these communities, I am from one of these communities, I understand their needs,” Ferreira told InSight Crime during a 2019 field investigation in Loreto.

She also had a vision for these communities, a vision of what she calls “participatory conservation.”

“What we are doing is opening a window for development while conserving the forest and the animals,” she said.

A Thriving, Questionable Business-Model

With the money from Asia pouring in, Loreto celebrated a rare success story for both business and the rainforest. However, suspicions were building that not everything was as it seemed.



*Newly released taricaya turtles at Peru's
Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve.
Photo: Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve.*

As the number of management groups approved grew, irregularities began to creep into the plans, according to an environmentalist involved in conservation whose work with management groups previously saw him register as an exporter of taricaya. He wanted to remain anonymous for fear of professional repercussions.

“They have created management plans in communities that don't even have a hundred nests, but these plans are for 5,000 nests,” he said.

Then there was the near zero mortality rate. No matter how carefully they are looked after, a significant percentage of each season's new taricaya population will die. But in the registries, none ever did.

“All of those that die, they are replacing with illegal ones,” said Toni Mori, head of Loreto's Regional Environmental Authority (Autoridad Regional Ambiental – ARA).

And then there were the two criaderos, or hatcheries – one of which was set up by Ferreyra – where hundreds of thousands more taricaya have been bred in captivity. The local authorities charged with monitoring these sites noticed the birth registries did not fit with normal taricaya breeding patterns.

“A lot of times the quantity of births they were registering were not credible,” said Dustin Silva, head of ARA in the previous Loreto government, whose term finished at the end of 2018. “They can say a certain quantity were born there, but really, how can we prove that they were born in the hatchery?”

The reason, they suspected, was because the hatcheries had also become laundries where trafficked turtles were blended into the legal supply chain using falsified birth certificates.

“There is a sale of babies to the hatcheries, which launder this activity,” said Silva.

However, it was only when Peru’s National Superintendence of Customs and Tax Administration (Superintendencia Nacional de Aduanas y de Administración Tributaria – SUNAT) and the Financial Intelligence Unit (Unidad de Inteligencia Financiera – UIF) took an interest in the taricaya trade that investigations got serious.

A UIF investigation, seen by InSight Crime, looked at taricaya exports between 2014 and 2017, 70 percent of which were carried out by two companies owned by Ferreyra, MF Tropical Fish and MF Turtles and Tropical Fish.

Over the period, the companies registered exports with a Free on Board (FOB) value of \$6,179,722, with taricaya turtles accounting for over 70 percent of the total. However, the companies’ accounts show they received \$10,305,096 in payments from China – a difference of over \$4.1 million. Not only this, but Ferreyra’s personal accounts also showed transfers from China of a further \$2 million.

As a result of the report, authorities opened a money laundering investigation into Ferreyra and froze her personal and business accounts.

However, the source of the unjustified income remains a mystery. Investigations into wildlife trafficking by financial agencies such as the UIF and the SUNAT have repeatedly hit the same wall: a lack of information from the local authorities charged with monitoring the trade.

There are, of course, theories. The environmentalist, for instance, believes it can be explained by the gap between the number of turtles declared on export forms and the actual numbers of taricaya packed in a container. Verifying that these coincide is a near-impossible task for the small teams of officials responsible.

“There are depositories where both the legal and illegal turtles go, which is where they should be counted,” said the environmentalist. “But you’ve got a company with over 300,000 turtles and one or two officials, who is going to count that quantity?”

It wasn’t only in the export sector where the red flags kept appearing. As the taricaya trade took off, authorities made seizures of baby taricaya in unprecedented quantities: **2,500** on their way to the animal trafficking transit hub of Pucallpa; **hundreds more seized** on route to the Ecuador border.

Such quantities were far beyond what authorities had seen in the past. Between 2013 and 2015 in Loreto, for example, there was a total of just 142 specimens seized, government documents show. And local authorities describe making seizures of, at most, 50 adult turtles or a handful of babies, but never hundreds or thousands.

There is only one possible source for such large quantities of baby taricayas, says the environmentalist: the management groups.

“The groups liberate them in large quantities, but these babies don't leave quickly. They are in the same place for two or three days,” he said. “So that is where the groups themselves, or other communities or family members, go in and start recapturing them.”

The owner of the only other taricaya hatchery, Santiago Alves, is also adamant the management groups are supplying the traffickers.

“They don't release anything because they catch them and sell them,” he told InSight Crime. “Everything is a business.”

Alves alleges that one of the groups offered to sell him 30,000 eggs, and he says that traffickers from around the country come to the reserves to buy turtles.

“From here, taricaya are smuggled all over Peru – to Lima, to Chiclayo, even to other countries,” he said.

*“The only thing I do is
work with communities
to exploit wildlife legally.”*

However, Alves himself has also fallen under suspicion, with industry insiders claiming it is well known among fishermen that he will purchase turtles they collect – an allegation he dismisses as “pure fiction.”

His critics, however, add that he also has a dispute with Ferreryra and the other principal taricaya exporter – a company called Acuatrade – whom he blames for shutting him out of the export market and driving down the prices for his hatchery.

He complains that Ferreyra and Acuatrade have seized total control over the market by monopolizing supply from the management groups.

“I don't know what privilege these people have to be the ones to sell them and take them from the reserves,” he said.

Ferreyra, meanwhile, fiercely denies any wrongdoing.

“We are not committing any crime,” she said to InSight Crime. “The only thing I do is work with communities to exploit wildlife legally.”

The accounting discrepancies, Ferreyra says, can be explained away by freight costs and advances from her clients. She also dismissed concerns about the hatcheries by pointing to the fact that hers has not been inspected since 2016.

“If the authorities suspect my hatchery is a ‘laundry-mat’ why don't they come here?” she said.

Investigators involved in the case, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, dismissed Ferreyra's claims that transport costs accounted for the excess money, saying these should be no more than 10 percent of the shipment value.

They also point to her political contacts as a possible reason her businesses have until recently escaped scrutiny, a view that resonates in Iquitos, especially as two former officials responsible for monitoring the taricaya business later went to work for her companies.

But for William Maldonado from the management group, the investigation is yet another example of the state driving wildlife trafficking by creating obstacles instead of opportunities. The state should be helping them develop sustainable sources of income that do not destroy the rainforest, he says, but instead is placing ever more barriers to them working legally.

“The state teaches you to work illegally,” he said.

Suspicious Legal Exports

The suspicions over the taricaya business have not emerged from a vacuum. The companies involved belong to a sector contaminated by trafficking. The modality they use is arguably the most important form of international wildlife trafficking in Peru: legal exports.

“They finance the traffickers, they help and support them logistically.”

The ornamental fish trade, which is one of Loreto’s most important export sectors, sent \$2.7 million of fish in 2017, principally to China, Hong Kong and Japan. However, these exports often hide rare and exotic fish that are protected under law.

Currently, there are 21 Loreto companies with licenses to export wildlife, and most of them trade in fish. Many are already on the SUNAT “red list” for having been caught trafficking, SUNAT told InSight Crime in an interview. At least two of the 21 are shell companies set up purely to obtain export licenses, which they rent to traffickers, investigators in Loreto told InSight Crime, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Fish are sourced from the Amazon and its tributaries, with many of the most sought-after species extracted not in Peru but in Brazil. Traffickers travel to the border to make the buys and bring them back to Iquitos to sell to the aquarium dealers. While some are independent, others work with advances from the aquariums.

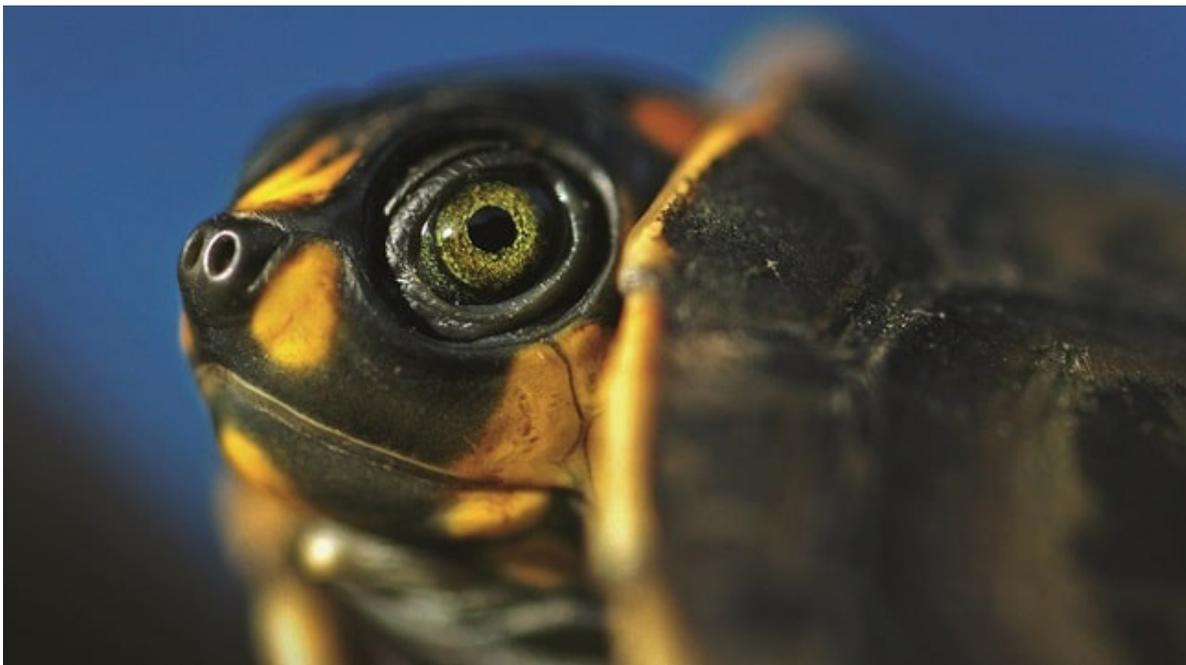
“There are aquariums that pay for this trafficking,” said Clara Chuquimbalqui, director of the Loreto government’s Regional Production Directorate (Dirección Regional de Producción – Direpro), which oversees the regional fish trade. “They finance the traffickers, they help and support them logistically.”

In the case of the bigger companies, they pay cash directly to fishermen and maintain holding stations at key locations.

“They pay Brazilian fishermen advances,” said John Jairo Garnica, a former tropical fish exporter who now runs a wildlife rescue center. “They have their paid personnel working at their collection stations just to receive the fish, then they bag them up. And they pay for the seats on the boats, and they also pay for airplanes to other parts of the Putumayo river.”

There are two forms of trafficking carried out by the aquarium dealers: trafficking of banned species, and trafficking of controlled species extracted from illegal sources, including moving species that are protected in Colombia and Brazil through Peru, where restrictions are looser. Some of the most sought-after species are worth up to \$180 each to exporters.

Former Direpro official Carlos Perea described to InSight Crime how traffickers pack containers with far more fish than they are permitted to export using illegally sourced fish, or mix in illegal species with legal shipments. They also collude with airline staff to switch the boxes after inspection, and in some cases, even use secret compartments in tanks, which can be used to hide other banned species such as frogs, lizards or snakes.



Close-up of a taricaya turtle. Photo: Government of Peru

To ensure these shipments pass, the exporters rely on two key characteristics of the local authorities: a lack of capacity and corruption.

Inspections in extraction zones, at the aquariums and prior to shipment are carried out by the Direpro. The officials that do this work often have little to no technical knowledge and neither the capacity nor the resources to carry out full inspections, Perea said. Often, these officials are in the jobs not because of their experience or

expertise but their connections, and their aim is not to oversee the wildlife sector but to make money from the bribes.

“Inspector jobs are often handed to people that sometimes don’t even have education or training,” Perea said. “Unfortunately, a lot of people arrive at these public sector positions not to do their work as a public servant but to make money for themselves.”

The exporters also enjoy political protection, numerous sources claim. Officials responsible for monitoring exports, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, said they had come under political pressure from a Loreto congressman to ease off on the trade after the local exporters association, headed by Milagros Ferreyra, called a conference with business leaders, politicians and national-level environmental authorities to discuss wildlife exports in June 2018.

Ferreyra’s political clout has also come into question previously after a local official responsible for rulings affecting her fish exports was seen driving around Iquitos in a vehicle belonging to Ferreyra, according to local media reports.

“The European and Asian markets are the instigators of this.”

While two cases have been passed to prosecutors in the last two years, no charges have been levied against the companies caught making illegal exports, which instead are fined. So far, the rewards remain higher than the risk.

There is evidence that the tropical fish and turtle trades are not the only wildlife trafficking businesses using a façade of legality in Peru. There are concerns over [legal parrot trapping for export](#); national environmental police say they have received intelligence about criminality in the international butterfly trade; and investigations have revealed how [Peruvian companies have been laundering](#) millions of dollars of illegally harvested shark fins in their government-approved exports to Asia.

And illegality in the trade could be on the rise. The fish export market, for example, was [posting impressive growth](#) rates before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. At the same time, fishermen were reporting that the demand for the common legal species was falling, while the market for illegal species found in Brazil was on the rise, according to Garnica.

The pressure to extract these species, however, does not start with the aquarium dealers, but from those at the end of the supply chain, say officials.

“The aquarium owners say to me that they sometimes send banned species because their buyers in Asia and Europe demand them, and they say if they don’t send them, the clients won’t buy the rest,” said Chuquimbalqui. “The European and Asian markets are the instigators of this, because if they didn’t demand banned species, no one would sell them and there would be no market.”

Today, the taricaya boom appears to be fizzling out. Prices were already falling when COVID-19 hit, resulting in new import restrictions imposed by China and limited air travel that choked off access to the main market. Management groups are now struggling to recover their investments, leading to Sernanp launching an “adopt a turtle” campaign to try and make up for the financial shortfall. The investigation into Milagros Ferreyra continues. But with her accounts still frozen, her businesses have fallen into bankruptcy, she told InSight Crime in early 2021.

Even if the taricaya business collapses, its lessons about wildlife trafficking in Peru today remain. While officials hunt the very real but relatively rare smugglers of popular imagination, those who travel with birds stuffed into tubes in their luggage and drugged monkeys strapped around their chests, the biggest international traffickers are instead working with certificates of origin and export permits.



InSight Crime is a foundation dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime.

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- giving workshops to journalists, academics and non-governmental organizations on how to cover this important issue and keep themselves, their sources and their material safe;
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Or contact: info@insightcrime.org



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