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Wildlife trade threatening unprotected animals

International trade in animals not regulated by multilateral agreements is putting them under increasing threat. More than three times the number of unregulated animal species are being imported into the United States compared to the number of regulated species. Closer monitoring of trade in these species is urgently required so that they may be protected.

University of Adelaide researchers have looked at the number of species not listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) that are entering the United States.

Ms Freyja Watters, who led the study, is a Ph.D. candidate from the University of Adelaide's Invasion Science and Wildlife Ecology Group in the School of Biological Sciences.

"The international wildlife trade is currently one of the leading threats to global biodiversity conservation and environmental security," she says.

"The global trade in live terrestrial vertebrates, mainly for pets, is increasing, and we found a growing demand for unregulated and novel species entering the United States, which is the largest global importer of wild species for the exotic pet market.

"Using a decade of importation data on wild harvested, live animals entering the United States, we found 3.6 times the number of unlisted species in U.S. imports compared with CITES-listed species (1,366 versus 378 species)."

Of the 1,366 species of amphibians, birds, mammals and reptiles not listed in the CITES appendices which were imported into the United States, these included species at risk of extinction, yet traded in large numbers, such as the golden gecko (*Gekko badenii*) and Chinese water dragon (*Physignathus cocincinus*), or species with small and fragmented geographic ranges (<5000km) like Helens flying tree frog (*Rhacophorus helenae*) and the Chapa Bug-eyed frog (*Theloderma bicolor*).

Trade in species not currently listed as threatened by extinction may also be cause for concern when numbers traded are increasing through time as was seen in the two-toed sloth (*Choloepus didactylus*) or when species are regularly imported despite being a known high invasion risk like the Rose-ringed parakeet (*Psittacula krameria*).

CITES is the largest body regulating the international wildlife trade and exists to ensure the sustainable and traceable legal international trade in wild species.

"Overall, the quantities of live animals entering the United States were approximately 11 times larger for imports of unlisted species relative to imports of CITES-listed species and over a quarter of unlisted species faced current conversation threats," says Ms Watters.

"Many more species are threatened by trade than are being afforded international protection."

The research published in the journal [Conservation Biology](#) comes ahead of the next CITES Conference of Parties in November 2022.

CITES currently lists in its appendices 10.5 per cent of all described terrestrial vertebrates. No international regulatory framework exists to monitor the trade of species not listed in the appendices.

Proposals to add new species to the CITES appendices are put forward by the governments of participating countries (currently 184) at the Conference of the Parties, held every 2-3 years, but many countries do not record or closely monitor their imports and exports for species not listed in CITES.

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Media Release

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“This investigation into imports of unlisted species into the US illustrates why there is an urgent need for monitoring the trade of all species present in the international legal wildlife, not just those listed in the CITES appendices,” says Dr Phill Cassey from the School of Biological Sciences, The University of Adelaide.

“No systematic alert or standard procedure exists to identify when a species may require CITES listing and it is only after the documentation of major declines in wild populations or large volumes of illegal trade seizures that many species are identified as at risk from trade.”

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