



# COMBATING WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING FROM LATIN AMERICA TO THE UNITED STATES

The illegal trade from Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America and South America and what we can do to address it



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**W**ildlife trafficking is one of the most lucrative forms of illegal activity in the world. About 350 million plants and animals are sold on the black market annually, generating an estimated \$7 billion to \$23 billion USD.

Every region of the world is experiencing negative impacts as poachers and traffickers steal more and more natural resources. New strategies are desperately needed to counter this growing illegal trade and threat to our planet's natural heritage. More important, we need to address the fact that, despite efforts to fight wildlife trafficking, much of it is taking place on our soil and involves shipments from Latin America (Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America and South America) containing illegal products in demand by American consumers.

## THE UNITED STATES: A TOP CONSUMER AND KEY PLAYER

Discussions on combating wildlife trafficking have focused mainly on elephants, rhinos and tigers in Africa and Asia. It is often forgotten that wildlife trafficking occurs across all continents and threatens a wide range of species, including exotic birds, sea turtles, coral, caimans, crocodiles and iguanas from Latin America. Moreover, demand from the United States fuels it.

**The United States is one of the world's largest consumers of illegal wildlife and related goods.**

The United States is one of the world's largest consumers of illegal wildlife,<sup>1</sup> not only because of its high demand for trafficked goods, but also because of the lack of funding and capacity for domestic enforcement at its borders and ports of entry. Much of the world's trade in illegal wildlife is either

<sup>1</sup>International Fund for Animal Welfare, *Criminal Nature: The Global Security Implication of the Illegal Wildlife Trade* (June 2013), 9; U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans, *Oversight Hearing on the Impact that U.S. Consumer demand is Having on the Illegal and Unsustainable Trade of Wildlife Products, and Ongoing and Proposed Efforts to Increase Public Awareness About These Impacts*, September 16, 2008; Darryl Fears, "Overwhelmed U.S. port inspectors unable to keep up with illegal wildlife trade," *Washington Post*, October 17, 2014.

driven by U.S. consumers or passes through U.S. ports en route to other destinations, making the United States a key player in wildlife trafficking. The value of legal wildlife trade in the United States is estimated to be \$6 billion annually; the value of the illegal wildlife trade about one-third of that or \$2 billion.<sup>2</sup>

## LATIN AMERICA: A HOTBED OF ILLEGAL ACTIVITY

Latin America experiences the same perfect storm of factors that have led to rampant wildlife trafficking in other regions of the world: The region is home to many developing countries, has thousands of endemic and endangered species and struggles with corruption and enforcement. Consequently, the United Nations has identified Latin America as a priority region in combating wildlife crime.

To focus much needed attention on this wildlife trafficking crisis and to better understand the links between the United States and Latin America, Defenders of Wildlife undertook an extensive analysis of data collected by one of the most comprehensive wildlife trade monitoring systems in the world, the Law Enforcement Management Information System (LEMIS) managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

<sup>2</sup>United States Fish and Wildlife Service, 41 ("[Service inspectors] examined some 184,000 shipments *Office of Law Enforcement Accomplishments 2013-2014* in Fiscal Year 2013, and 180,000 in Fiscal year 2014—monitoring a \$6.2 billion legal trade for compliance with wildlife laws."); Haken, Jeremy, *Transnational Crime in the Developing World* (Global Financial Integrity, 2011), 11 ("Illegal trade is estimated to be around one-third of the legal trade...").

**A wildlife detector dog hones in on a suspicious-smelling package during a training drill. FWS is successfully using dogs—which can examine packages 100 times more quickly than human inspectors—to boost inspection capabilities at ports. Only one of the five ports most frequently used for illegal wildlife shipments from Latin America has canine help.**



## ANALYSIS OF A CRISIS: DETAILS OF THE TRADE FROM LATIN AMERICA

Defenders analyzed LEMIS data<sup>3</sup> on shipments containing wildlife protected under the Endangered Species Act and Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) that were illegally imported from Latin America to the United States and seized at U.S. ports of entry. We identified the most commonly used trade routes and most frequently trafficked animals and derivative products and assessed the capacity of U.S. law enforcement to detect and deter these shipments at our ports.

### Most Used Trade Routes

The five most frequently used trade routes (country of export to port of entry) for illegal wildlife shipments entering the United States from Latin America were Mexico to El Paso, Texas; Haiti to Miami, Florida; Mexico to San Diego, California; Mexico to Louisville, Kentucky; and the Bahamas to Miami, Florida. The country of export is not necessarily the country where a shipment originates; it is the last country through which the shipment passes before entering the United States, regardless of whether it originated there or not.

### Most Commonly Trafficked Animals and Products

The five most frequently seized animals/animal products in the illegal shipment data were queen conches, sea turtles, caimans, crocodiles and iguanas.

It is important to note that 20 percent of the seized species identified are species threatened with extinction due to trade and are therefore listed under CITES Appendix I, which bans all commercial trade in listed species.

The form in which illegal wildlife enters the United States varies widely. In total, 56 different types of wildlife products, including live and dead animals and animal parts, were seized on entry to the United States. Tallying the quantity seized in each product category showed the types of illegal wildlife products from the Latin American region in most demand by U.S. consumers.

The most frequently seized illegal wildlife products were (in order of total volume seized) meat, eggs, shoes, small leather products such as belts and wallets, dead animals, scientific specimens for museums or researchers, mollusk shells, live animals, feathers and derivative medicinal products.

### Law Enforcement Capacity

Enforcing federal wildlife laws is primarily the responsibility of the FWS Office of Law Enforcement. This office has the funds to employ only 130 wildlife inspectors nationwide to process legal wildlife shipments, intercept illegal wildlife shipments and enforce national and international wildlife protection laws. Of the 328 recognized ports of entry to the United States, only 18 are designated for the import/export of wildlife and staffed full-time by wildlife inspectors.

### Inspection Rates vs. Volume of Trade

Most ports of entry consist of multiple locations. For example, Los Angeles is a single port of entry, but its inspectors cover two sea ports, four airports and several courier facilities. While these inspectors examined 22,409 imported wildlife shipments in 2013, the various receiving facilities combined processed more than 1.9 million tons of air cargo, 5.5 million containers and 3.9 million tons of ocean freight in the same year, likely meaning an untold number of illegal wildlife shipments are going undetected.<sup>4</sup> It is clear from the numbers: The dedicated wildlife inspectors at U.S. ports are overwhelmed and outnumbered by the volume of shipments transiting the United States each year.

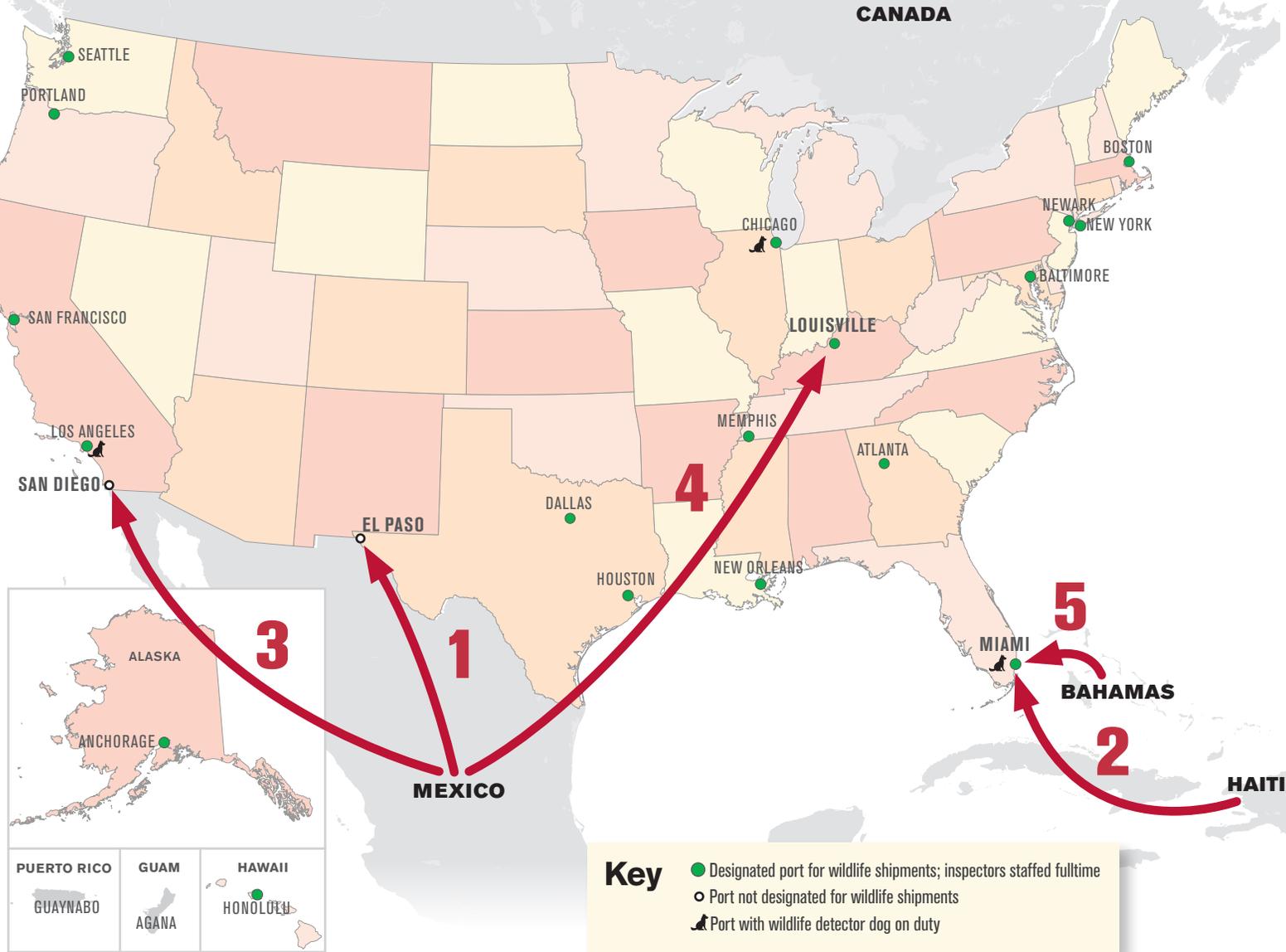


<sup>3</sup>LEMIS is the most detailed database on the import/export of illegal wildlife shipments. However, given the illicit nature of this trade, there are inevitably gaps in the LEMIS data.

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement, *Port of Los Angeles—Torrance, California*, <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/lawenforcement/portla.html>; United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Law Enforcement Accomplishments 2013–2014, 42.

# WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING FROM LATIN AMERICA TO THE UNITED STATES

## Top 5 Trade Routes



Only 18 out of the 328 recognized ports of entry to the United States are designated for the import/export of wildlife and staffed full-time by wildlife inspectors, and only three of these ports have wildlife detector dogs on duty. Mexico is likely a transit country for shipments containing illegal wildlife en route to the United States from other Latin American countries.

## Illegal Wildlife Products Seized (by volume)

**68,481 lbs.**

**MEAT**

Mostly queen conch, but iguana and sea turtle meat also prevalent



**9,128**

**EGGS**

Dead eggs; mostly sea turtle, but also iguana

**5,760**

**SHOES**

Includes boots; crocodile, caiman and sea turtle skin most common



**4,783**

**SMALL LEATHER PRODUCTS**

Belts, wallets, watchbands, etc; caiman and crocodile skin most common



**4,048**

**DEAD ANIMALS**

Mostly seahorses, but also doves, iguanas and sea cucumbers



## Top 5 Illegally Traded Animals



NOAA

### Queen Conches

18% of all shipments contained queen conch items  
 40% of all shipments containing queen conch items went from Haiti to Miami  
 99% of queen conch items were sourced from the wild  
 81% of queen conch items were imported for personal purposes



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### Sea Turtles

15% of all shipments contained sea turtle items  
 35% of all shipments containing sea turtle items went from Mexico to El Paso  
 98% of sea turtle items were sourced from the wild  
 89% of sea turtle items were imported for personal purposes



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### Caimans

9% of all shipments contained caiman items  
 44% of all shipments containing caiman items went from Mexico to El Paso  
 86% of caiman items were sourced from the wild  
 50% of caiman items were imported for commercial purposes



USFWS

### Crocodiles

9% of all shipments contained crocodile items  
 79% of all shipments containing crocodile items went from Mexico to El Paso  
 96% of crocodile items were sourced from the wild  
 88% of crocodile items were imported for personal purposes



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### Iguanas

9% of all shipments contained iguana items  
 27% of all shipments containing iguana items went from Mexico to Los Angeles  
 99% of iguana items were sourced from the wild  
 77% of iguana items were imported for personal purposes

## More Illegal Wildlife Products Seized (by volume)



**4,002**  
**SCIENTIFIC SPECIMENS**

For museums or scientific analysis; mostly derived from sea turtles, but also from dolphins and poison-arrow frogs



**3,569**  
**LIVE ANIMALS**  
 Mostly parrots, parakeets and tortoises

**3,704**  
**MOLLUSK SHELLS**

Raw shells, almost exclusively queen conch



**3,238**  
**FEATHERS**  
 Mostly from macaw species, but also from hawk species



**2,279**  
**MEDICINAL PRODUCTS**

Mostly derived from unspecified cetaceans (dolphins and whales), but also sea turtles

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMBATING THE ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE IN THE UNITED STATES

Based on the analysis and identification of challenges facing law enforcement, Defenders developed several recommendations to combat wildlife trafficking. These recommendations focus on what the U.S. government, the private sector and the general public can do.

## For the Federal Government

- **Secure funding to hire more law enforcement officers.**  
Implement a long overdue inspection fee increase, secure additional appropriations funding for FWS, and institute a user-fee program for travelers to provide revenue for hiring additional wildlife inspectors and special agents.
- **Significantly increase the number of wildlife inspectors.**  
Provide full-time staffing at all 64 ports of entry monitored by FWS, and enhance enforcement capacity at ports that attract high volumes of illegal trade from the Latin American region. To improve efficiency, supplement this force with additional wildlife detector dogs.

## For Businesses

- **Ensure that imported wildlife products sourced from the Latin American region are legal.**  
Make sure all products come from sustainable sources and are accompanied by proper importation paperwork.

## For Tour Operators

- **Do not include questionable wildlife attractions on Latin American tour itineraries.**  
Stay away from places that offer “wildlife encounters” or feature captive animals taken from the wild and retail outlets that sell illegal wildlife products.

## For the Transportation Industry

- **Work cooperatively with FWS law enforcement to combat wildlife trafficking.**  
Where appropriate, ban the transport of particular wildlife species or products consistently found in the illegal trade.



**Wildlife inspectors identify a live specimen from a seized shipment. Only 18 out of the 328 recognized ports of entry to the United States are designated for the import/export of wildlife and have full-time wildlife inspectors. The United States needs more inspectors to handle wildlife shipments at ports and more special agents to investigate wildlife trafficking crimes.**

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Do not purchase items or eat foods that may contain illegal wildlife or derivative parts. Ask:

- What is this product made of?
- Where did it come from?
- Do I need any special documents or permits to take this item home?

**When in doubt, rule it out!**

To learn more about trafficked wildlife, check out these FWS resources:

- *Buyer Beware*, <http://www.fws.gov/international/pdf/brochure-buyer-beware-2004.pdf>
- *Buyer Beware Caribbean*, <http://www.fws.gov/international/pdf/brochure-caribbean-buyer-beware-2003.pdf>
- *Importing Queen Conch: What You Need to Know*, <http://www.fws.gov/international/pdf/factsheet-import-queen-conch-2013.pdf>

For Defenders' complete report on illegal wildlife trafficking from Latin America to the United States, visit [www.defenders.org/combating-wildlife-trafficking](http://www.defenders.org/combating-wildlife-trafficking)



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