

## COOPERATING ACROSS BORDERS TO FIGHT WILDLIFE CRIME IN **LATIN AMERICA**

*The Latin American region (Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America and South America) struggles with the same factors that have led to devastating rates of wildlife crime in Africa and Asia, including corruption and organized crime. Governments and law enforcement are placing increased emphasis on the protection of the many rich and varied species of the region.*



“The results were spectacular...when countries get together to fight wildlife crime, we can make a difference.”

- Border Services Officer

Organized criminal networks, from Colombia to Mexico, use well-established international trade routes and financial markets to move live animals and animal parts as they would to move drugs and arms.

With low risk and soaring demand, traffickers continued to move illegally obtained flora and fauna this past year even amidst the many pandemic restrictions imposed around the world. In Mexico, the environmental protection agency, PROFEPA, reported a 660% increase in the number of animals seized between 2019 and 2020.

The region's law enforcement are taking the threat seriously and, with support from ICCWC, are sharing information and using tools developed to fight the arms and drug trade to disrupt the illegal wildlife trade.

ICCWC's Operation Thunder 2021, led by INTERPOL and WCO, seized tonnes of birds, reptiles, timber and

plants all worth millions of US dollars on the international black market.

Demonstrating the link between wildlife and drug crime, Operation Thunder saw Mexican authorities arrest three Chinese nationals smuggling Totoaba bladders, sea cucumber and coral along with methamphetamine and cash.

Working with police, customs and environment agencies in coordinated raids at airports, land borders, and sea ports across the globe, the successful month-long operation is the fifth in a series of joint operations, following Thunderbird (2017), Thunderstorm (2018), Thunderball (2019) and Thunder (2020).

### IMPACT

#### The Operation Thunder series has led to:

- ✓ 3,800 suspects apprehended
- ✓ Tens of thousands of illegally traded wildlife parts and specimens seized
- ✓ Trafficking methods, border hotspots and trade routes identified
- ✓ New enforcement tools tested, including sniffer dogs and x-ray scanners
- ✓ Several INTERPOL Red Notices issued

## MAKING WILDLIFE CRIME A REGIONAL POLITICAL PRIORITY

In Latin America, the illegal wildlife trade and its links to organized crime are now recognized as a serious threat to biodiversity, environmental and human security. The first high-level Conference of the Americas on the Illegal Wildlife Trade, was held in Lima, Peru in October 2019, where countries committed to address the poaching and trafficking of protected species and to raise awareness of the wide-ranging impact of these crimes. The conference was attended by some 200 representatives from over 32 governments, 59 institutions and 20 organizations.

## DID YOU KNOW?

**118** COUNTRIES collaborated in  
**ICCWC's**  
**OPERATION THUNDER 2021**

**ICCWC's**  
**OPERATION THUNDER SERIES**  
 contributes to:



**SDG 15**  
 To combat poaching and trafficking of protected species.



**SDG 16**  
 To promote strong institutions, the rule of law and enforcement.



A recent CITES study shows the illegal trade in jaguar specimens is becoming more organized across Latin America, with traffickers taking advantage of online platforms and social media to advertise and sell products.



The most-trafficked types of animals from Ecuador are birds and reptiles, including the snapping turtle pictured here with environmental police during checkpoint inspections in Ecuador's Santo Domingo de los Tsachilas.



Over 56,200 kg of marine products were seized during Operation Thunder 2020, including a shipment of 11 tonnes of mutilated sharks seized by the Peruvian police.



Operation Thunderball saw the seizure of more than 4,300 protected birds, including this Slender-billed Parakeet (*Enicognathus Leptorhynchus*) seized by Chilean Police.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Law enforcement organizations in Latin America have begun to take wildlife crime seriously and are undertaking extensive, sophisticated and cooperative efforts to fight this form of organized crime. Unfortunately, as the number of seizures indicate, there is still much work to be done.

Arrests and prosecutions are ongoing as global investigations build cases against the illegal networks identified during Operation Thunder 2021. ICCWC continues to support law enforcement cooperation and information sharing, for example, between Peru and Ecuador, in a case of shark fin trafficking, where data extracted from seized telephones revealed the involvement of global export companies and links with other serious crimes, such as tax evasion and false declaration.

United under the banner of the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC), these five inter-governmental organizations form a unique pool of complementary expertise, providing a holistic approach to combating wildlife crime along the entire criminal justice chain.



ICCWC's Operation Thunder series and its work in Latin America is generously supported by:



Questions? [info@cites.org](mailto:info@cites.org)