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Concern over Social Media Trafficking of Great Apes

Wildlife conservationists and law enforcement officials are becoming increasingly concerned about the use of the Internet in marketing and trading protected wildlife species. Before the Internet, live wild animals, plants and their products were normally traded in physical market places, auction houses or shops, limiting numbers.

With the arrival of the Internet, thousands of traders can communicate instantaneously with one another in cyber-space and sell millions of items at the touch of a key. Traders can use e-commerce websites and social media platforms, such as Instagram, WeChat, Twitter and

ABOVE: These two orangutan babies, transported from Indonesia to Bangkok by Exoticpet88, were seized by Thai police (Natural Resources Environmental Crime Suppression Division) and the Freeland operations team.

Facebook, to advertise wildlife with photographs showing a multitude of items. WhatsApp, Snapchat and other private communication applications can also be used to negotiate illegal trades out of sight of law enforcement. Payments increasingly are being made with various cyber-wallet apps.

The Project to End Great Ape Slavery (PEGAS), hosted by Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya, has been investigating online trading of great apes for about two years now, collaborating closely with the Cheetah Conservation Fund. Cheetahs and great apes share the unfortunate distinction of being popular exotic pets of the wealthy in the Middle East, former Soviet Union countries and elsewhere.

Well-meaning posts of photos of loved exotic pets, especially when made by influential people, unwittingly stimulate others to emulate them by acquiring their own exotic pet, usually through illegal trade, as many of the species are in the Appendix 1 of the Convention on International



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Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which lists species threatened with extinction and prohibits trade.

Showing children with great ape pets drives the trade, as both parents and children who see the posts will get the idea that it is acceptable, even desirable, to acquire a chimpanzee or orangutan baby pet.

Other posts are more insidious, with a ‘For sale?’ query being common. The question is often answered instructing the potential buyer to communicate through a WhatsApp number or direct messaging. Occasionally, actual prices will be given in plain view of any observer.

Some posts might even promote others going into the business, as they show dealers with expensive cars and nice houses.

Many posts create the impression that the ape is having a wonderful time and is enjoying its role as a pet, but other posts capture the reality, the

ABOVE: This infant chimpanzee was captured in West Africa and smuggled to the UAE. The dealer is offering it for sale for 120,000 dirhams (almost USD 33,000).

BELOW: Driving around Dubai or Doha with a chimpanzee in your lap shows the world you are cool. Wrong, it shows you selfishly abuse intelligent creatures.



PHOTOS BY: INSTAGRAM

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despair and loneliness that the ape experiences, and its end destination when it ceases to be cute and cuddly – a cage.

The Internet markets can be much larger than physical markets, because thousands of group members located in many countries can be involved. For example, TRAFFIC documented 70,000 members affiliated to just 14 groups on Facebook in one country (Malaysia) selling a wide variety of CITES Appendix I animals.

Starting with one trafficker in March 2015, PEGAS tracked the Instagram followers,



ABOVE: This important trafficker in the Gulf kept these four chimpanzee babies for weeks, showing them love and affection. One day he sold off three of them.

Facebook friends and people making comments to posts to establish an ever-widening network of fellow animal dealers, and those buying them as pets and prestige display trophies. There is nothing like driving around the streets of Dubai or Doha with a chimpanzee kitted out in designer clothes and sunglasses to make a statement: “Look at me, I’m cool.”

A few months later Patricia Tricorache of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) contacted PEGAS and provided a wealth of additional information regarding online exotic animal trading. The CCF and PEGAS have been collaborating since then, building up a cheetah and great ape database of online wildlife trafficking. We see many other endangered species being trafficked as well in the course of our investigations.

METHODOLOGY

PEGAS conducted an update count of the individual great apes that it has seen posted on

Instagram and Facebook accounts as of early May, 2017. Only those apes that were in the possession of the person posting were counted. Care was taken to count only the ape in the original account photo or video. Some great apes are pets that owners have posted many times, sometimes over the course of two or three years. PEGAS recorded the names of the pets and took care not to count the same ape more than once. In addition, some people have more than one Instagram or Facebook account and post great ape photos and videos on them all. For example, PEGAS has seen the exact same post on up to ten different accounts.

To complicate matters, some people have closed accounts and opened new accounts. The fact that owners usually put the apes in children’s clothes helps with identification, particularly with reposts. PEGAS has even seen dealers repost great apes from another account and offer them for sale. It is unknown whether these were scam sales offerings or were done with the owner’s



PHOTOS BY: INSTAGRAM

knowledge and permission.

PEGAS classed accounts as dealers (D) or owners only (O). Some dealers are also great ape pet owners (D/O). PEGAS was surprised to see cases in which dealers would sell great apes that they had named and kept as pets for themselves or their children for several months, and for whom they had shown great affection.

Traffickers also made reposts of great ape photos from sites not engaged in trade, whether to mislead investigators or just for fun is not known. Traffickers posted great apes from International Animal Rescue, from various sanctuaries, from zoos and safari parks, from animal-theme websites, and even of Koko the gorilla. Most exotic animal dealers know now that

ABOVE: Cheetahs and great apes share the unfortunate distinction of being popular exotic pets of the wealthy in the Middle East, former Soviet Union countries and elsewhere.

a number of investigators are watching them.

The figures presented should be considered as plus or minus about 10 percent, as a certain amount of guesswork was involved in deciding whether a post was a repost of the same ape, or which account was the actual original account making the photo/video post. This type of work is enormously time-consuming and further work is needed to figure out who actually owns each account and who first posted each ape photo seen. The posts go back to 2011, but the great majority have been made since 2014.

RESULTS

PEGAS has been monitoring social media accounts in thirteen countries. The most active region for great ape trafficking is the Middle East, followed by South East Asia. Africa is not well represented because they rarely post photos of great apes on personal accounts, knowing that their sale is illegal and that there are investigators watching their accounts. For whatever reason,

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PHOTOS BY: INSTAGRAM

African dealers do not seem to use Instagram as much as the other dealers do, preferring Facebook.

Thus far, 98 individuals have been found posting photos of great apes that they have at one time possessed personally. Of these, 52 are dealers and 46 are owners only, and 7 are both. It should be understood that even the owners only are also engaged in great ape trafficking, as it takes two to tango. Trafficking consists of a seller and a buyer.

The 98 individuals posted approximately 169 chimpanzees and 92 orangutans that they held in their possession, 261 in all. Although photos were seen of bonobos and gorillas, none of them appeared to be in the possession of the person posting them.

Many of the bigger dealers and owners know each other, and PEGAS has stitched together a few networks. Key dealers in South East Asia, the Middle East and Africa all are mutual Facebook friends or Instagram followers. There is much more research to be done to work out the networks of suppliers, middlemen and buyers.

DISCUSSION

The 261 great apes seen in the thirteen countries is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many

TOP LEFT: Many Instagram and Facebook posts shows great ape infants dressed up and playing, giving the impression they enjoy being a pet, but other photos show the truth. They are lonely and traumatized without their mother and the social group.

TOP RIGHT: Photographs of celebrities like Paris Hilton holding great ape pets only serves to drive demand.

accounts and groups that have not been fully researched or even found yet.

There is also the problem of law enforcement. Even when the names and contacts of traffickers are known and reported to the relevant authorities, with copies of the incriminating posts, they will not take action. They claim it is too much work to gain a conviction and they have higher priorities. Some NGOs and individuals campaign to have the social media sites closed down, but that can be counter-productive as the trafficker then simply establishes a new site and increases his security settings and is much more careful about whom he lets gain access to it. Shutting down an account does not stop the trafficking.

About the only way to be sure of law enforcement is to set up a sting, as occurred in Thailand last December involving PEGAS, where two traffickers were arrested and two baby orangutans were seized. The police were involved early on and there was close cooperation between PEGAS, the police and the collaborating local NGO. This is expensive and can take months of work to achieve. Until laws are in place to make it easier for the police and legal system to arrest and convict traffickers on the basis of posts alone, the undercover sting will remain the only option.

If one includes how many of the great apes that were killed during the capture of the infants and how many infants would have died during transport, the 261 successfully smuggled great apes probably represent about 2,000 ape deaths. This has to stop. ●