

# Social media threat to wildlife

International syndicates trading in endangered wildlife have gone hi-tech by turning to social media to protect their multi-billion dollar businesses from increasing pressure by global law enforcement agencies.



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Using secret "closed groups" on Facebook, criminals have expanded their networks tenfold. Wildlife protection groups estimate that nearly 70,000 people access these secret sites.

South Africa is not immune, with roaring sales of endangered plants and animals on the internet.

A report, "The Trading Faces", produced by Traffic, a UK wildlife protection monitoring group, has revealed how international animal traffickers are turning to social media, especially Facebook, to ply their trade.

The document, which monitored Facebook over five months, reveals that 14 closed groups are trading in Malaysian endangered wildlife.

Among the animals sold were sun bears, gibbons, otters, the rare Indonesian yellow-crested cockatoo, and Madagascan tortoises.

A separate investigation by the International Fund for Animal Welfare found more than 30,000 live wild animals, as well as

animal parts and products, for sale in 16 countries on 280 online marketplaces.

All the animals are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (better known as "CITES").

The Traffic report showed that most of the Facebook groups were "closed", requiring membership to view and trade online.

Traffic spokesman Richard Thomas said the closed groups had almost 70,000 active members, with 106 identified as animal-sellers.

He said Facebook was working to stop such illegal trading on its platform.

The previously undocumented trade has sparked alarm among international and South African wildlife protection groups.

The Traffic report's co-author, Kanitha Krishnasamy, said that the rise of social media had enabled the creation of a thriving marketplace for threatened wild animals, often as bought as pets.

Traffic's Sarah Stoner, a senior crime analyst, said the wildlife protection body believed the findings reflected a worldwide problem.

"Social media's ability to put traffickers in touch with so many potential buyers quickly, cheaply and anonymously is worrying," Stoner said.

Tania McCrea-Steele, IFAW's global wildlife cyber crime project leader, said: "Our intelligence indicates that the online trading in endangered wildlife is a significant issue in South Africa.

"Sites include those of Gumtree and eBay."

IFAW spokesman Christine Pretorius said: "In South Africa the emerging threat on online market-places is the trade in rare and endangered cycads and aloes."

*Source: The Times*

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