



ASEAN Wildlife Forensics Network will help stamp out wildlife crime

ASEAN countries are to increase DNA testing to help tackle wildlife crime in the region.

DNA testing can allow Customs officers to identify wildlife species in shipments to determine whether they are being legally transported or not, and in some cases even indicate which geographic region the specimens came from.

"Identifying items such as skins, pieces of meat, or processed wood products is a significant challenge facing enforcement officers, but the latest forensic techniques, such as DNA testing can help speed up this process meaning illicit wildlife cargoes can be identified more easily," said Dr Jen Mailley, Manager of the ASEAN-WEN Wildlife Forensics Project.

"Widespread testing will be a significant weapon in the fight against wildlife trafficking."

DNA testing is one of a range of forensic techniques to be introduced as part of a regional initiative to tackle wildlife crime through the establishment of a Wildlife Forensics Network within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN).

"Everyone who has contact with forensic samples, from crime scene to court, has a vital role to play in helping tackle wildlife crime," said Mailley.

The forensics initiative is funded by the UK Darwin Initiative, and will deliver tangible benefits to ASEAN wildlife forensic specialists through three streams of activity. Workshops such as one scheduled for June will train both laboratory scientists in DNA techniques, as well as training enforcement officers in sample collection and storage. Secondly, it is vital that the many experts and facilities which already exist in the region are used as efficiently as possible. Therefore the project will also establish a network of forensic specialists, and a directory of the expertise in the region. All agencies, departments and individuals involved in the use of Wildlife Forensics are invited to join the newly established ASEAN Wildlife Forensics Network website, at www.asean-wfn.org

As experts log on and add their details to the secure directory of regional expertise, a Wildlife Forensics network will be formed. If a Department is not able to identify a specimen, they will be able to search the online database to find other Departments or experts, perhaps at Universities, who are able to help.

Finally, it is vital that the ASEAN region is able to accredit new tests so that they are accepted as evidence in a court of law. Therefore the project will also provide support and advice to ongoing research and accreditation projects.

Together, these three streams of activity will increase the efficiency of current forensic processes, help coordination and collaboration within the ASEAN region, and increase the scientific capacity of the regions' experts. The ASEAN region will be better able to enforce legislation protecting wildlife.

The promising cooperation between TRACE and ASEAN-WEN is one answer to the increasing global scope of the illicit trade in a region that is a famous trade hub for endangered animal species from all over the world. "This cooperation marks a key progress for the ability of ASEAN-WEN enforcement and scientific staff to tackle the illegal trade by identifying particular species in a global context and tracing back trade routes", says Dr. Chumphon Suckaseam, Senior Officer of ASEAN-WEN.

TRAFFIC Southeast Asia are key partners to TRACE in implementing the project. Regional Director, Dr. William Schaedla, expressed excitement and optimism at the undertaking, "Forensic science has vast potential to help enforcement agencies make good on their commitments against wildlife crime. We are optimistic this project will set new precedents not only here in the region, but also globally."

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) will be coordinating the international Wildlife Forensics Training Workshop, through its regional coordination unit. The event will be hosted by Malaysia's PERHILITAN (Department of Wildlife and National Parks) in June this year.

According to DWNP spokesperson "DWNP is keen to maximise their use of modern technology in our fight against illegal activity. The existing laboratory will be upgraded to enhance its capability to undertake wildlife forensic investigation. The Department's Wildlife Genetic Resource Bank currently maintains DNA sequence database for wildlife and biomaterial database. The genetic bank currently keeps 1400 genetic samples from mammals, avifauna and reptiles. It also maintains 400 wildlife serum samples. The Resource Bank provides services such as species identification, species genetic variation, sexing of wildlife species, and determining wildlife species origin and population. The hosting of this International Wildlife Forensics Training Workshop is the Department's commitment to the regional and international efforts to combat wildlife crime. This workshop in collaboration with A-WEN and TRACE will build on the excellent progress PERHILITAN has made in recent years. Together better trained staff and coordination between agencies can make a real difference to the detection and prosecution of wildlife offences."

The training is part of a 3 year project headed by the UK based NGO 'TRACE Wildlife Forensics Network'. The project is run in partnership with TRAFFIC South East Asia, and

funded by the UK government's Darwin Initiative. Further information is available on the project website: www.asean-wfn.org

Information for journalists:

TRACE is a UK-based international organization that aims to promote the use of forensic science in biodiversity conservation and the investigation of wildlife crime. The TRACE network brings together forensic scientists and enforcement agencies in order to exchange information on the latest challenges facing wildlife law enforcement and modern techniques for tackling them. Website: www.tracenetwork.org

ASEAN-WEN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network. It involves environmental, law enforcement and Customs agencies in all 10 ASEAN countries and facilitates cross-border collaboration in the fight against illegal wildlife trade in the region. ASEAN-WEN is sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, works to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals is not a threat to the conservation of nature.

FURTHER PROJECT DETAILS can be found at the newly established project website www.asean-wfn.org

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