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Internet gives rise to reptile poaching



Angulate tortoises used to be found by the hundreds in fields in the Western Cape. Now there are probably more of them in pet shops and homes overseas than in their natural habitats. File Picture

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Pretoria - Reptile poaching in South Africa has escalated into wholesale plunder since the advent of the worldwide web, which has ✕

made it possible to place online orders for any species.

This is according to Professor Friedo Herbig, a former marine conservation inspector turned conservation crime academic and researcher.

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Angulate tortoises used to be found by the hundreds in fields in the Western Cape. Now there are probably more of them in pet shops and homes overseas than in their natural habitats.

South African snakes – from the harmless mole snake to the venomous Cape cobra – are suffering a similar fate. Mole snakes are popular as pets, while Cape cobras are prized among collectors internationally because they are so venomous.

Frogs, lizards, geckos, toads and chameleons are also in demand, and as far as collectors are concerned, the more endangered or dangerous they happen to be, the more they are prepared to pay.

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“It's all about status. Reptile collectors pride themselves on owning the rarest, most endangered, venomous or poisonous species.

“There is a massive market for reptiles overseas and collectors tend to love South African species,” Herbig said.

The animals, easily picked up in their natural habitats, are shipped to their destinations in shocking conditions. Tortoises, for instance, are starved and dehydrated before and during the voyage, often stuffed into suitcases, with the holes in their shells for their heads and legs taped up so that they cannot move, make a sound, urinate or defecate. ✕

According to Herbig, between 35% and 55% of poached tortoises and other reptiles die during the journey but this does not seem to deter the poaching trade. The animals are shipped out of the country in large numbers – numbers sufficient to ensure a profit even if a third or more of the poached reptiles are dead on arrival.

He said many reptiles targeted by poachers for collectors or pet owners were becoming increasingly scarce.

“Tortoises are being decimated. You hardly see them anymore.”

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He added that the repercussions of reptile poaching are far graver than many people realise.

“Reptiles are the barometers of environmental health. If there are issues with reptiles, we know there are other environmental issues as well.

“If reptile numbers decline, the implications for farmers and crop damage can be severe.”

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Herbig pointed to the role reptiles play in keeping pest populations – from rodents to mosquitoes – in check.

“Everything has its niche role and the role played by reptiles is larger than we think. When they’re gone, they’re gone.”

However, he said, neither the general public nor the law enforcement authorities seem overly perturbed about the phenomenon of reptile poaching.

“Many people don’t like ‘creepy crawlies’ and see reptiles as pests. They don’t care if they hear that a snake species is disappearing.

“Unlike the poaching of iconic species like rhinos or elephants, reptile poaching isn’t newsworthy so there is no pushback.”

There are, according to him, two main obstacles to action being taken to curb reptile poaching. X

“Nature conservation agencies are understaffed and overstretched.

“There are so many animal species to protect that reptiles are falling through the cracks. They are right at the bottom of the pile.

“The other problem is legislation and its enforcement. Each province has its own nature conservation ordinance to protect species and there is little to no uniformity between provinces. We have nine different provinces and nine different sets of grassroots conservation legislation, which makes it very difficult to adopt a concerted approach.”

Even when there are arrests, conviction rates are low.

“Offenders usually get a slap on the wrist despite the inhumaneness of the crime ... What is needed is an overhaul of the legislation,” he said.

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