

# Lizard traffickers exploit legal loopholes to trade at world's biggest fair

Precious but endangered lizards are a lucrative new cargo for German smugglers, ahead of an international attempt to outlaw their trade

Arthur Neslen

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At the trade fair, Schaub, was eager to talk when asked if he had any rare abronias (arboreal alligator lizards). “You’re looking to buy?” he said. “I have abronias here, but only that I got from one customer to ship to another. I just do the transport.”

Schaub handed over a business card with an email address for his partner, Maciej Oskroba, and said: “If you’re interested, just write me an email so I can let you know if people are offering abronias. I have customers calling me, saying ‘Markus, I’ve got a *deppii*’ and I’m expecting a *fimbriata* [two species of abronia].”

Oskroba was caught trying to smuggle more than 400 frogs, lizards and snakes out of Costa Rica last year. He was held for a few days then deported. “In my 20 years working at the airport, this is the largest wildlife trafficking case we’ve seen,” Carlos Viquez, the chief of Panama airport

security was quoted as saying at the time.

In reply to an emailed request ostensibly from an enthusiast interested in purchasing rare lizards, Oskroba wrote: "I will let you know in a few weeks how it should work [sic] on abronias. Please wait a bit for further information."

Schaub and Schmidt both denied that the reptiles they were offering had been caught in the wild.

But captive breeding is not possible for all species. International experts believe that rare species such as earless monitor lizards could not be captive-bred for sale in trade fairs. "All the specimens available outside Borneo have been illegally obtained and brought there," said Mark Auliya, the co-chair of the IUCN's monitor lizard specialist group. "For the people who harvest and collect lizards, it's like additional pocket money. The main money is made by syndicates of importers and exporters - the profit margin is extremely high," he added.

The more rare and exotic the species, the higher the asking price. The IUCN says that one contemporary trend for "mutants" has created bizarrely multicoloured frogs and snakes without scalation that bleed if they try to move on a rough surface.

*Lanthanotus borneensis* is a truly enigmatic, subterranean species that is sought by collectors for its unique features such as blue eyes and a lack of visible ears. Campaigners and vendors both say that a drop in their retail price from €8,000 a pair at the start of the year to €5,000 in September suggests an increase in supply.

"Those animals were like the holy grail for many years because no one believed they really existed," one seller said. "Now that Borneo is destroying the habitats where they lived for palm oil plantations, you can find them in the rice fields, in every channel where water flows between one field and another. At first they were expensive but no one is bringing them in anymore. It's cheaper to breed them here."

But the argument that lizard traders are protecting animals threatened by habitat loss in the wild was "complete nonsense," said the IUCN's Mark Auliya, who is currently based at the Helmholtz centre for environmental research in Leipzig.

Pro Wildlife's Sandra Alther agreed: "Preservation in captivity would only make sense if the smugglers planned to release these animals into the wild one day and of course, they do not."

In private, traders admit that the rearing of lizards for sale is not always played by the book. "Taking species from the wild is frowned upon nowadays. It's all about captive breeding but you have to have new blood to liven up the gene pool," explained one London-based reptile seller.

Another trader compared the reptile industry to stamp collecting. "We're all aware that there are animals coming to Europe from sources that are working on the grey line," he said. "We have a big problem in that you can trade Cites species without any controls, just a hand-written note saying 'I'm a breeder and I sold you an animal'."

The Guardian approached the organisers of the Terraristika trade fair but they declined to comment.

## LUCRATIVE LIZARDS

Reptiles are not the most charismatic of protected species, but they can play a vital role in ecosystems. Herbivorous species can be important seed dispersers, especially on islands and other lizards may eat rodents and insect pests. Reptiles can also act as pollinators for rare plants. In food chains, lizards play a role as predators and prey, and their removal can severely impact upon other wildlife populations, and ecosystems in general.

### *Ceratophora stoddartii*: Rhino horn lizard

This slow-moving arboreal lizard has bright orange lining inside its mouth that it reveals when threatened. Native to Sri Lanka's cloud forests, all exports of the endangered *stoddartii* are forbidden. All the same, it has been traded in Europe since at least August 2013 for around €1,200 a pair.

### *Lanthanotus borneensis* Borneo earless monitor lizard

Endemic to Sarawak and West Kalimantan in Borneo, *Lanthanotus* is thought rare, although little is known about the cryptic lizard with a morphology that has been linked to a 70 million-year-old Mongolian fossil. The reptile, which sells for around €5,000 a pair, is a protected species in Indonesia. Punishment for its theft can go as high as a five-year prison sentence.

### *Abronia fimbriata*: Fringed arboreal alligator lizard

The IUCN classifies Guatemala's *fimbriata* as endangered, and they are found in less than five locations, at high altitudes. On the market, they sell for €2,800 a pair. Like the *Lanthanotus*, these have been traded in Europe since last May, and have also been proposed for a Cites listing.

### *Cnemaspis psychedelica*: Psychedelic gecko

*Psychedelica* was discovered in Vietnam in 2011 - and began retailing in Europe's reptile market in October 2013, at prices of around €3,500 a pair. Endemic only to Hon Khoai island, it has not yet been given a protected status but could be approved for an "appendix 1" listing at the next Cites conference.

### *Ctenosaura defensor*: Yucatán Spiny-tailed Iguana

In European trade fairs, *defensors* sell for €1,200 each. The unusual iguana is classified as vulnerable by the IUCN, mainly due to the loss of its jungle habitat in Mexico, and the lizard trade. A decade ago, the IUCN predicted that its numbers would fall by 30% within 10 years.

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