

monitoring and reporting of wildlife trade regulation. In February 2017 the Australian Auditor General's Department conducted a performance audit in the Department of the Environment and Energy to determine if progress had been made towards implementing the recommendations. The report findings showed progress in addressing the recommendations .

The Australian Government remains resolute in its efforts to tackle illegal wildlife trade, said a spokesperson from the Department of Environment and Energy.

"The Department takes attempts to illegally smuggle wildlife into and out of Australia very seriously and will continue to work with Australian law enforcement agencies, including Australian Border Force and the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources," said the spokesperson. "Australia is working internationally to combat illegal wildlife trade to ensure that the penalties match the seriousness of the crime, and to make sure international organised crime groups can't keep the profits from illegal wildlife trade."

AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE ON THE JOB

The trafficking of native Australian wildlife is a serious issue for the Australian Border Force as it works with other federal and state agencies, which tie in with their network overseas, explained ABF Acting Superintendent John Fleming.

"Over time, there has been a gradual increase in cross border wildlife smuggling of Australian native wildlife as it has become a more valuable commodity," he said.

"Wildlife smuggling is a lucrative trade and criminal syndicates and individuals can make significant profits by exporting and selling Australia's unique native fauna overseas. Many animals smuggled out can fetch large sums of money. Recent lizards exported can fetch up to \$10k per animal!"

Traffickers mainly use international mail and target lizards because they can be easily hidden in luggage, packed in socks, boxes of cereal or bag of chips and legs taped together, said Superintendent Fleming.

"The way traffickers are putting wildlife into packages are quite cruel, it's quite upsetting," he said. "For syndicates that smuggle animals it's a numbers game. Many animals won't survive the journey."

Police also generally find that these criminal syndicates are involved with other activities, like narcotics and importation of illegal tobacco, he added.

According to recent ABF detection data, the native species being smuggled out of Australia included shingleback lizards, eastern spiny tailed skinks, geckos, blue tongue lizards and gidgee skins. The animals were aimed mostly for the Asian market to be sold as pets.

"The majority of the international mail

parcels were posted from Melbourne and Sydney and destined for China, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Russia. The boxes were labelled as toys, kids and baby clothing, shoes, school bags and bags of chips," said Superintendent Fleming.

In the first quarter of 2018/2019 financial year, the ABF officers stopped a total of 20 separate consignments containing more than 110 reptiles from being illegally exported overseas.

"Since these detections, we haven't seen numbers this high but are still intercepting packages containing reptiles on a regular basis, most commonly through our mail stream," he said. "We also occasionally see people attempting to bring in exotic wildlife from overseas. It's not a growing problem. We see less coming into Australia."

In the spirit of national collaboration and coordination to combat illicit trafficking of Australian wildlife, the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) works closely with the ABF, the Department of Environment and Energy (DOEE), Australia Post, RSPCA Victoria and other agencies across the states and territories.

Whilst federal agencies are looking at investigating wildlife trafficking from a national perspective, DELWP is taking a similar approach - in our current investigation, said DELWP's Manager of Intelligence and Investigations, Iain Bruce.

"In our investigation, Operation SHEFFIELD, we wanted to fully understand the level of sophistication and number of people involved in this detailed, long term investigation targeting wildlife crime " said Mr Bruce.

What authorities do know is that smugglers are targeting reptiles because they are easier to transport and conceal. Specifically of interest are lizards - Blue tongue, Shingleback, Skink, Gecko, Water Dragon and Lace Monitor - and snakes. Smugglers are also after native mammals like Echidnas and Sugar Gliders.

"The way these animals are concealed are extremely cruel; taped up head to tail to avoid animals making any noise," he said. "Some come out paralysed, some found dead and others very close to

