

Illegal Wildlife Trade Victim: Million Dollar Gecko

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IF you are new to the north-east Indian states of Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, etc. you must have been mesmerised by the enthralling beauty of the land. Dusk comes early here in comparison to western India. And the scenic summer evenings are filled with the piercing sound of To-kay!!! To-kay!!! To-kay!!! To-kay!!!

This call is so strong and frequent that you cannot help wondering about the animal. And, if you are one of those who are scared of geckos, then get prepared to meet your worst nightmare, the Tokay Gecko.

Tokay gecko or *Gekko gecko*, a gecko found in northeast India, is common throughout Southeast Asia. It lives in the rainforests on trees but also quite common in rural human houses, hiding in crevices during daytime and searching for insect preys or mates during the night hours.

It is one of the largest geckos in the world, reaching up to 35-40 cm in length. Its body is cylindrical and flattened.

However, the survival of the Tokay gecko is seriously threatened due to its huge trade because of its use in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for hundreds of years to treat cancer,



Males are more brightly coloured (left) than females (right)

asthma, diabetes, skin disorders and a range of ailments. Although, there is no scientific proof to support the traditional use of this reptile species having any medicinal properties, smuggling the Tokay gecko to Myanmar and China has become a lucrative illegal trade for poachers.

Just one single matured gecko can fetch a price of Rs 20 lakh in the international market. Local smugglers in north-east India get about Rs 50,000 to Rs 2.5 lakh and then it is sold through various markets across the country. The price of gecko is dependent upon its size and weight and therefore, sometimes,



Tokay gecko for sale as pet in Indonesia



Dried Tokay gecko for sale as medicine in China



Tokay gecko wine for sale as medicine in China

low weight geckos are injected with mercury to make them heavier so that they could be sold at higher rates. This can, however, kill the animal in a few days. Poaching of this endangered lizard is done by local tribals who further hand them over to middlemen who smuggle it to international buyers through the north-eastern borders.

News reports of government officials busting the illegal wildlife trade of Tokay geckos are quite common in newspapers of north-east India. Tokay Geckos are listed in Schedule III of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, as a 'highly endangered animal'.

While the entire volume of the gecko trade has not been clearly assessed, global wildlife trade monitoring network (TRAFFIC) in their report of 2013



estimated that Indonesia alone had been exporting 1.2 million dried tokay geckos annually and that in recent years Taiwan has imported 15 million geckos from different countries.

TRAFFIC also warned that the wild population of the Tokay gecko in Southeast Asia was in grave danger, as it is hunted to meet demands in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam and other Asian countries.

Now, to meet international demands,

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gecko smugglers from India, Nepal and Bangladesh have joined the trafficking chain. According to wildlife experts, the poachers are active in the Indian states of Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, among others.

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