



Department of Justice

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Fact Sheet: Operation Central

Sentencing for First Wave of International Wildlife Smugglers Complete

Operation Central, a three-year undercover operation conducted by federal agents and prosecutors, has resulted in the arrests and guilty pleas of seven individuals who took part in the illegal international trade of skins and products made from protected sea turtles and other wildlife.

The investigation resulted in four indictments, containing 69 counts, returned on Aug. 22, 2007 in Denver, Colo. Seven individuals from the United States, Mexico and China were arrested on Sept. 6, 2007 during an undercover sting operation led by special agents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Branch of Special Operations. Four of the indicted defendants remain at large.

The Defendants

All pleadings and sentences have taken place in U.S. District Court in Denver, Colo.

1. Carlos Leal Barragan, of Ciudad Guzman, Mexico, was sentenced on April 29, 2008 to serve 16 months in prison and three years supervised release in connection with his sale and smuggling of internationally protected sea turtle skins and sea turtle products from Mexico to the United States. Leal Barragan pleaded guilty on Jan. 29, 2008.

As set forth in the indictment and acknowledged in the plea agreement, Leal Barragan's family had been involved in the tanning of sea turtle hides, purchased from fishermen, for several years. The skins were sold to boot makers in Mexico and were sometimes smuggled to boot makers in the United States. Leal Barragan sent three shipments containing approximately 360 sea turtle skin pieces, along with sea turtle boots, belts and shoes from Mexico to undercover agents of the USFWS working in Colorado during 2007, in violation of U.S. law and international treaty. The value of these items is approximately \$30,000.

2. Martin Villegas Terrones, a Mexican national, pleaded guilty March 11, 2008, to federal smuggling charges in connection with his sale and shipment of endangered sea turtle skins and skin products from Mexico to the United States.

On Wednesday, October 8, he was sentenced to serve 24 months in prison, followed by 3 years of supervised release and a special assessment of \$100. In calculating his sentence, the Court found that the fair market retail value of the exotic skins and products smuggled by Villegas Terrones was between \$120,000 and \$200,000.

3. Esteban Lopez Estrada, a Mexican national, was sentenced on April 30, 2008 to 24 months in prison for his participation in the sale and smuggling of sea turtle and other exotic skins and skin products into the United States from Mexico.

Along with the prison term, Lopez Estrada was sentenced to three years supervised release and a \$1,700 fine, the amount in the defendant's possession at the time of his arrest.

Lopez Estrada pleaded guilty on Feb. 8, 2008, to one felony count of smuggling and one felony count of money laundering. According to the plea agreement, Lopez Estrada operated a business in Leon, Mexico, named Botas Exoticas Canada Grande, through which he bought and sold exotic leathers, including sea turtle, caiman, ostrich and lizard skins; manufactured boots and belts from the skins; and sold the skins, boots and belts to customers in the United States. After arranging sales to customers in the United States, Lopez Estrada sent the exotic leathers and leather products to his co-defendants Caraveo and Cueva in Mexico for clandestine importation into the United States. As payment for the skins, boots and belts, Lopez Estrada received international wire transfers from Colorado to his Mexican bank account.

In addition to the skins, boots, and belts sold and shipped by Lopez Estrada to the United States, joint investigation with Mexican authorities led to the seizure in September 2007 of more than 400 pairs of sea turtle boots, shoes, slippers, and other products from Lopez Estrada's home and business in Mexico. At sentencing, the court determined that the total fair market value of the wildlife items in Lopez Estrada's case was between \$120,000 and \$200,000.

4. Jorge Caraveo, of El Paso, Texas, was sentenced on May 30, 2008 to serve 18 months in prison for his participation in the sale and smuggling of sea turtle and other exotic skins and skin products into the United States from Mexico. Along with the prison term, Caraveo was sentenced to three years supervised release and a \$300 special assessment.

Caraveo pleaded guilty on Jan. 29, 2008, to three felony counts of smuggling. According to the plea agreement, Caraveo operated a business in El Paso, Texas, named Juarez Boot Company, through which he bought and sold exotic leathers, including sea turtle, caiman, ostrich and lizard skins; manufactured boots and belts from the skins; and sold the skins, boots and belts to customers in the United States. Caraveo crossed the border between Juarez, Mexico and El Paso, daily and frequently concealed footwear and skins of exotic animals in his vehicle. Caraveo received in Juarez exotic leathers and leather products from co-defendants in Mexico for clandestine importation into the United States. Caraveo received "crossing fees" as payment for his smuggling activities.

At the sentencing hearing, the Court found that the fair market retail value of the skins and hundreds of pairs of boots and shoes smuggled by Caraveo during the past several years was more than \$200,000. He was ordered to relinquish title to the boots and shoes made from exotic skins seized at his Juarez Boot Company business in September 2007 which had been smuggled into the United States.

5. Oscar Cueva, of McAllen, Texas, was sentenced on June 20, 2008 to 16 months in prison for his participation in the sale and smuggling of sea turtle and other exotic skins and skin products into the United States from Mexico.

Following the prison term, Cueva was sentenced to three years supervised release and has the option of paying \$5,000 to a specific sea turtle awareness program, performing 350 hours of community service for the benefit of a sea turtle conservation program, or participating in a public service announcement about the dangers and consequences of sea turtle smuggling.

Cueva pleaded guilty on Jan. 18, 2008, to conspiracy to commit smuggling and money laundering. According to the plea agreement, Cueva operated a business in McAllen called La Cueva Western Wear from 1996-2000, through which he bought and sold exotic leathers, including sea turtle, caiman, ostrich and lizard skins; manufactured boots and belts from the skins; and sold the skins, boots and belts to customers in the United States. Cueva crossed the border between Reynosa, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, daily and frequently concealed footwear and skins of exotic animals in his vehicle. In Reynosa, Cueva received exotic leathers and leather products from co-defendants in Mexico for clandestine importation into the United States. Cueva received "crossing fees" as payment for his smuggling activities.

According to the plea agreement filed in the case, during the undercover portion of the investigation Cueva smuggled approximately 200 sea turtle skins, 40 pairs of sea turtle skin boots and 100 pairs of boots made from other exotic skins requiring inspection and permits. In addition, Cueva smuggled hundreds of pairs of boots made from exotic skins during the years 1996-2000 for sale through his business.

At the June 20, 2008 sentencing hearing, the court found that the fair market retail value of the skins and hundreds of pairs of boots and shoes smuggled by Cueva during the past several years was more than \$200,000.

6. Fu Yiner, a Chinese national, was sentenced on Jan. 22, 2008, to 138 days of imprisonment (time served) and three years of supervised release.

Yiner pleaded guilty on Jan. 10, 2008, to one felony count of smuggling in connection with his sale and shipment of internationally protected sea turtle shell and sea turtle shell products from China to the United States.

As set forth in the indictment and acknowledged in the plea agreement, Fu knowingly sent four shipments of raw shell and guitar picks made from the shell of Hawksbill sea turtles, an endangered species, from China to undercover agents of the USFWS working in Colorado during 2006 and 2007, in violation of U.S. law and international treaty. The five kilograms of unworked shell and 300 guitar picks together were valued at over \$3,000.

7. Wang Hong, a Chinese national, was sentenced on Feb. 19, 2008, to 167 days in prison (time served) and three years of supervised release. Wang pleaded guilty to federal smuggling charges on Jan. 3, 2008, for knowingly sending four shipments of Hawksbill sea turtle shell and violin bows decorated with Hawksbill sea turtle shell, valued at a total of over \$5,000, to undercover USFWS agents working in Colorado during 2006 and 2007.

Wang was indicted by a federal grand jury in August 2007, along with co-defendant Stephen Cheng, also of China. Cheng remains at large.

The Court's conclusions regarding fair market retail value of the wildlife smuggled in the Operation Central cases was informed by an economic evaluation performed by TRAFFIC, a non-governmental wildlife trade monitoring program sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Sea Turtles

There are seven known species of sea turtle: Loggerhead Sea Turtle, Green Sea Turtle, Hawksbill Sea Turtle, Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle, Olive Ridley Sea Turtle, Flatback Sea Turtle, and Leatherback Sea Turtle.

Endangered under the ESA in all or part of their habitat:

- Hawksbill
- Leatherback
- Kemp's Ridley
- Olive Ridley
- Green Sea Turtles

Threatened under the ESA in all or part of their habitat:

- Loggerhead Sea Turtle

Six of the seven sea turtle species inhabit Mexican waters and nest on that country's beaches. Sea turtles are slow-growing, late-maturing animals. About one percent of hatchlings make it to adulthood, making reproductive adults ecologically significant to many subsequent generations of the population. The illegal killing of one adult for its meat, skin or shell, does the same damage to the population as taking many thousands of eggs.

Sea turtles are illegally killed for their shell, meat, skin, and eggs, which have commercial value. All killing of sea turtles, taking of eggs and sale of sea turtle products has been illegal in Mexico since 1990. Public campaigns and grassroots efforts have widely informed the public of these restrictions. Nevertheless, the illegal collecting of sea turtle eggs, hunting of the animals for their meat, skin and shells remains one of the leading threats to their survival. Sea turtle products can be used as food, clothing and decoration.

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)

Sea turtles are protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, a multilateral treaty of which the United States, Mexico and approximately 170 other countries are parties. International trade in all sea turtle parts for commercial purposes is prohibited by CITES, and also restricts international trade in many other species of wildlife involved in this case which are deemed at risk of

extinction and are, or may be, affected by international trade.

United States law requires that all wildlife and products made from wildlife entering the United States be clearly marked and declared to customs or wildlife officials upon entry, requires permits for trade in specimens or products from certain species and prohibits commercial international trade in endangered species, including all sea turtles.

Smuggling

The investigation revealed that sea turtle products from Mexico (tanned skins, boots, belts, and other products) generally arrive to the United States in five steps: First sea turtles are killed in violation of Mexican law and then tanned and/or products manufactured in Mexico. They are then shipped to Mexican border towns and are crossed into the United States by "mules" (people who smuggle products across the border). They are then shipped/delivered from the U.S. border town to wholesale or retail customers in the United States.

Sea turtle products from China (including raw hawksbill sea turtle shell, sea turtle shell guitar picks, violin bows with sea turtle decorative inlays) are obtained and/or products manufactured in China and then shipped to customers in the United States using undeclared and mislabeled packaging.

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