

# **A**NIMAL SMUGGLING

Journalists are fond of them: animal lovers caught at the airport while smuggling rare birds or reptiles. They make good stories for both television and newspapers. But they do not make good stories for all those thousands of serious bird and reptile keepers who are trying so hard to give their pets a perfect life and try to breed them. Turtles stapled in boxes, dozens of lizards put together without any fresh air, snakes hidden in stinking socks in the luggage... The species name of the smuggled animals is rarely mentioned in the press, so that every reptile and its keeper becomes suspect to most people. "Oh really, are you keeping snakes at home? Well, the newspapers recently said, that some guy was caught with life threatening snakes at the airport. It seems to be forbidden, importing reptiles." In this way most of the newspaper readers will react to the fact that you keep reptiles as pets. Boa constrictors or Pythons get the label 'dangerous'. As a matter of fact, the popular press doesn't realize that only a small percentage of snakes species are dangerous. And who cares: call something dangerous and the audience will love it!

The fact that animal smugglers become news, is logical. The police or customs benefit by announcing every catch they make: they just show that they are doing their jobs well. And they tell us that you should not try to do this because the risk of being caught is high. As soon as the police proudly shows that it is doing its job well, one should be suspicious. The risk of being caught for animal smuggling is still low. This makes smuggling animals a profitable business.

Unfortunately there are still snake keepers that only want animals which are rare, expen-

sive and very hard or impossible to buy. These 'snobs' are potential buyers of smuggled animals. They don't care about the animals, they only care about the image these animals can give them. Buying smuggled animals makes them criminals too and even this aspect tends to be attractive for some guys. Reptile societies, including the European Snake Society, hate animal smugglers and buyers of smuggled animals. But even these societies cannot fight this phenomenon. The only thing they can do, is show the consequences of animal smuggling and of course asking their members to keep their hands off smuggled animals. Therefore reptile keepers should always make sure they don't buy smuggled animals. Most reptiles species are imported legally or captive bred. But rare species might get smuggled. That is why one should always ask for legal papers (mostly Cites documents) and the seller has to prove that his animals are obtained in a legal way. Ask for this proof!

However, reptile magazines can not make sure that animals offered in advertisements are 'clean'. The editors cannot refuse an advertisement if someone offers animals, saying that they are including all legal documents. Even if the advertiser has a dubious reputation, this still does not mean that he is offering something illegal. To prove this, is hard and accusation is a matter of the court of justice. Therefore, we repeat, the buyer should realise his responsibility and ask for the proof of legality. Only in this way, might animal smugglers stop their business. This is necessary to get rid of the bad reputation they give to us reptile keepers.

*the board of the European Snake Society*

