



PRESS RELEASE

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Global Wildlife Trafficking Channel Exposed and Disrupted

Live Exotics Smuggled from South America to West Africa and Asia Points to Need for Transcontinental Enforcement Collaboration.

Successful Repatriation of Animals Hailed by Conservationists

Three wildlife protection groups today applauded the successful repatriation of 29 highly endangered animals that were smuggled across thousands of miles of ocean, while pointing to the need for transcontinental collaboration among enforcement agencies and NGOs to curb such wildlife trafficking.

Freeland, EAGLE, and Liberia Chimpanzee Rescue and Protection (LCRP) collaborated with one another, and with government agencies from 5 countries. Now that the traffickers have been caught and the animals repatriated, these groups reveal the challenges and opportunities for mitigating major international wildlife trafficking operations.

In mid-February, a boat stalled off the coast of Togo (West Africa) while traffickers attempted to use a lifeboat to move the animals to shore. Their suspicious behavior ashore triggered their arrest. Investigations then revealed that the boat had sailed from South America en route to West Africa. The crew was a mix of nationals from Brazil, Suriname, Belarus, Russia and Israel (some mixed nationalities and multiple passports). They were smuggling the following species:

- Lear's Macaws (12)
- Golden Lion Tamarins (19)

These animals can fetch very high prices on the international exotic pet market.

Critical to the success of this operation was the involvement of South American enforcement officers who have been participating in specialized counter-wildlife trafficking courses, as well as a cross-border networking group called a "SIG" (Special Investigation Group). These officers provided initial details of the case with Freeland, which then collaborated with EAGLE and

LCRP to find and take care of the animals, as well as to help West African officials gather more information on the traffickers.

The boat crew claimed they were delivering the animals to a legitimate importer in Benin. Further investigation revealed they were smuggling the animals to a trafficker in Ghana, who it appears had plans to route the animals to Asia via Togo.

Just two months earlier, a major consignment of primates and other animals was intercepted at Togo's international airport with the help of EAGLE, revealing caged live animals that did not match the CITES trade certificates assigned to them. Those animals were destined for Thailand where they would be sold as legally caught or bred animals on the Asian exotic pet market.

In both cases, the physical and mental health of the animals deteriorated by the hour, warranting rapid professional help by expert care givers. In the most recent case, with the Lear Macaws and Golden Tamarin monkeys, the 3 organizations were able to help move the animals to a Brazilian consulate. Then the Brazilian Federal Police sent an airplane with a task force of Federal Police and Ibama agents to transport the animals back to South America. Due to these international efforts, the animals were brought back from critical state and all of them survived.

Freeland, EAGLE and LCRP are urging governments and donors to step up support for both cross-border and cross-continental wildlife enforcement collaboration, and to include NGOs that have information on traffickers, as well as expertise on caring for confiscated animals. The quick sharing of information among Freeland's teams in Asia, Africa and Asia with EAGLE's team in Africa and LCRP's support in gaining air space to repatriate the animals was critical in unblocking certain bureaucratic hurdles.

"This successful enforcement action and repatriation of the animals was due to excellent, timely collaboration among our organizations, together with government officers who really cared," said Steven Galster, Chair of Freeland. "Dr. Juliana Machado Ferreira, head of Freeland in Brazil, and Ofir Drori, head of EAGLE, with his team, were completely instrumental to the success of this operation, as were government officers from Brazil, Togo and the team from Liberia Chimpanzee Rescue and Protection. Thanks to these people, 29 highly endangered animals were taken home, and their species still stand a chance of survival."



About the trafficked animals:

Lear's Macaw – Only about 1,200 are left in the wild, including a mere 120 nesting pairs. This animal lives only in a small locality in north-east Brazil. It had been considered extinct in the wild until this locality was discovered in 1978.

Golden Lion Tamarin – Only about 3,200 remain in the wild. In the 1990s they were barely hanging on as a species, with only 150 remaining. Their numbers increased thanks to tireless conservation efforts.

Investigations continue.

Freeland's training and networking support in South America is funded by the US State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL).

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