Unmasking the Global Trafficking of Galápagos Iguanas: A Conservation Crisis

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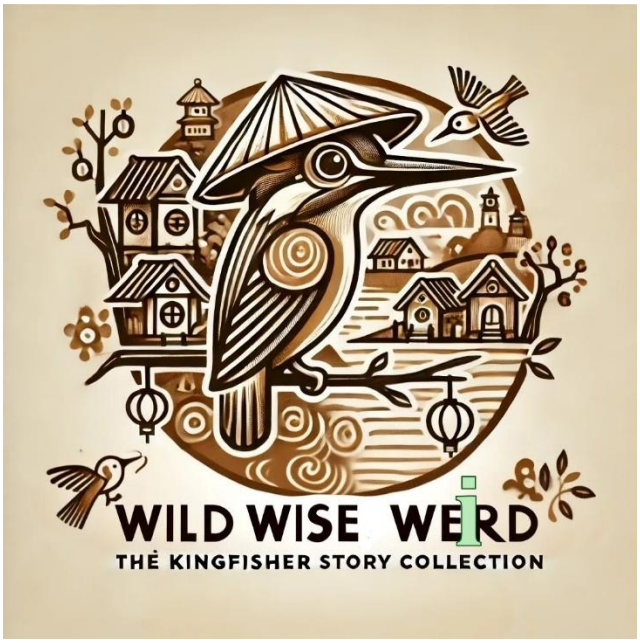

"– So Flower Kingfisher exchanged his beautiful outfit for several kilograms of fish caught by the Pelicans. I retail that catch and earn a profit enough for this whole year."

In "Flower Kingfisher"; *Wild Wise Weird* [1]

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The illegal wildlife trade remains a significant threat to global biodiversity, with Galápagos iguanas—charismatic reptiles endemic to Ecuador—becoming emblematic victims of a sophisticated international laundering scheme. A recent review by Auliya et al. [2] published in *Biological Conservation* exposes how the regulatory framework of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is being manipulated to legitimize the illicit trade of these protected species. Although all four iguana species have been listed in Appendix II of CITES since 1975, traffickers are exploiting loopholes by falsely declaring wild-caught Galápagos iguanas as captive-bred, thereby securing export permits from CITES Parties.

The study highlights the roles of non-range countries such as Mali, Switzerland, and Uganda in issuing CITES export permits for Galápagos land and marine iguanas without verifying their legal provenance. Notably, Ecuador—the only range state for these species—has never authorized commercial exports. Nevertheless, hundreds of individuals entered the international pet trade, particularly between 2017 and 2023, during which Uganda emerged as the predominant exporter of supposedly captive-bred specimens, with most shipments destined for markets in Asia. However, there is no verifiable evidence of any legally established founder stock outside Ecuador, casting serious doubt on the legitimacy of these captive breeding claims [3,4].

Inconsistencies in the CITES trade database, weak enforcement mechanisms, and questionable permit documentation further exacerbate this problem. A notable example occurred in 2022, when both Uganda and South Korea declared the source code “F” for a shipment of two Galápagos land iguanas—indicating the animals were born in captivity but do not meet the criteria for being classified as captive-bred under CITES regulations. This stands in contrast to all other Galápagos land iguana exports from Uganda, which were reported under the source code “C,” suggesting they were fully captive-bred. Such discrepancies raise serious concerns about the legitimacy of the reported breeding claims and suggest the possibility that wild-caught individuals are being laundered into legal trade channels under the guise of captive-bred status [2].

Beyond the plight of the iguanas themselves, this case underscores the broader vulnerability of insular, range-restricted species in the high-end exotic pet trade. Species with limited distributions and high market value are especially susceptible to exploitation, often targeted by collectors and hobbyists seeking rarity [3,4]. The authors call for urgent international action, including the reclassification of all Galápagos iguana species to CITES Appendix I—a move that would prohibit their commercial trade—and the enforcement of stricter accountability measures for countries that issue export permits without adequate verification of legal origin.

The study serves as a stark reminder of the delicate balance between nature and human economic ambition. Galápagos iguanas, evolutionary treasures of one of the planet’s most biodiverse regions, are being reduced to commodities through administrative loopholes and inadequate oversight. Safeguarding these species demands more than regulatory instruments; it requires a collective ethical commitment to prioritize ecological integrity over short-term profit. The trafficking of

Galápagos iguanas exemplifies a broader nature-human nexus—one that challenges us to redefine our relationship with the natural world, not as consumers or exploiters, but as responsible stewards [5].

References

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