

Illegal pets in the Philippines

Title A few days ago, I watched Richard Gutierrez tell his TV audience the perils of buying exotic and endangered animals as pets. He elaborated that these animals especially those that are forest-dependent cannot survive in an urban setting. Some may do but will exhibit stress-induced movements or behavior. Indeed, biodiversity loss due to trade is a serious problem in the Philippines. According to Sinha (2005), the overharvesting of Philippine wild species for pets, ornaments and medicines is one of the major causes of species loss. Birds are usually the majority of species that is traded. It is said that before a "perfect" bird is caught and sold as a pet, at least 10 die because trapping is not a perfect art. Wings or legs get broken along the way and the birds are thus discarded and left to die. If the birds that are caught have juveniles, then these baby birds are sure to die, too. Once the "perfect" bird is caught, a water bottle is split in two and the bird is stuffed inside. They are packed in suitcases and when they get to Manila, half are dead. Sinha (2005) tells about the well-documented rampant trapping of birds along the crest of the mid-Luzon mountain range at Dalton Pass, Nueva Vizcaya and similar places within Mount Pulag National Park and Mount Data National Park in Northern Luzon. Birds of several species consisting of native and migrating birds (rails, pigeons and kingfishers) fly seasonally along these mountain ranges. Despite their small body mass and insignificant amount of edible meat, the birds are heavily trapped for food. A few trapped birds that survive are sold in the local markets. Trappers use a high-pressure lamp alongside homemade nets, set on elevated ground during foggy or overcast nights. The birds in flight become disoriented and fly to the light from the lamp, and in the process, get trapped in the net set next to the lamp. It is a harmful and unsustainable harvesting method because birds, and also bats, are trapped indiscriminately. This trapping practice, although claimed as a small-scale economic operation, has caused high mortality, inflicting a painful death to many native and wintering birds. The practice has been banned at Dalton Pass for several years by the local government and the ban has been enforced fairly consistently. International trade in wildlife is a lucrative business. Wild plants and animals are sold "on the market" either dead (stuffed turtles) or alive (birds, monkeys). The marketable products include portions or the entire animal or plant and their by-products. In commercial trade, preserved specimens and by-products are primarily sold as "traditional" medicines (many of which have questionable or no known medicinal value), house or personal ornaments, souvenir items and curios. Internationally, from the early to mid-1990s, the numbers and kinds of wild animals and plants sold are a staggering 25,000 to 30,000 primates, two to five million birds, 500 to 600 million ornamental fishes, nine to 10 million orchids and seven to eight million cacti (Hunter 1996). Live tropical insects (butterflies and beetles) and reptiles (iguanas, lizards, snakes) were also in high demand among avid collectors, display houses and souvenir and pet shops. The Wildlife Act regulates wildlife trade in the country. Although this law is already in place, the challenge is implementing it. The celebrity Richard Gutierrez vigorously advocates the curtailing of illegal wildlife trade. His a welcome initiative. Tremendous awareness raising and information campaigns have to be continuously and extensively done to abate this practice and arrest its adverse impacts on the

population of our species. The first step is to not buy exotic and endangered animals. Stick to the 'safe' pets?dogs, cats, lovebirds, gold fish. They are easier to care for. Not buying endangered animals and having only 'safe' pets will ensure that animals of the wild stay there. by Annabelle Plantilla Image Credit: Furryscaly; flickr.com