

Tip of an iceberg?

CITES live wildlife confiscations only tell part of the story

Summary

We assessed the global scope and scale of confiscated live wild animals using information provided in the UNEP-WCMC CITES trade database¹. In total, we found 64,143 wild animals (including 359 species of amphibians, birds, fish, mammals and reptiles) were seized by 54 countries between 2010 - 2014. However, this figure may be just the tip of the iceberg as we found CITES records were incomplete with no data on seizures provided by 70% of CITES Parties.

Data on the disposal of confiscated live wild animals is also lacking as providing this data is not currently a formal CITES requirement. This lack of information prevents the proper allocation of available resources and the effective monitoring or evaluation of management outcomes. We urge Management Authorities to improve reporting compliance and for the CITES trade database (and other associated platforms) to include information on the fate of all live wild animal seizures.

Background

Poaching of endangered species to supply the illegal wildlife trade is estimated to be worth up to \$10 billion per year². As the global human population and the economies of developing countries continue to grow rapidly, demand for wildlife and illegal wildlife trade activity is flourishing². International travel and transport of goods are also now commonplace facilitating the movement of live wild animals through illegal trade chains, with increased online advertisement and access to information further stimulating demand².

Illegal wildlife trade is a substantial threat to wild populations through species loss, the introduction of invasive species, irresponsible wild release of confiscated animals and disease³. Illegal wildlife trade also has negative impacts on animal welfare during illegal capture, improper captive breeding, transport, sale and subsequent use³. In recognition of these threats, improved regulation of wildlife trade and associated enforcement action has led to an increase in the confiscation of illegal shipments by government authorities³. However, despite their efforts, criminal activity continues to evade them³.

Methods

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international agreement that operates as a licensing system through which imports and exports of listed species must be authorized by Parties⁴. The 181 Countries that are party to CITES are required to submit annual reports of international trade, including seizures of listed species (using source code "I"), which are made publicly available on the CITES trade database^{1,4}.

We reviewed the reports submitted for the period 2010 - 2014 to examine the current state of live wild animal trade seizures. Specifically, we asked: (1) what taxonomic groups are most frequently seized? (2) how many individual animals are involved? (3) what are their conservation status? and (4) where are seizures most frequently taking place? This information should help guide efforts to conserve wild populations and to safeguard the welfare of confiscated animals.



Findings

Between 2010 and 2014, a total of 64,143 individual animals, from 359 different species, were reported to have been confiscated by CITES Parties' enforcement authorities. According to the database, reptiles represented the class from which the largest number of individual live animals were reported to have been seized (60,666 individuals; 95% of all live animals seized). Fish was the second most commonly reported class (1,384 individuals; 2%), followed by birds (1,080 individuals; 2%), mammals (829 individuals; 1%) and amphibians (184 individuals; >1%) (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Overall, there was no evidence for a trend in the number of seized live animals reported by CITES parties over the time period studied (Figure 3). Seizure data were reported from just 54 different countries (with no data provided by 70% of all Parties to CITES) (Figure 4). 19% (11,902 individuals) of all live wild animals reported as seized are currently considered as "Threatened" according to the IUCN* Red List (Figure 5). Data on the disposal of confiscated live animals is also lacking as providing them is not currently a formal requirement for CITES Parties.

*International Union for the Conservation of Nature

Figure 1

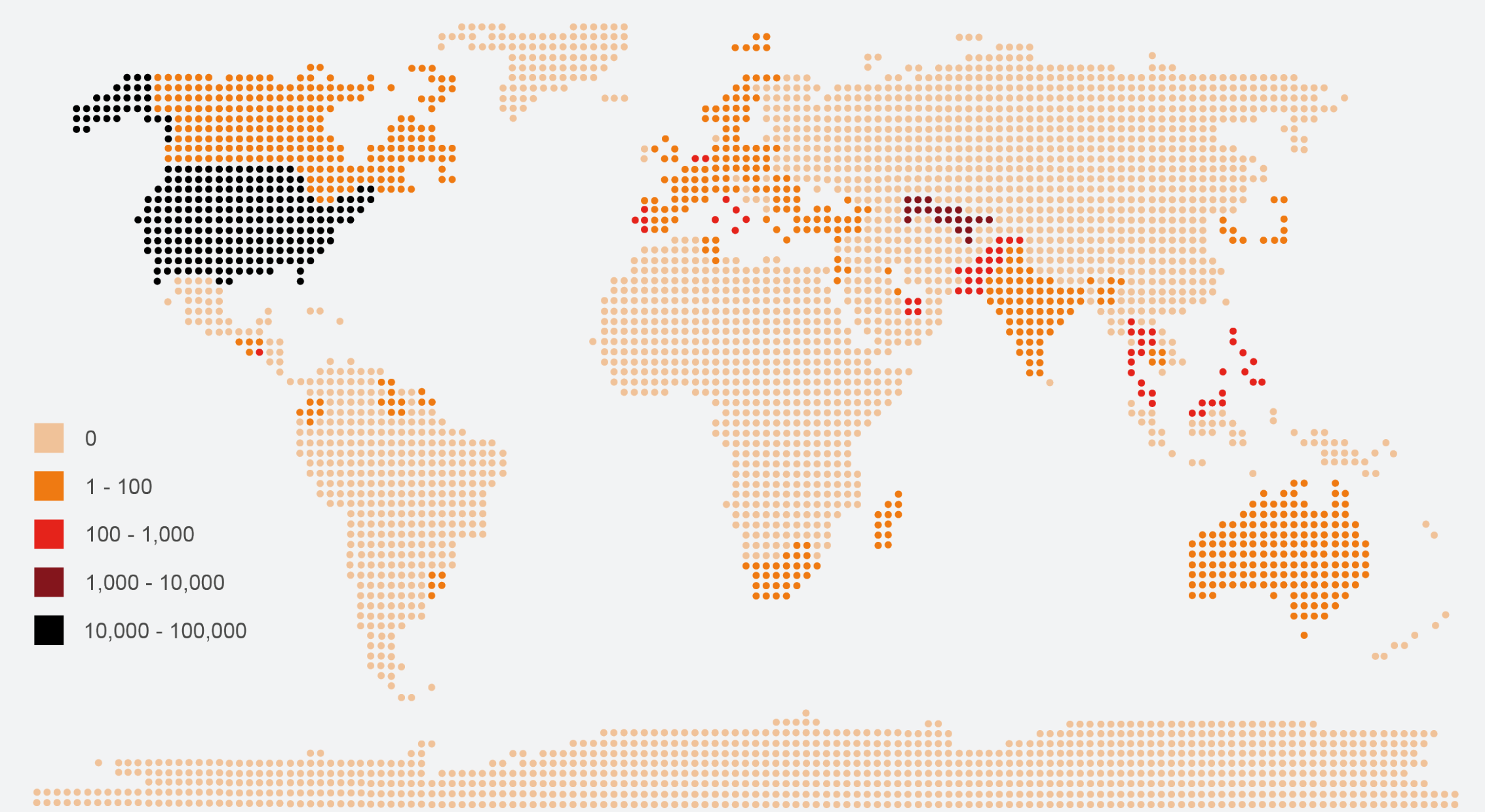
Top 10 live wild animal species confiscated (according to number of individuals seized 2010 - 2014, excluding taxa that could not be identified to species level).

Rank	Species	Common name	No. Individuals Seized
1	<i>G. pseudogeographica</i>	False map turtle	23,201
2	<i>Python regius</i>	Ball python	12,172
3	<i>Testudo horsfieldii</i>	Russian tortoise	7,115
4	<i>Graptemys ouachitensis</i>	Ouachita map turtle	2,630
5	<i>Varanus exanthematicus</i>	Bosc's monitor	1,705
6	<i>Chamaeleo senegalensis</i>	Senegal Chameleon	1,469
7	<i>Astrochelys radiata</i>	Radiated tortoise	523
8	<i>Testudo graeca</i>	Spur-thighed tortoise	518
9	<i>Macaca fascicularis</i>	Crab-eating Macaque	482
10	<i>Hippocampus kuda</i>	Estuary seahorse	465

Data source: CITES trade database.

Figure 4

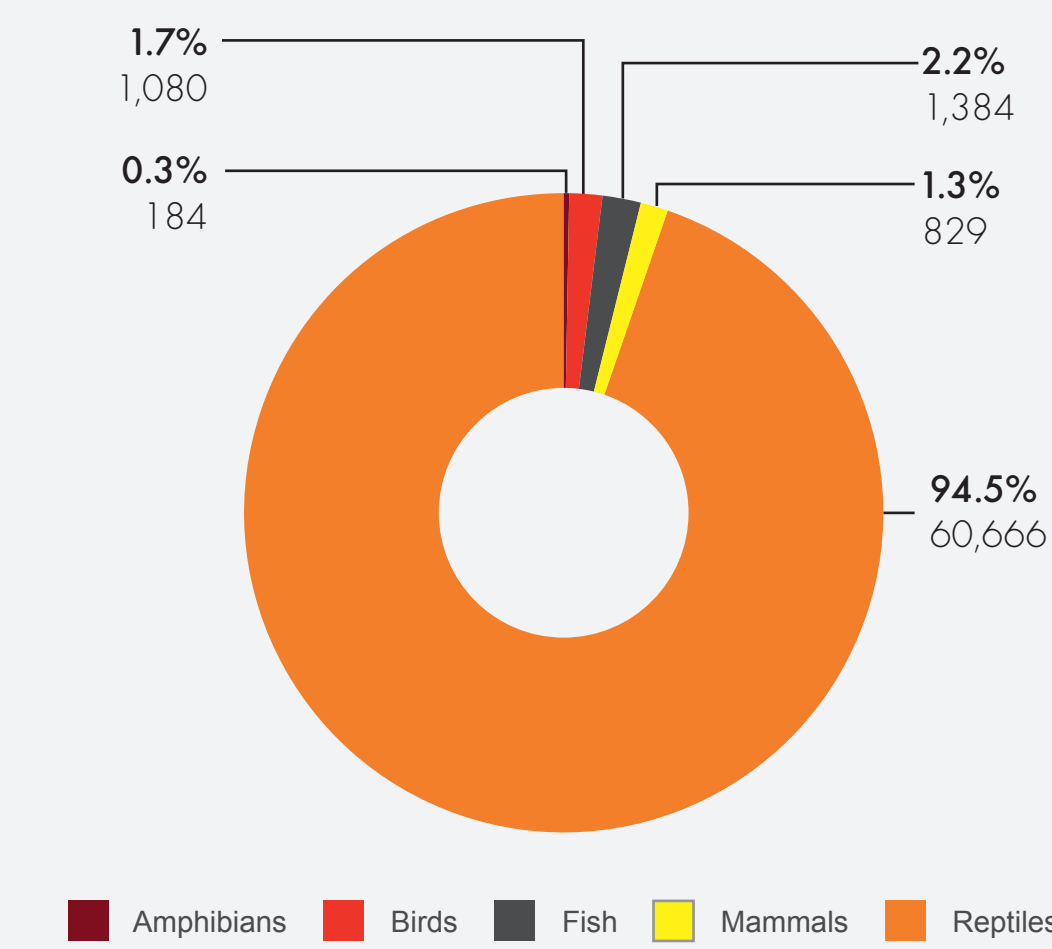
Live wild animals seized, according to confiscating country, between 2010 - 2014.



Data source: CITES trade database.

Figure 2

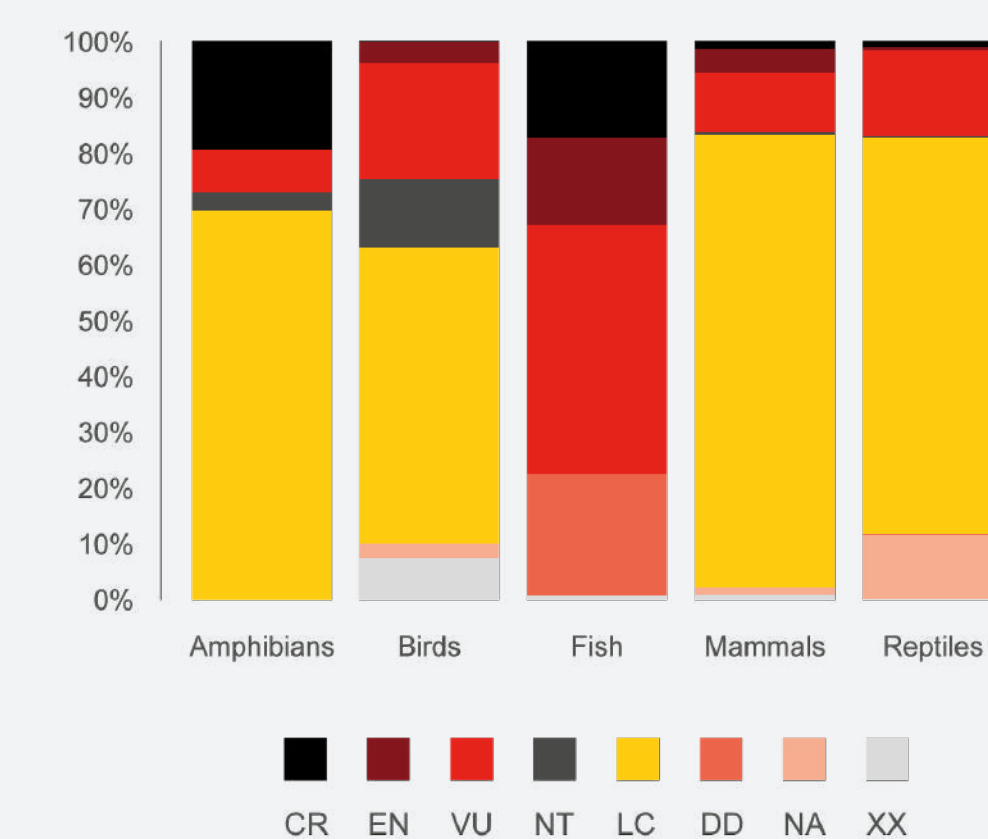
Live wild animals seized, according to taxonomic group, between 2010 - 2014.



Data source: CITES trade database.

Figure 5

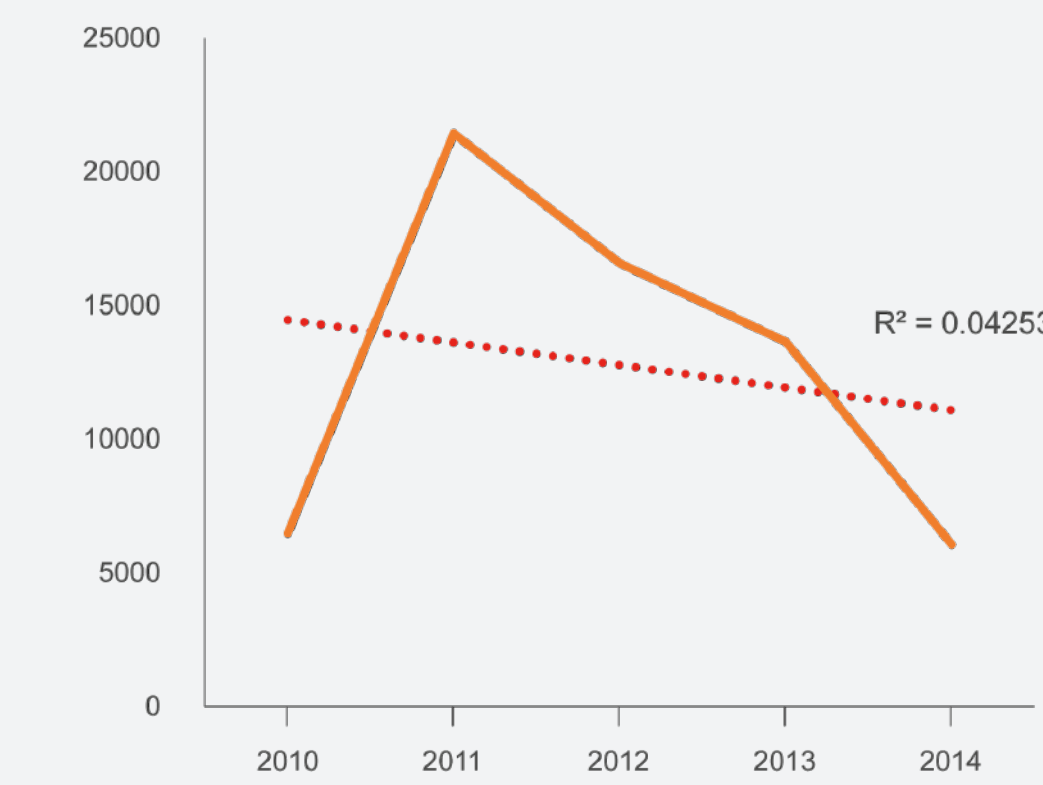
Live wild animals seized, according to IUCN* Red List status, between 2010 - 2014. (IUCN Red List assessment categories: CR, critically endangered; EN, endangered; VU, vulnerable; NT, near threatened; LC, least concern; DD, data deficient; NA, not yet assessed; XX, not listed).



Data source: CITES trade database.

Figure 3

Live wild animals seized, according to year, between 2010 - 2014.



Data source: CITES trade database.

Discussion

The CITES records are likely to represent just a fraction of the true number of live wild animals that were actually illegally traded between 2010 - 2014, since only a small proportion of wild animals in illegal wildlife trade are seized and not all seizures are reported on the CITES trade database⁵. Efforts to control illegal wildlife trade also varies considerably between countries, depending on the species and due to technical challenges in dealing with confiscated animals⁵. As such, the total of 64,143 animals reported to have been seized should be treated as a highly conservative figure.

Nevertheless, enforcement officials seized at least 359 different species with varying psychological and physiological attributes. Following each seizure, the relevant Authorities are advised to deal with confiscated animals in a humane manner that maximizes their conservation value^{6,7}. Although data fields are provided in other reporting formats⁸, CITES does not currently require any formal record keeping about their ultimate fate⁸. As such, it is not possible to ascertain how many of the 64,143 animals were euthanized, placed in long-term captivity, or returned to the wild.

References

1. UNEP-WCMC CITES Trade Database (2016) <http://trade.cites.org/>
2. Baker, S. E., Cain, R., Van Kesteren, F., Zommers, Z. A., D'Cruze, N., & Macdonald, D. W. (2013). Rough trade: animal welfare in the global wildlife trade. *BioScience*, 63(12), 928-938.
3. UNODC (2012) *Wildlife and Forest Crime Analytic Toolkit* Revised Edition New York, USA.
4. UNEP-WCMC (2014) *A guide to using the CITES Trade Database, version 8*. United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre. http://trade.cites.org/cites_trade_guidelines/en-CITES_Trade_Database_Guide.pdf.
5. TRAFFIC (2008) *What's driving the wildlife trade? A review of expert opinion on economic and social drivers of the wildlife trade and trade control efforts in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and Vietnam. East Asia and Pacific region sustainable development discussion papers*. The World Bank: 1-103.
6. CITES (2010) *Disposal of confiscated live specimens of species included in the Appendices. Resolution Conf. 10.7 [Rev. CoP15]*.
7. IUCN/SSC. (2013) *Guidelines for Reintroductions and other Conservation Translocations*. Gland, Switzerland.
8. CITES (2016) *Reporting under the Convention* <https://cites.org/eng/resources/reports.php>



Recommendation

Our study shows that information about the actual number of live wild animals seized by CITES officials is incomplete. We argue that the proper allocation of resources to effectively detect and act upon illegal wildlife trade is currently hindered by this lack of information.

We recommended that Management Authorities seek to improve reporting compliance and that CITES strengthens its existing trade database (in continued collaboration with other associated data management platforms) to include information on the fate of any live wild animals that are officially confiscated.

Tip of an iceberg?
CITES live wildlife confiscations only tell part of the story
27th September 2016

www.worldanimalprotection.org
www.wildcru.org