

Wildlife crime in Hispanic America

An analysis of seizures and poaching incidents in 18 countries (2017-2022)



Acknowledgements

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Maps were created by Go Insight.

Content warning: This document contains images of animals in situations where they are being mistreated.

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Cover photo: © Bogota Ministry of Environment

Two orange-chinned parakeets being transported in a styrofoam cooler were recovered by environmental authorities during an operation at a Bogota bus terminal in Colombia, April 2021.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora	PROFEPA	Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente (Mexico)
EU	European Union	SERFOR	Servicio Nacional Forestal y de Fauna Silvestre (Peru)
IPLC	Indigenous People and Local Communities	USA	United States of America
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature	USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
LEMIS	Law Enforcement Management Information System	WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation	COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019



Photo: © Bogota Ministry of Environment

▲ Shipment of 1,936 mata mata turtle hatchlings seized at Bogotá's International Airport in Colombia in May 2021.



▲ Andean hairy armadillo (*Chaetophractus nationi*) and incense burner on shaman's stall, Alasitas festival, La Paz, Bolivia.

Executive summary

This study set out to compile and analyse data on wildlife seizures and poaching incidents reported in the media between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2022 in the 18 countries of Hispanic America. It provides important baseline information on illegal exploitation of reptiles, birds, mammals, and amphibians in this biodiverse region.

The study's key findings include:

Species affected

- ▶ A total of 1,945 seizures and poaching incidents were identified, affecting a minimum number of 102,577 wild animals. Of these, 59% impacted reptiles; 28% birds; 9% amphibians; and 4% mammals. The high percentage of reptiles can be partly explained by two major seizures totaling 29,502 mud turtles and musk turtles, which took place in Mexico in 2020. In most countries, however, the most seized taxa were birds.
- ▶ At least 690 different affected species were recorded, including 328 bird species; 174 mammal species; 165 reptile species; and 23 amphibian species. Of these, more than half (363 species) are only protected by domestic laws, not by CITES.¹ This is disproportionately true for songbirds.
- ▶ The illegal wildlife trade in Hispanic America is a major contributor to the decline of some wildlife species and is driving some species to extinction. Forty of the 690 species found in illegal trade (6% of all species identified) are classified as 'Endangered' by IUCN, and 13 species (2% of all species) as 'Critically Endangered', meaning they face a high risk and an extremely high risk, respectively, of extinction in the wild.

Countries with the highest reported numbers of incidents and animals involved

Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Peru and Bolivia reported the highest numbers of seizures and poaching incidents and animals involved. Mexico surpassed all other countries, accounting for 28% of all incidents and 45% of all animals seized or poached.

Increasing trade

Region-wide, incident reports increased significantly between 2017 and 2022,

a trend which could be attributable to factors including but not limited to: an uptick in poaching and trafficking, enhanced law enforcement focus, and/or increased media attention.

Domestic and foreign demand

- ▶ Trafficked wildlife appears to mainly supply domestic markets, including the pet trade; wild meat (bushmeat) consumption; traditional medicine; fashion; décor; jewellery; and the use of wildlife (alive, dead or their parts) in folkloristic practices or rituals.
- ▶ Only a small percentage (2.6%) of all seizures identified by this study concerned illicit shipments that were destined for and/or seized in the USA, Europe, and Asia. However, these shipments often involved rare and/or endemic species, highlighting the major threat this foreign demand presents to already vulnerable Hispanic American wildlife.

Live animal trade

Of all wildlife reported to be seized or poached in Hispanic America between 2017 and 2022, the vast majority (92.5%) reports concerned live animals, mainly to supply the demand for wild pets ('mascotismo'), which is strongly rooted in most Hispanic American cultures. This puts a spotlight on the need to better understand and reduce consumer demand, as well as to ensure there are adequate rescue and rehabilitation facilities in place, both from an individual animal welfare perspective and a species conservation perspective. It is also important that front line officials are well trained to identify wildlife species, protect themselves, and provide appropriate care to animals from the moment of seizure to when they can safely be transferred to specialised care or repatriated.

Impacts on animal welfare and human health

Illegal wildlife trade in Hispanic America is associated with untold animal suffering and high mortality rates, particularly given the large volumes of live animals smuggled over long distances in dire circumstances. In addition, there are significant risks of zoonotic disease transmission, e.g., in the case of live monkey trafficking and human consumption of monkeys.

Illegal online wildlife trade

Illegal online wildlife trade has reportedly increased exponentially in Hispanic America. However, online wildlife traffickers appear to be operating with near impunity, as most Hispanic American countries reported very few—if any—seizures of wildlife that was offered for sale online.

Law enforcement efforts

Wildlife crime remains a high-profit crime with relatively low risk of consequences for those who engage in poaching or trafficking in Hispanic America. Fighting wildlife crime does not appear to be a priority for many governments in the region; accordingly, resources allocated to responsible law enforcement actions to combat wildlife crime are broadly insufficient. Law enforcement responses to illegal wildlife exploitation in Hispanic America are predominantly reactive and by and large fail to effectively deter, disrupt, and dismantle wildlife crime networks.

- ▼ Argentinian officials stopped a man transporting two turtles in a cardboard box in his van, in violation of the Wildlife Protection Act, December 2022.



Photo: © Gendarmería Nacional Argentina CC BY 4.0

Recommendations

The following recommendations represent opportunities to more effectively fight wildlife poaching and trafficking in Hispanic America.

The governments of Hispanic American countries included in this study are urged to:

- ▶ Strengthen efforts to fight wildlife poaching and trafficking in line with the Lima Declaration on Illegal Wildlife Trade of 4 October 2019, which was adopted by all Hispanic American countries except for Cuba and Venezuela.² The Declaration contains a holistic set of commitments to enhance responses to wildlife poaching and trafficking in Hispanic America and the Caribbean region, with an emphasis on:
 - Strengthening domestic laws, including by recognising wildlife poaching and trafficking as serious crimes and by addressing wildlife crime linked to the internet with effective penalties and sanctions.
 - Strengthening criminal justice responses to illegal wildlife trade, including by strengthening public

institutions engaged in fighting wildlife poaching and trafficking; adopting financial investigation techniques; strengthening cross-border and regional cooperation; leveraging innovative technologies and tools that can facilitate the identification and control of illegal trade in wildlife species, their parts, and derivatives.

- Raising awareness and eradicating consumer demand for wildlife, including by encouraging active participation of and close collaboration with indigenous peoples, local communities, civil society organisations, the private sector, and academia.
- ▶ Inasmuch as they are not covered by the Lima Declaration, Hispanic American governments are furthermore urged to implement the following specific measures:
 - Enhance monitoring and investigations of illegal online wildlife trade, including through partnerships with internet service providers, civil society organisations, and academia.
 - Adopt and apply dissuasive and proportionate penalties and sanctions. Increase surveillance and controls

of illegal trade in wildlife species that poses risks for zoonotic disease transmission, such as the trafficking of live monkeys and monkey parts.

- Ensure that there are adequate facilities to rescue and rehabilitate, and where appropriate, provide long-term, expert care for live wild animals seized from poachers and traffickers.

Donor countries, agencies, and international financial institutions are urged to contribute to efforts by Hispanic American states to fight wildlife poaching and trafficking through the provision of funding and technical assistance in support of countries' national, cross-border, and subregional efforts.

International organisations and civil society organisations are urged to provide technical assistance in support of countries' national, cross-border, and subregional efforts to address wildlife crime.

▼ An iguana with its front legs painfully tied around its back lying on top of other iguanas as they are illegally shipped from Honduras to El Salvador.



Photo: David M. Hillis / © IFAW



Photo: © Gendarmería Nacional Argentina CC BY 4.0

▲ Argentinian officials seized 387 wild birds hidden among a load of olives in a cargo truck, July 2023.

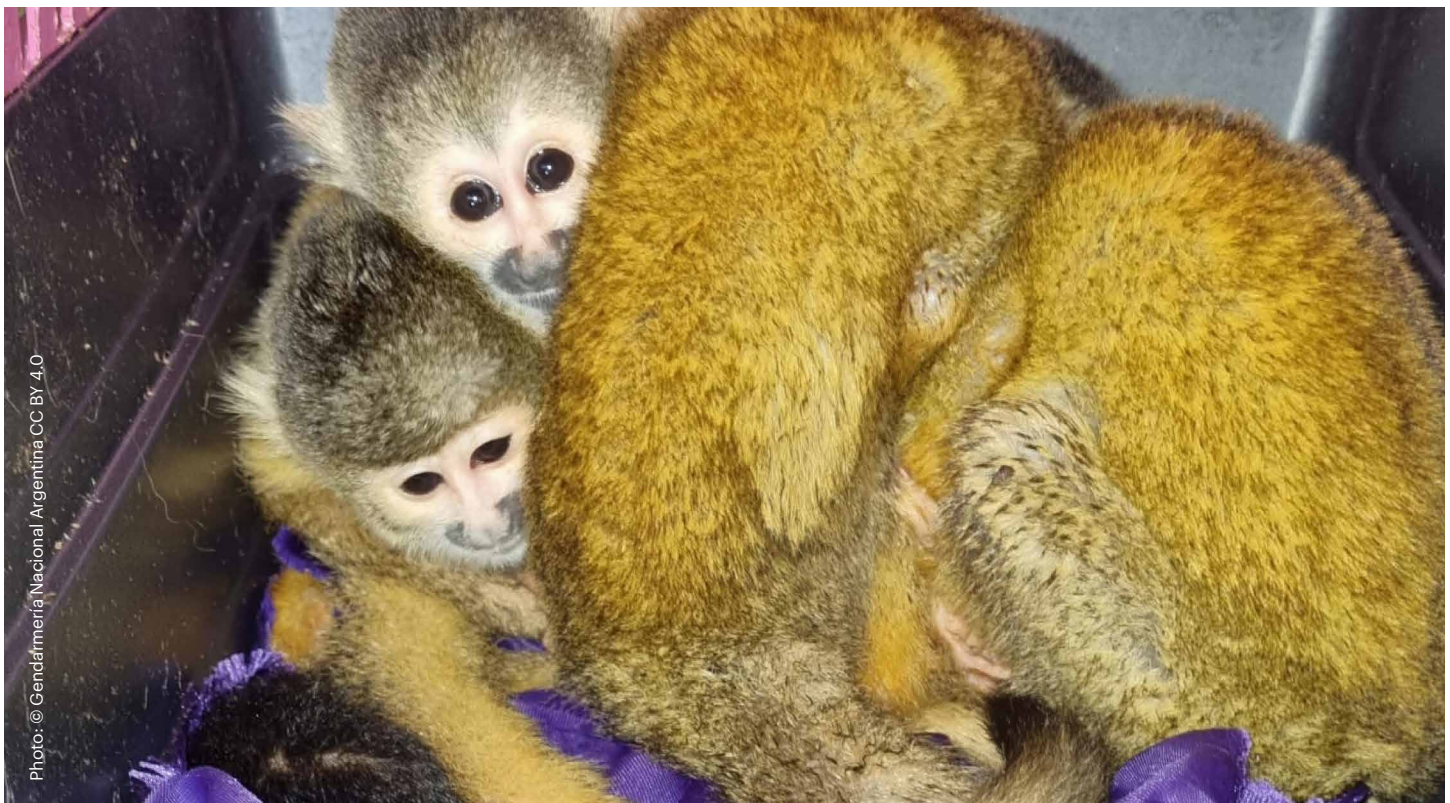


Photo: © Gendarmería Nacional Argentina CC BY 4.0

▲ Truck found to be illegally carrying four young titi monkeys inside a pet cage in Argentina, May 2024.

Introduction

Introduction

Latin America boasts incredible biodiversity, with seven Latin American nations ranking among the world's 20 most biodiverse countries: Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Bolivia.³ Unfortunately, this impressive biodiversity is under severe threat across the region. The decline of species in Latin America and the Caribbean is occurring more rapidly than anywhere else on Earth. World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) 2022 Living Planet report revealed a 94% decline in species populations between 1970 and 2018 for Latin America and the Caribbean, compared to an average, global, decline of 69%.⁴ Illegal exploitation of wildlife is an important driver of species loss which, in turn, exacerbates threats from habitat loss and degradation, invasive species, disease, and climate change.

Illegal wildlife exploitation in Latin America has long been underprioritised compared to other regions. While the issue has received more attention in recent years, to date research and conservation efforts have focused mainly on a few countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. For most of the other countries in the region, data reflecting the scale of illegal wildlife exploitation is scarce.

To aid in addressing this knowledge gap, IFAW commissioned a 2023 study on poaching and trafficking of reptiles, birds, mammals, and amphibians in the 18 Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas (Hispanic America). The study's aim was to identify key trafficking hotspots, routes, methods, trends, and targeted wildlife species.

The main source of information for the study consisted of open-source media reports on wildlife seizures and poaching incidents for each of the 18 Hispanic American countries. Reliance on this data source means that findings presented in this report must be interpreted with some caution. First, seizures of any illegal commodity represent only a fraction of the actual volume of illegal trade in that commodity; and this caveat is particularly important for countries in which little effort is made to tackle wildlife poaching and trafficking. Second, not all seizures and poaching incidents are reported to the media. And third, because it is impossible to identify all relevant media reports through open-source research; this analysis should be seen as initial work which can be augmented by more in-depth research.

Methods

Media reports on seizures and poaching incidents were collected through open-source research using the Google Chrome browser and Spanish search terms for the time frame 1 January 2017 through to 31 December 2022. The list of search terms used for this research is included as Annex 1.

The data were compiled in a Microsoft Excel database. Information on relevant seizures that occurred on or after 1 January 2023 was excluded from the data set, but is mentioned in this report where useful to highlight significant trends.

To contextualise the seizure and poaching data, other relevant sources of information were also considered and included in the analysis, including NGO reports,

academic papers, and other open-source information. In addition, the study examined data contained in the Law Enforcement Management Information System (LEMIS) database maintained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) with the aim of identifying key U.S. ports of entry for illicit wildlife shipped from Hispanic America. For this purpose, the study utilized a LEMIS dataset spanning 2016 to 2020, which was obtained by the Center for Biological Diversity through a Freedom of Information Act request and subsequently shared with IFAW in 2022.

Details collected from media reports for each poaching or seizure incident include: date of the incident; country and location of the incident; type of incident (poaching or seizure); geographic origin, transit location, and destination; transport mode; concealment method; indications of crime convergence; use of social media to advertise the wildlife specimen, if applicable; taxonomic information including species' name and class; quantity (live animals; dead animals; parts/derivatives; and/or product weight in kg); information on arrests and prosecution, if available; and weblink(s) for media report(s).

Local currency amounts mentioned in this report were converted to USA dollar (US\$) amounts based on conversion rates sourced from Xe currency converter (<http://xe.com>) in February 2024.

Maps were created using ArcGIS.

▼ SERFOR rescues a squirrel monkey who was treated as a pet and kept in a home in Piura, Peru.



Photo: © SERFOR

Identification of wildlife seizures

For purposes of this study, all incidents in which wild animals (live, dead, and/or as their parts and products) were confiscated by government authorities have been

recorded as seizures. In addition, incidents in which wild animals were surrendered to authorities, or wild animals suspected to have been victims of poaching or trafficking were rescued by authorities (e.g. a jaguarundi cub found in a city street far from its natural

habitat) were also recorded as seizures. For each incident the number of animals involved was recorded. Where wildlife parts, products, or meat were seized, the minimum number of animals involved was calculated using the following methods:

Table 1: Guidance for calculating number of seized animals

Seized item	Minimum number of animals recorded	Notes ^{A,B,C}
One part of a wildlife specimen. For example, a claw, tail, paw, tooth, head, carapace, skin, antler, tongue, wing, feather, or rattle of a rattle snake	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ In incidents where multiple parts belonging to a certain species were seized, the estimate was based on the number of those parts present in the species involved. For example, as mammals have 4 paws, 2-4 paws would equate to 1 mammal, 5-8 paws would equate to 2 mammals, etc. As big cats have four fangs, every four fangs seized were considered to involve one specimen. For example, a seizure of 185 jaguar fangs equated to 46 jaguars. ▶ If a mixture of items of a certain wildlife species was seized, the minimum number of animals involved was conservatively calculated to avoid overestimation. For example, 33 fox legs and 19 fox tails were estimated to involve 19 foxes.
Wild meat, any quantity	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ If a large amount of meat from a certain wildlife species was seized, the average weight of an adult specimen for that species was used to estimate the minimum number of animals involved. For example, 106.3 kg of capybara meat was estimated to involve at least two capybaras as the body weight of free-living capybaras ranges between 63.4 kg and 100 kg.
A product containing parts or derivatives of a wildlife species. For example, a fashion or folkloristic item made from or containing a wildlife specimen's skin or feathers; a natural medicine containing wildlife derivatives (e.g. a potion made from reptiles or amphibians)	1	
One taxidermy	1	

Note A: If the estimated number of animals involved in a seizure was provided by the law enforcement agency that made the seizure, that number was recorded. For example, a seizure of 18 kg of spectacled caiman skins seized in Colombia was estimated by Colombian authorities to pertain to 23 specimens.

Note B: If a mixture of items of a certain wildlife species was seized, the minimum number of animals involved

was conservatively calculated to avoid overestimation. For example, 200 kg of sea turtle meat and 3 sea turtle carapaces were estimated to involve three sea turtles and a seizure of 23 crocodile tails, 175 kg of crocodile meat and 58 crocodile pieces was estimated to involve 23 crocodiles.

Note C: Seized reptile or bird eggs were not extrapolated to numbers of animals.

Identification of wildlife poaching

Any incidents involving a dead animal that was suspected to have been killed illegally (with no person having taken possession of that animal) were classified as poaching incidents. Incidents where media outlets reported on illegal wildlife killings as evidenced by photos or videos circulated on social media were also recorded as poaching incidents.



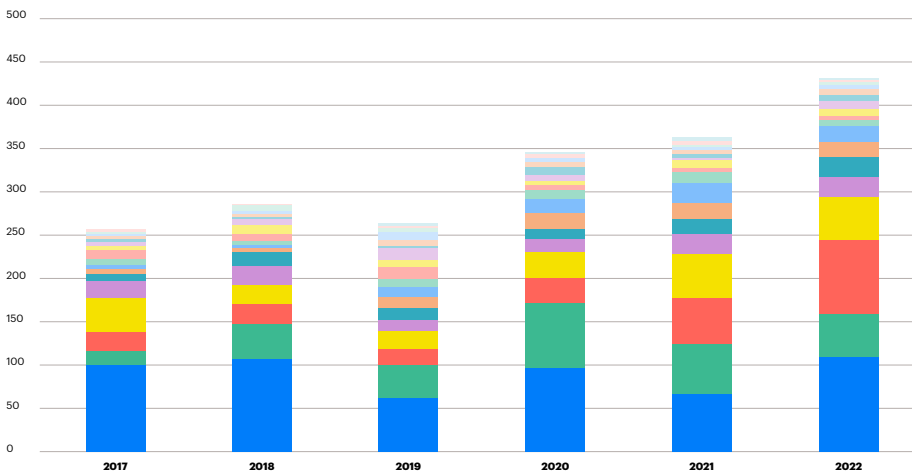
Photo: © SERFOR

▲ A Peruvian-American citizen entered Peru with 160 exotic wild animals without the documents proving their legal provenance, including species of reptiles, spiders, snakes, and turtles in poor condition, wrapped in fabric and stuffed in boxes and bottles.

Regional analysis

Regional analysis

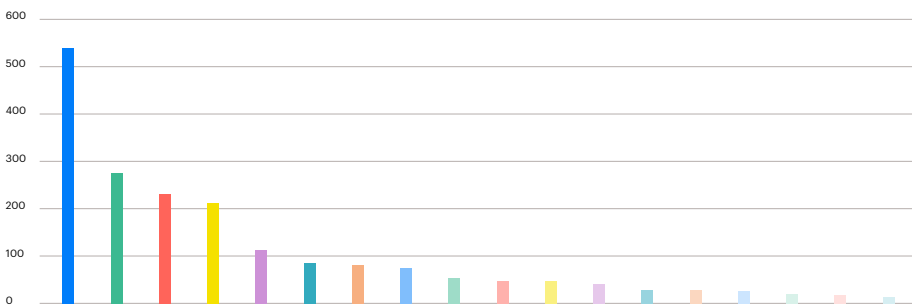
Figure 1: Number of seizures and poaching incidents in Hispanic America between 2017 and 2022, based on media reports



This study collected and analysed 1,945 seizures and poaching incidents reported by media outlets for 18 Hispanic American countries between 2017 and 2022. Overall, the annual number of reported incidents increased significantly in this time frame. Possible explanations for this trend include:

- ▶ increased poaching and trafficking;
- ▶ increased law enforcement focus;
- ▶ and/or increased media attention.

Figure 2: Number of seizure and poaching incidents reported per country between 2017 and 2022



With respect to recorded incidents, Mexico far surpassed all other countries, accounting for 28% of all incidents and 45% of all seized and poached animals included in this analysis. While this finding suggests that Mexican law enforcement agencies successfully intercept illegal wildlife shipments, data nonetheless indicate that wildlife crime remains a significant problem in that nation.

Colombia, Argentina, Peru, and, to a lesser extent, Bolivia, also reported significant numbers of seizure and poaching incidents and wild animals harmed, reflecting both considerable law enforcement effort and high levels of wildlife crime.

Figure 3: Number of animals seized or poached per country between 2017 and 2022, based on media reports



The other 13 countries of Hispanic America reported significantly fewer incidents, ranging from 87 in Ecuador to only 13 in Cuba during the 2017-2022 study period. However, a low number of recorded incidents does not necessarily imply a low level of wildlife crime. Media reports and other open-source data analysed suggest that most, if not all of these countries, experience serious levels of illegal wildlife exploitation, suggesting that fighting wildlife crime is not a priority in these countries and/or a lack of enforcement capacity and resources.

The map below visualises the regional distribution of seizures and poaching incidents recorded by this study. Country-level maps depicting the locations of seizures and poaching incidents are included in Section 3.

Figure 4: Regional distribution of seizures and poaching incidents reported between 2017 and 2022



Species most at risk from wildlife crime

The seizures and poaching incidents identified by this study involved a minimum number of 102,577 wild animals, of which 59% were reptiles; 27.5% were birds; 9.5% were amphibians; and 4% were mammals. While this is a large number, it is important to note that these 102,577 animals represent just a fraction of the actual illegal offtake during the study period.

The high percentage of reptiles is explained in part by two major 2020 seizures which took place in Mexico and involved 29,502 mud turtles and musk turtles. These two seizures also explain the peak in animals seized in 2020 relative to other years in the study period. In fact, in most Hispanic American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela), birds were the most seized species group. Reptiles were the most seized in Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Nicaragua, whereas amphibians were the most seized in Panama and Peru.

A minimum of 690 different wildlife species were recorded in seizures and poaching incidents across Hispanic American countries between 2017 and 2022, impacting at least: 328 bird species; 174 mammal species; 165 reptile species; and 23 amphibian species. As media reports often failed to specify the exact (sub)species of animals involved in these incidents, it is very likely that the number of species trafficked in the region during the study period is even higher. Of the 690 species, more than half (363 species) are only protected by domestic laws, not by CITES. This is disproportionately true for songbirds; only three of the 145 songbird species documented by this study are CITES-listed. Most wildlife specimens were seized within their countries of origin based on domestic laws which prohibit capture, trade, or possession without a permit. The lack of

CITES protection has implications for criminal justice responses to specimens trafficked abroad, however (see below under Domestic/regional versus international demand). A full list of the species documented in this study, including their Latin, English, and Spanish names and whether they are listed in CITES, is included in Annex 2 of this report.

The question of which species are most at risk from poaching and trafficking depends on local circumstances, particularly the occurrence of species in a certain country (i.e., supply), and demand for that species locally, regionally, and/or internationally (influenced, among other things, by socio-economic and cultural circumstances). Nonetheless, the following observations can be made.

Figure 5: Number of animals seized or poached in Hispanic America between 2017 and 2022, based on media reports

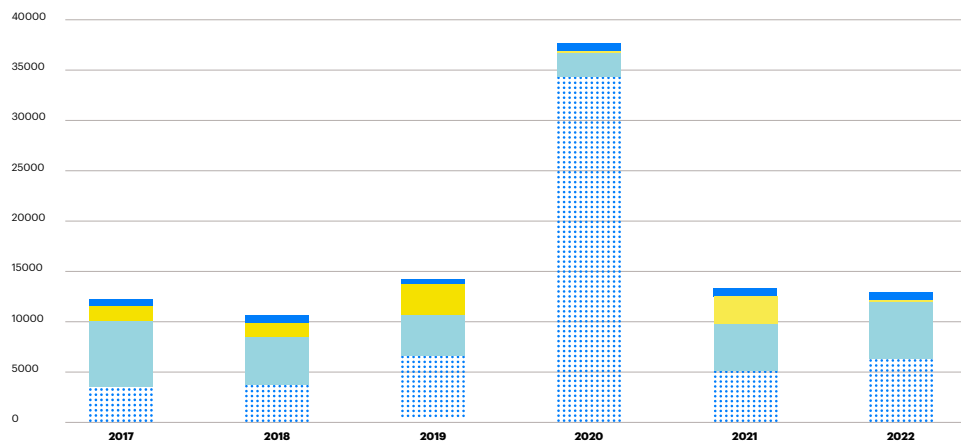


Figure 6: Wildlife (percentage) seized or poached per country in Hispanic America between 2017 and 2022, based on media reports

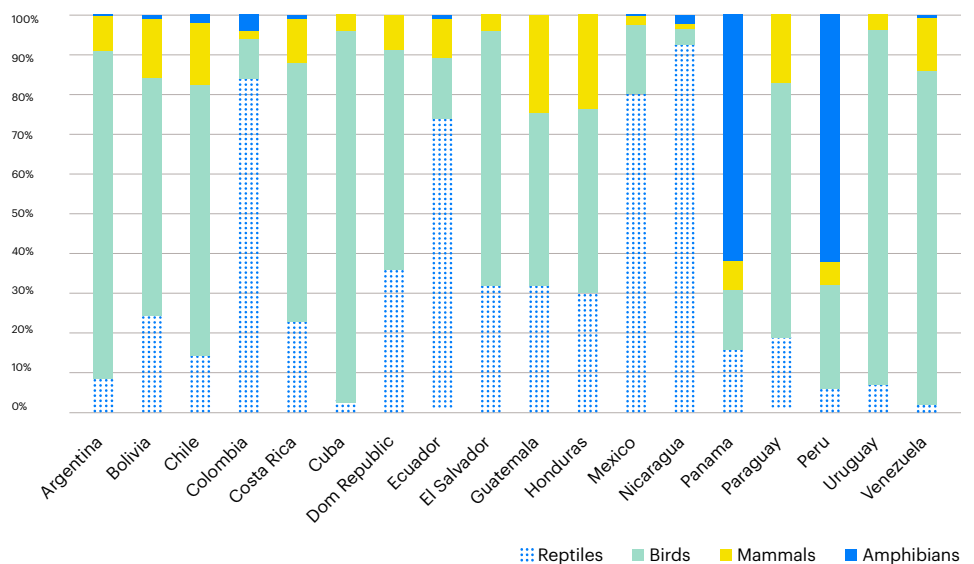




Photo: © Gendarmería Nacional Argentina CC BY 4.0

◀ Officials carrying out routine vehicle checks in Argentina intercepted a man and a woman with two cardboard boxes full of “lumps of moving fabric” determined to be 35 jacket turtles, a lagoon turtle, 126 scuerzos, two yacaré, and a snake, November 2021.

Ecuador’s Galápagos tortoises (*Chelonoidis niger*) remain under severe threat from traffickers, with 392 specimens seized. In Bolivia and Peru, yellow-spotted river turtles (*Podocnemis unifilis*) are targeted for their meat and eggs. Peruvian authorities seized 10,802 yellow-spotted river turtle eggs and Bolivia seized 81,345 eggs of the same species between 2017 and 2022.

Caimans and crocodiles were also frequently seized (alive, dead, or as parts and products), accounting for 6,639 specimens. They are mainly targeted for their skins and meat. The highest numbers were reported in Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, with 3,384 live Morelet’s crocodiles (*Crocodylus moreletii*) seized in Mexico and 2,135 spectacled caimans (*Caiman crocodilus*), including 1,086 skins, seized in Colombia.

Also noteworthy is the illegal trade in lizards, which involves numerous species. A total of 3,102 specimens were reported to be seized and/or poached. Mexico accounted for a significant portion of this trade, with 1,812 lizards of 44 different species seized in Mexico as well as abroad, including 777 green iguanas (*Iguana iguana*); 392 alligator lizards (*Abronia graminea* and *A. taeniata*); 173 horned lizards (*Phrynosoma asio*, *P. orbiculare*, *P. solare*); and 121 Mexican spiny-tailed iguanas (*Ctenosaura pectinata*). These lizards are mainly targeted for the pet trade. Bolivian authorities seized 406 Forster’s tree iguanas (*Liolaemus forsterii*), which are used for traditional medicine. In El Salvador, iguanas are the most seized reptiles. Considered a culinary delicacy, 190 black spiny-tailed iguanas (*Ctenosaura similis*) and green iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) were seized from traffickers.

Marine turtles are targeted for their meat and their eggs as well as their shells, which are used to produce handicrafts for the local market. Furthermore, significant quantities of hawksbill turtle shells are trafficked to East Asia, mainly Vietnam and China, where they are highly prized. 312 marine turtles were reported to be poached, in addition to seizures of 283,339 marine turtle eggs and 1888 kg of meat. Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama reported the highest numbers. Mexico accounted for 90.1% of all marine turtle eggs seized in the region between 2017 and 2022.

Reptiles destined for the global pet trade are commonly smuggled alive. However, **smuggling of reptile eggs** has also been observed, including to Europe. In 2020 a

major wildlife trafficking investigation led by the Spanish Guardia Civil and EUROPOL revealed that reptile eggs were being smuggled to Europe from Mexico, Brazil, Australia, South Africa, and the Middle East. The reptile eggs were smuggled under smugglers’ clothes and in suitcases and artificially incubated in Europe. After hatching, juveniles were marketed as captive-bred in Europe, using forged documents to conceal their origin.⁵

Birds

Wild bird populations in Hispanic America are under significant pressure from poaching. Psittacids and songbirds were the most seized; both are mainly captured for the domestic and foreign pet trades.

Except for Cuba, all Hispanic American countries reported seizures of **psittacids**. A total of 10,869 New World psittacids were seized, including 5,729 parakeets of 22 different species; 4,424 parrots of 26 species; and 535 macaws of 11 species. In addition, 195 Old World psittacids of at least ten species were seized. These seizures represent just a fraction of actual illegal offtake. Indeed, a 2001 study estimated that between 400,000 and 800,000 psittacid chicks are poached each year in the Neotropics.⁶

The most significant seizures were reported by authorities in Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. For 1,015 seized individual psittacids, media reports describing their seizure(s) failed to specify the species. Therefore, the numbers of seized specimens categorised by species below reflect minimum figures for each species.

Orange-fronted **parakeets** (*Aratinga canicularis*) were the most seized parakeet species (2,525 specimens, of which 97.3%—2,457 specimens—were seized in Mexico). Second came white-winged parakeets (*Brotogeris versicolorus*) with 1,609 specimens seized, all in Peru. In third place are orange-chinned parakeets (*Brotogeris jugularis*); 308 specimens were seized, the majority in Colombia (191 specimens) and El Salvador (81 specimens).

The most seized **parrot** species were turquoise-fronted amazons (*Amazona aestiva*); 1,683 specimens were seized, of which 96.4% (1,623 specimens) were seized in Argentina. The second most seized parrot species were red-lored amazons (*Amazona autumnalis*): 651 specimens were seized in total, of which 70% (452 specimens) were seized in Mexico and 20% (130 specimens) in Nicaragua. Pacific parrotlets (*Forpus coelestis*) followed in third place with 605 specimens seized, of which 603 were seized in Peru.

Reptiles

Reptiles are trafficked in huge numbers in Hispanic America. They are poached for the domestic and foreign pet trade; for their skin, meat, and/or eggs; to be taxidermied; and in some countries for use in traditional medicine.

Freshwater turtles and tortoises are the most seized reptiles in Hispanic America. A minimum of 47,997 individuals were reported to be seized overall in this study, consisting mainly of live specimens destined for the pet trade. Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru reported the highest numbers. Mexico accounted for 64% of all freshwater turtles reported as seized in the region between 2017 and 2022. Most of these were mud turtles, with 24,849 specimens (including *Kinosternon leucostomum*, *Kinosternon integrum*, and *Kinosternon scorpioides*) reported to be seized. In Colombia, mata mata turtles (*Chelus fimbriata*) are most threatened by illicit trade, with 6,163 specimens seized. In Argentina, Chaco tortoises (*Chelonoidis chilensis*) are the most poached reptiles, with a total of 463 specimens seized during the study period.

Of particular concern is the presence of endangered parrot species in illegal trade, particularly in Mexico: 111 yellow-headed amazons (*Amazona oratrix*) were seized during the study period, including 86 in Mexico; 62 lilac-crowned amazons (*Amazona finschi*) were seized, all in Mexico; and 15 red-crowned amazons (*Amazona viridigenalis*) were seized, including 13 specimens in Mexico. Critically endangered yellow-naped amazons (*Amazona auropalliata*, 30 specimens) were primarily seized in El Salvador and Mexico. All four species are listed in CITES Appendix I, meaning that international commercial trade of wild-caught specimens is prohibited.

Blue and yellow macaws (*Ara araurana*) were the most seized **macaw** species overall: 166 specimens were seized across Hispanic America, with the highest numbers seized in Argentina (39); Colombia (32); and Bolivia (27). Scarlet macaws (*Ara macao*) were also frequently observed in illegal trade, with 97 specimens seized in various countries during the study period. The highest numbers were reported in Honduras (21), Venezuela (21), Mexico (9), and Nicaragua (8). Lastly, 77 military macaws (*Ara militaris*) were seized, most of which were intercepted in Mexico (49) and Venezuela (24).

Nicaragua and Paraguay were identified as source countries for the smuggling of **parrot and macaw eggs** to East Asia by Asian criminal networks. Taiwan region, where New World parrots and macaws are in high demand and command high prices, appears to be the key destination. The USA and Europe (including The Netherlands and Spain) are key transit points. Two seizures were recorded between 2017 and 2022: in 2017, authorities in Taiwan region seized 45 macaw eggs that originated in Paraguay; in 2019, 244 scarlet macaw eggs from Nicaragua were seized in Hong Kong SAR. Seizures

continued after 2022: in 2023, authorities in Paraguay seized 40 macaw eggs from two smugglers from Taiwan region and U.S. authorities in Miami, Florida, USA, seized 29 parrot eggs (red-lore amazon and critically Endangered yellow-naped amazon) smuggled from Nicaragua, which were destined for Taiwan region. In 2024, Panamanian authorities seized 240 macaw eggs coming from Nicaragua that were destined for Taiwan region.

In several Hispanic American countries, **songbirds** are heavily trafficked for the cagebird trade. A total of 9,289 specimens were reported to be seized, involving at least 145 different species. Argentina reported the highest number of songbirds seized, with 3,428 specimens intercepted there. The next highest figures were reported by Mexico (2,841 specimens); Uruguay (1,000 specimens); Peru (704 specimens); Colombia (582 specimens); Bolivia (579 specimens); Cuba (449 specimens); and Costa Rica (98 specimens). As with psittacids, media reports often failed to specify the (sub) species involved in songbird seizures. This was the case for 2,449 songbirds. Nonetheless, it was possible to assess which species are most affected by illegal trade.

Saffron finches (*Sicalis flaveola*) were the most seized songbird species between 2017 and 2022, with at least 1,819 specimens intercepted. Peru reported the highest numbers (644 specimens), followed by Bolivia (570 specimens); Uruguay (350 specimens); Colombia (127 specimens); and Argentina (128 specimens). Cross-border trafficking is frequent, including from Peru to Brazil. The Peruvian subspecies *Sicalis flaveola valida* is in demand in Brazil because the birds are bigger and more aggressive than the Brazilian subspecies. They are trafficked to Brazil to be hybridised with the local subspecies so that their offspring

can be used in illegal saffron finch fighting competitions.

Painted buntings (*Passerina ciris*) were the second most seized songbird species. Mexican law enforcers seized 1,256 specimens between 2017 and 2022. This included a shipment of 454 specimens that were transported in a car in 2017, and another shipment of 682 specimens transported in a passenger bus in 2018, highlighting the sheer scale of the illegal trade in this migratory species. Painted buntings are reportedly also heavily trafficked in Cuba, including through social media. However, Cuba reported only one seizure that involved painted buntings. This seizure took place in 2019 and concerned 277 songbirds of various species seized from the suitcase of an air passenger headed abroad.

The persistently high levels of illegal offtake are threatening some songbird species with extinction. A stark example is the yellow cardinal (*Gubernatrix cristata*, CITES Appendix I), which is classified as 'Critically Endangered' in IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species. At least 170 specimens were reportedly seized between 2017 and 2022, including 166 in Argentina, two in Uruguay and two in Chile. Formerly widespread and common throughout much of Argentina and Uruguay, yellow cardinal populations have declined rapidly due to constant and chronic exploitation for the cagebird market, compounded by habitat loss. Today, only 1,000-2,000 mature individuals remain in the wild in Argentina, in small and fragmented populations.⁷

▼ SERFOR rescues condor that was used as an exhibition in a local parade of national holidays in Peru. The condor was very thin, dehydrated and with the feathers of both battered wings and tail.





Photo: © USA Customs and Border Patrol

Mammals

Wild mammals in Hispanic America are targeted for their meat, wool, skins (which are used for décor, accessories, and high-end fashion), and parts (which are used in folkloristic rituals, as good luck charms, and in traditional medicine), as well as for the pet and taxidermy trades. A total of 4,070 mammals representing 174 different species were identified in seizures and poaching incidents across Hispanic America between 2017 and 2022. This number is low relative to the other species groups that were part of this study; however, as with the other taxonomic groups, the figures provided in this report for mammal poaching and seizures represent just a fraction of actual illegal offtake.

The illegal trade in wild meat (bushmeat) is a major driver for the poaching of mammals, including deer, lowland pacas, capybaras, peccaries, armadillos, monkeys, tapir, opossums, anteaters, and sloths. In some areas, such as the Amazon, this illegal trade is increasing in the wake of infrastructure development. A 2022 study of wild meat trade in key urban markets in the Peruvian town of Iquitos found that wild meat sales had increased significantly between

1973 and 2018, reaching an estimated 442 tons in 2018 in Iquitos alone.⁹

In many countries, especially in the Amazon basin, indigenous people and local communities (IPLCs) engage in wildlife hunting. Several countries allow wildlife hunting by IPLCs for subsistence. However, such exemptions can create loopholes which see large-scale abuse, enabling commercial sale of bushmeat at unsustainable levels, as has been documented in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru (for more detail and references, please see the analyses for these countries in Section 3 of this report). In some countries (e.g., Argentina, Dominican Republic, and Uruguay) recreational hunters also engage in systemic wildlife poaching, including for commercial purposes.

Despite these findings, few interceptions of wild meat poachers and traffickers were recorded by this study, suggesting that wild meat poaching and trafficking are not priorities for law enforcement officials in Hispanic America. Capacity to patrol protected areas is also low in many Hispanic American countries as there is often a lack of resources to address this type of crime. Furthermore, several countries, including Chile, Ecuador, and Venezuela reduced anti-

poaching (and trafficking) budgets because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

All countries except for Cuba reported seizures of wild **primates**. A total of 579 primates were seized, involving no fewer than 41 New World species. In addition, four Old World primate species were identified, including chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*, 11 specimens seized in Peru) and three species seized in Mexico: green monkey (*Chlorocebus sabaeus*, one specimen), lemur (*Lemuroidea*, three specimens), and baboon (*Papio sp.*, eight specimens). Mexican authorities seized the highest number of primates (110), followed by Peru (109), Argentina (79), and Colombia (79).

These seizures represent just a tiny fraction of the actual number of primates poached from the wild in Hispanic America. Researchers have estimated that, in Peru alone, up to 200,000 monkeys end up in the bushmeat or pet trade annually.¹⁰

▲ U.S. Border patrol agents found a sedated tiger cub stuffed inside a duffel bag at the Mexico-USA border in May 2018.

Eight primate species reported to be trafficked in Hispanic America are listed in CITES Appendix I: Yucatán howler monkey (*Alouatta pigra*); Central American squirrel monkey (*Saimiri oerstedii*); Geoffroy's tamarin (*Saguinus geoffroyi*); white-footed tamarin (*Saguinus leucopus*); cotton-top tamarin (*Saguinus oedipus*); yellow-tailed woolly monkey (*Lagothrix flavicauda*); chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*); and lemur (*Lemuridae*).

Primates are targeted for food as well as for the pet trade. Hunters typically kill adult monkeys for consumption and the bushmeat trade, while simultaneously capturing their young to sell into the domestic or international pet trade. The most endangered—and therefore most valuable—species are targeted for the pet trade. Some countries have reported a rise in monkey trafficking for the international pet trade, with social media playing a key role in fueling global demand.

For instance, Mexico has seen a rise in spider monkey and howler monkey trafficking, both domestically and to the USA, to such an extent that it is threatening these species in the wild. The possession of these monkeys has become fashionable due to influencers flaunting their monkey 'babies' using social media.

Wild cats, including jaguars (*Panthera onca*), pumas (*Puma concolor*), jaguarundis (*Puma yagouaroundi*), and ocelots (*Leopardus pardalis*), are persecuted across their range out of fear and/or in retaliation for preying on livestock. Poaching incidents of jaguars and pumas often become public after images of poachers posing with the dead animals are shared on social media. Most incidents remain unknown, however, as poachers make sure to hide the animals they kill for fear of prosecution. The cubs of poached wild cats are often sold as pets. Some wild cat species—in particular jaguars, pumas,

and ocelots—are also targeted for the trade in their parts and products, as well as for the exotic pet trade.

All Hispanic American countries except for Chile, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Uruguay reported **jaguar** poaching and trafficking incidents between 2017-2022, affecting a minimum of 188 jaguars. These incidents included 36 live jaguars; 65 dead jaguars; and parts and products of at least 87 jaguars (including 193 teeth, 25 skins, three heads, two claws, two skulls, four taxidermies, five fashion items and two other products). Bolivian authorities reported the greatest number of impacted animals (61 jaguars), due in large part to the 2018 seizure of 185 fangs, eight molars, three skins, two claws and one jaguar coat from a restaurant in Santa Cruz. Mexican authorities seized the highest number of live jaguars (21 specimens) during the same period.

A total of 133 **pumas** were reported to have been poached or seized in 11 countries, including 58 dead specimens, 55 live specimens, and parts and products representing at least 20 specimens. Argentina reported the highest number: 56 specimens, including 21 poached pumas, 21 live pumas, and parts and products of at least 14 pumas.

This study documented 696 **vicuñas** (*Vicugna vicugna*) affected by poaching and illegal trade. The vicuña is a small camelid species that inhabits the Altiplano in the central Andes, stretching across Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, and Peru. A smaller, introduced population lives in central Ecuador. The species nearly went extinct in the 1960s due to excessive hunting for their wool, which is considered the rarest and most expensive in the world. Concerted protection measures centred around regulated, community-based harvest and trade of vicuña fibre have contributed to

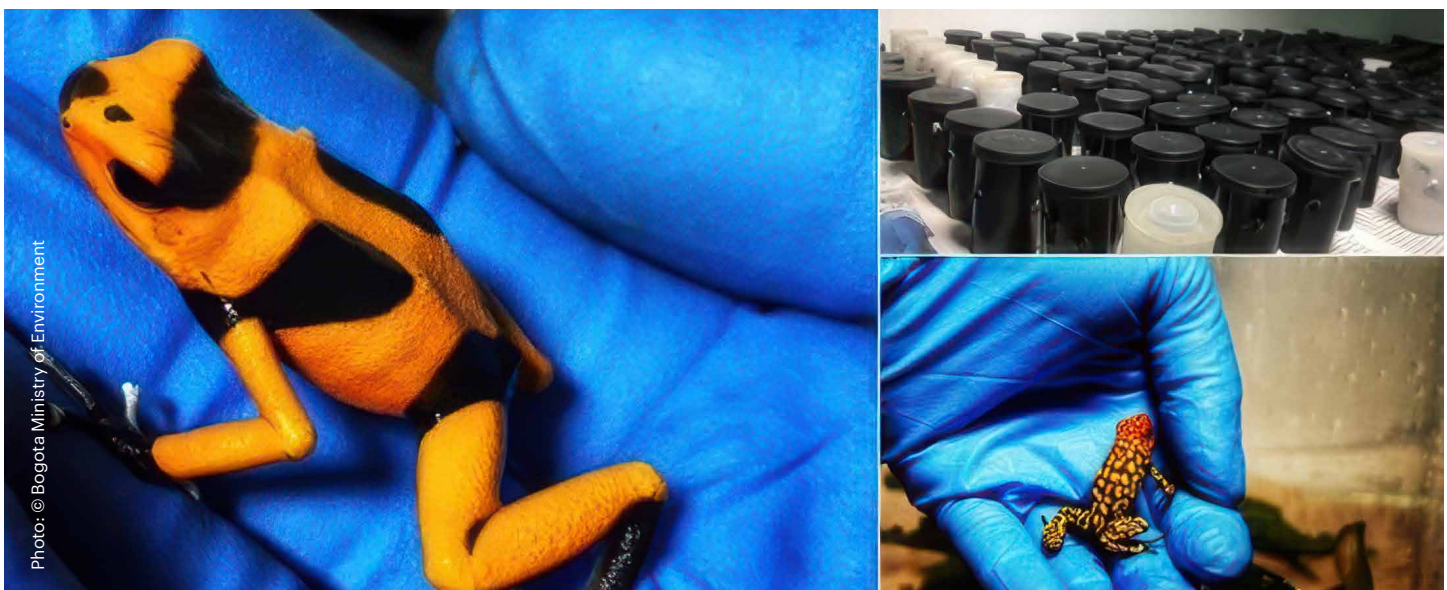
the recovery of vicuña populations across the species' range. Poaching remains a threat in some areas, however. A total of 394 specimens were found slaughtered and the skins and wool of another 302 specimens were seized from poachers and traffickers. Peru reported the highest number of incidents and impacted animals, identifying 333 carcasses, stripped of their skins and, in some cases, partially dismembered. The majority of these specimens—totaling 310—were poached in the first half of 2020, with poachers most likely taking advantage of reduced enforcement during the country's lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Bolivian authorities seized the fleeces and wool of 231 specimens; in Argentina, 43 specimens were poached and the skins of 86 specimens seized; Chile, lastly, reported three poached specimens.

Amphibians

Although no fewer than 9,504 amphibians representing 23 different species were seized during the study period, only a few countries reported significant seizures of amphibians between 2017 and 2022.

The highest numbers were reported by Peruvian authorities, which seized 5,776 Titicaca water frogs (*Telmatobius culeus*) and 2,160 South American toads between 2017 and 2022. In Peru and neighbouring Bolivia Titicaca water frogs and South American toads (*Rhinella sp.*) are heavily exploited in connection with the belief that they cure diseases and act as an aphrodisiac.

▼ Authorities seized 216 poison dart frogs hidden in photographic rolls destined for Germany, at Bogotá's airport in Colombia.



Titicaca water frogs are also poached for their meat, and there is evidence of illegal export for the pet trade.

Colombia and Panama are key source countries for poison dart frogs trafficked to Germany. Between 2017 and 2022, Colombian officials seized 640 poison dart frogs, including 627 critically endangered harlequin poison dart frogs (*Oophaga histrionica*) and Lehmann's poison dart frog (*Oophaga lehmanni*), which were destined for Germany. In Panama, Strawberry poison dart frogs (*Oophaga pumilio*) are the most exploited poison dart frog species. German authorities seized 112 poison dart frogs (including 108 *Oophaga pumilio*) originating from Panama in 2020 and, a year later, Panamanian officials seized 408 poison dart frogs (including 376 *Oophaga pumilio*).

Between 2017 and 2022, Mexican authorities seized 271 amphibians of 15 different species, including several endemic species, which are trafficked domestically and abroad. Examples include plateau tiger salamanders (*Ambystoma velasci*) and Mexican leaf frogs (*Agalychnis dacnicolor*).

Live animal trading

Between 2017 and 2022, 92.5% of all seizure/poaching incidents reported in Hispanic America concerned live animals, most of which were trafficked to supply the global demand for wild pets. The remaining 7.5% of reported incidents concerned dead animals (3.7%), parts and products (3%), and meat (0.8%). These percentages are likely skewed by the fact that large numbers of animals are poached and consumed without being detected, as law enforcement capacity is generally limited in rural areas. Live animals, on the other hand, are more easily detected during transport or at the point of sale. Even so, it is clear that illegal live animal trade in Hispanic America is a significant problem.

This finding underscores the need for significant efforts to raise awareness and shift consumer behaviour away from the desire to own wild animals as pets. Furthermore, it draws attention to the need for adequate facilities to rescue, rehabilitate, and care for seized wildlife, both from an individual animal welfare perspective and a species conservation perspective. It is also important that front line officials responsible for intercepting shipments of live wildlife are well trained to identify species, protect themselves and the animals, and ensure that the animals receive appropriate care and attention during the period immediately after seizure until they can safely be transferred to specialised care or repatriated.

Domestic/regional versus international demand

When wild animals are seized, their intended destination is not always evident, and media reports seldom provide information on this aspect of the wildlife trade. However, a large majority of wildlife seizures recorded by this study involved native wildlife species and occurred in locations that suggest wildlife trafficking in Hispanic America mainly supplies domestic demand. Massive numbers of wildlife are taken from the wild and sold illegally, including in markets, streets, shops, and online, despite wildlife protection laws restricting such exploitation. Although governments and NGOs in some countries are working to raise awareness about illicit trade and discourage consumer audiences from buying wild animals and/or wildlife parts and products, wildlife consumption remains deeply ingrained. Demand for wild animals as pets ('mascotismo') appears to be the main driver for wildlife poaching in Hispanic America. Other drivers include: wild meat (bushmeat) consumption; traditional medicine; fashion; décor/jewellery; and the use of wildlife (alive, dead or their parts) in folkloristic rituals.

Exotic species native to Africa and Asia destined for the pet trade were also frequently seized in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, and Mexico. These seized animals included several species of pythons, chameleons, bearded dragons, leopard geckos, Mali uromastix, Russian tortoises, African grey parrots, cockatoos, budgerigars, African lions, and tigers. Many of these species breed readily in captivity and are commonly traded in exotic pet markets, so it can be assumed that most have a captive origin. Based on seizure data and existing research, the USA and Europe are likely destinations for exotic wildlife trafficked in Hispanic America.

Within Hispanic America, cross-border smuggling is common and affects myriad species. Cross-border smuggling is often driven by demand and higher potential profit in neighbouring countries. In some instances, traffickers also exploit loopholes afforded by less restrictive laws in neighbouring countries. For example, mata mata turtles (*Chelus fimbriata*) have been smuggled by the thousands from Colombia, where mata mata turtle trade is banned, to Peru, where these turtles are reportedly laundered into Peru's legal export market for captive-bred mata mata turtles.

The seizure data also demonstrate that Hispanic American wildlife is trafficked to the USA, Europe, and Asia. This trade often involves rare, endemic species of birds and reptiles, which are in high demand in foreign

pet markets. Examples of impacted species include mud turtles, horned lizards, alligator lizards, poison arrow frogs, and certain species of songbirds, Amazon parrots, and macaws.

Wildlife species trafficked abroad often lack CITES protections, though most are covered by national wildlife laws. To illustrate: this study identified 1,667 wild animals that were seized en route to or in Europe between 2017 and 2022. These animals belonged to 52 different species, 22 of which are endemic and, notably, only ten of which were listed under CITES at the time of seizure. This finding corroborates a 2022 threat assessment by EUROPOL, which states that traffickers operating in Europe are increasingly targeting less monitored endemic non-CITES listed species, which are trafficked to both EU and non-EU destinations. The lack of CITES protection has implications for criminal justice responses to such illicit shipments in destination countries. In many destination countries (including those within the EU), non-CITES listed species are not covered by national wildlife protection laws. Accordingly, smuggling of these species is often a low priority, and penalties are nonexistent or significantly lower than for smuggling of CITES-listed species (usually limited to fines based on violation of customs, animal welfare, or veterinary legislation).¹¹ The lack of adequate legal protection for species sourced in contravention of domestic laws in countries of origin furthermore hinders international judicial cooperation. For example, in 2021 Spanish authorities were unable to extradite a notorious bird trafficker to Peru because the rare Peruvian birds he had smuggled were not protected in Spain. As a result, his actions constituted only an administrative, and therefore not extraditable, offence.¹²

Demand from foreign consumer markets is a major threat to vulnerable Hispanic American species. For instance, the illegal trade of harlequin poison frogs (*Oophaga histrionica*) and Lehmann's poison frogs (*Oophaga lehmanni*), both endemic to Colombia, to European markets has contributed to such severe imperilment that the species are now IUCN-classified as 'Critically Endangered'.

Only a small percentage (2.6%) of all seizures identified by this study concerned illicit shipments that were destined for and/or seized in countries outside of the Hispanic American region. However, this figure too represents only a fraction of the actual volume of international traffic in Hispanic American wildlife species. Most illicit international shipments likely escape the attention of law enforcement agencies responsible for policing country borders for a variety of reasons including but not limited to: inadequate focus on travellers and goods leaving the country; lack of priority assigned to intercepting wildlife smugglers;



Photo: © Gendarmería Nacional Argentina CC BY 4.0

and/or a lack of enforcement capacity and resources. Furthermore, international wildlife trafficking networks are predominantly operated by sophisticated criminal actors who are skilled at abusing weak governance and circumventing controls, e.g. through bribery, the use of sophisticated smuggling techniques and routes, and fraud by means of forged (transport/CITES/veterinary) documents.

Impact on species

The illegal wildlife trade in Hispanic America is a major contributor to the decline of some wildlife species and is driving certain species to extinction. Forty of the 690 species found in illegal trade (6% of all species identified) are classified as ‘Endangered’ by IUCN, and 13 species (2% of all species) as ‘Critically Endangered’, meaning that they face a high risk and extremely high risk, respectively, of extinction in the wild. Examples of ‘Critically Endangered’ species include: red-fronted macaws (*Ara rubrogenys*); great green macaws (*Ara ambiguus*); yellow-naped amazons (*Amazona auropalliata*); harlequin poison frogs (*Oophaga histrionica*); Lehmann’s poison frogs (*Oophaga lehmanni*); Central American river turtles (*Dermatemys mawii*); and cotton-top tamarins (*Saguinus Oedipus*).

Furthermore, several species classified as ‘Endangered’ (facing a high risk of extinction in the wild) were identified, including: yellow cardinals (*Gubernatrix cristata*); red-crowned amazons (*Amazona viridigenalis*); Forster’s tree iguanas (*Liolaemus forsteri*); and Titicaca water frogs (*Telmatobius culeus*).

In the case of psittacid trafficking, poachers often cut down nesting trees with suitable nesting cavities or open holes in the trunk to reach the nest cavity and collect nestlings. These practices not only affect wild parrot

populations, but also the integrity and diversity of the forest, as parrots contribute to the dispersal of native plant seeds. While poachers often target newborn hatchlings or nestlings, adult specimens are also trapped in large numbers. This poaching is of particular concern because removing breeding adults directly disrupts the species’ population dynamics and breeding potential.

Animal welfare and mortality

The illegal wildlife trade in Hispanic America—and globally—is associated with immense animal suffering, particularly in the context of live animals in trade. Common methods used to capture wild animals, such as use of glue to trap songbirds, often result in injuries and sometimes death. Wild animals are smuggled across long distances, often stashed in large numbers within cramped boxes or luggage and hidden in motor vehicle trunks and luggage holds, deprived of oxygen, food, and water. Some smugglers sedate live animals to avoid detection. As a result, the mortality rate of wildlife from the moment of capture or poaching through to the final point of sales is very high, especially for birds. In Argentina, officials estimate that between 40 and 70 percent of songbirds captured for the wildlife trade die before reaching the point of sale. Birds smuggled abroad face even higher mortality. For instance, out of 70 songbirds smuggled from Uruguay to Spain in a suitcase in 2017, 32 birds were dead upon arrival in Spain, and the rest died soon after from stress and other harms associated with their capture and transport. A study undertaken in Mexico has estimated a mortality rate of 75% for trafficked psittacids before the animals reach the final consumer.¹³

Furthermore, a Mexican wildlife expert has estimated that, of those psittacids that manage to survive capture and transport,

90% die later due to disease, lack of care, or poor nutrition.¹⁴ Mortality is also high among trafficked reptiles, not only in the stages before sales but also afterward, after they have reached exotic pet owners’ homes. An estimated 75% of trafficked reptiles die within the first year of captivity.¹⁵ To compensate for very low survival rates among trafficked wildlife, poachers often capture animals in numbers that far outweigh demand, further exacerbating the trade’s adverse impact on wild populations; in turn, consumers wishing to replace dead specimens reinforce this practice.

The seizure data collected by the present study on wildlife crime in Hispanic America show that, in cases of domestic live animal smuggling, most specimens intercepted by law enforcement agencies are alive at the time of seizure. However, mortality of seized specimens after being intercepted is reportedly high. Seized animals often succumb due to the delay between the moment of seizure and placement in a suitable rescue facility or, in many cases, the lack of adequate rescue and rehabilitation facilities. For instance, according to a Venezuelan wildlife rescue expert, the survival rate of seed finches is very low after just 12 hours in captivity as the species is characterised by an extremely accelerated metabolism and must eat at all hours.¹⁶ The mortality of green iguanas seized in Mexico is reportedly nearly 100%, as the government lacks proper rescue facilities for the species.¹⁷

▲ A puma was tied to a tree with chains and straps in a private estate in Santiago del Estero province before being recovered by Argentinian officials in 2019.

Risk of zoonotic disease transmission

Wildlife trafficking is associated with significant risks of zoonotic disease transmission, especially among mammals. A recent study for which researchers tested 388 monkeys that had been trafficked in nine Peruvian cities identified a total of 32 disease pathogens in the animals' blood, saliva, and faecal samples. These pathogens included mycobacteria, which cause tuberculosis, and parasites that cause Chagas disease, malaria, and various gastrointestinal ailments. Human malaria and tuberculosis killed more than two million people in 2020 alone. Throughout the entire trafficking chain, from the forest to markets to households, humans exposed to these animals are at constant risk of infection. Moreover, trafficked and rescued monkeys are at risk of being infected by human pathogens which, if the monkeys are released back into the wild, may spread to and endanger free-ranging primate populations.¹⁸

Onsite and online sales

Numerous wildlife seizures were recorded in street markets, fairs, traders' residences, and pet shops, and such onsite sales outlets remain important avenues for trafficking wildlife across Hispanic America. However, as is true elsewhere in the world, the internet has become a major conduit for illegal wildlife trade in Hispanic America. In some countries, like Argentina and Bolivia, it was reported that the relative significance of street markets for facilitating illegal wildlife sales has decreased with the introduction of social media. Colombian and Peruvian law enforcers saw illegal wildlife trade on social media surge during the COVID-19 pandemic, as restrictions on movement prompted traffickers to move their business online. Investigations conducted by the Colombian National Police have found that wild animals are offered for sale on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, negotiations take place via phone or direct messaging, and the animals are shipped to the buyer using hired drivers or public transport. In cases for which public transport is used, animals are often drugged to avoid detection.

Unfortunately, online wildlife traffickers appear to be operating with near impunity in much of Hispanic America, as most countries reported few seizures of wildlife that was offered for sale online. In the Dominican Republic and Panama no such wildlife seizures were reported, despite evidence of significant illegal online trade in these countries.

It seems likely that the limited enforcement success in the fight against illegal online wildlife trade is related to a lack of capacity

and/or expertise to monitor the web and conduct online investigations. However, some countries are seen to be increasing their efforts. For instance, Argentina reported 16 seizures of wildlife that were offered for sale online, the highest number of any of the 18 Hispanic American countries; however, these seizures equate to only 7.5% of all seizures documented for this country. In Colombia, the National Police have employed 10 cybercrime specialists dedicated to monitoring websites and social media for evidence of wildlife trafficking. This enhanced capacity has delivered notable success: in April 2022, the police dismantled two criminal networks, seized 1,004 wild animals and, across Bogotá, Medellín, Magangué, Cali, and Popayan, arrested 21 people who had engaged in large-scale trafficking of wildlife using social media. In Mexico, in contrast, the dedicated wildlife cybercrime team of the country's environmental protection agency (Procaduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente, PROFEPA) was disbanded in early 2019.¹⁴

Trafficking routes and methods

The wildlife seizures examined by the current study suggest most wildlife trafficked in Hispanic America is smuggled by road. Passenger buses appear to be the most frequently used transport method, even for large quantities of live animals, which are often carried over long distances. Several incidents involved trafficking of live birds, reptiles, and amphibians that were transported by the hundreds or even thousands. In March 2017, for instance, 490 songbirds were seized from a bus in Mexico. Two years later, 1,125 parakeets, parrots, and macaws were seized from a bus in Peru. In June 2019, 2,517 Titicaca water frogs were seized from a bus in Peru. Smugglers also use chartered tourist buses, vans, cars, cargo trucks, and motorcycles.

Some Hispanic American countries, particularly Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, reported or were implicated in illicit air shipments of wildlife. These shipments concerned both domestic smuggling and smuggling to other countries, including the USA and countries in Europe and Asia. Seizures involved passengers smuggling wildlife in their luggage; reptiles hidden in air parcels; and animals concealed in cargo shipments, often with forged permits or transport documents. Several countries, including some nations with significant levels of illegal wildlife trade, reported no or very few wildlife seizures at airports. While this could indicate that wildlife trafficking by air is not a significant challenge in these countries, it is more likely that controls at the relevant airports are insufficient. For instance, seizures in other countries implicate Nicaragua as a key source country for illicit wildlife (including parrot and macaw eggs), yet Nicaraguan authorities had not intercepted

any wildlife at its airports during the 2017-2022 study period.

Relatively few seizures included in this analysis involved wildlife transported by boat. However, given the importance of river and sea transport for the shipping of commodities in Hispanic America, it is likely that the extent to which boats are used to smuggle wildlife is greater than the data suggest.

Key ports of entry in the USA for illicit wildlife shipped from Hispanic America (2016-2020)

Analysis of shipments registered in the USFWS' LEMIS database¹⁹ reveals that the following ports of entry in the USA are most significant for illicit shipments of birds, reptiles, mammals, and amphibians from Hispanic America: 1. El Paso; 2. Nogales; 3. Dallas/Fort Worth; 4. Miami; 5. Laredo; and 6. San Diego/San Ysidro. Together, these ports of entry accounted for seizures of 64% of illicit wildlife shipped from Hispanic America. Mexico is by far the biggest source for wildlife trafficked to the USA, with 76% of seized wildlife shipped from this country. Not coincidentally, El Paso, Nogales, Laredo, and San Diego/San Ysidro are on the border between Mexico and the USA. Peru accounted for 7% of seized wildlife shipments between 2016 and 2022, followed by Nicaragua (3%).

Role of organised crime

A significant proportion of the illegal wildlife trade in Hispanic America appears to be opportunistic, committed outside the sphere of organised crime by low-level actors who catch or kill wild animals and sell these in streets, in local markets, or in urban hubs, or to middlemen. However, numerous incidents were identified that had characteristics of organised crime, which include: the trafficking of large quantities of valuable wildlife, the logistics of which require a high degree of sophistication; the use of fraud (e.g. forged CITES and transport documents); the laundering of illegally harvested wild specimens through captive breeding facilities; the use of chartered private tourist buses to smuggle wildlife; the use of sophisticated obfuscation methods (e.g. for the smuggling of parrot and macaw eggs to Asia using especially made incubators); and the use of social media to traffic large quantities of wildlife.

Hispanic American countries where one or more of these characteristics were recorded include Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Law enforcement efforts

Wildlife crime remains a low-risk, high-profit crime in Hispanic America. In most Hispanic American countries, law enforcement efforts to tackle wildlife poaching and trafficking appear to be largely reactive rather than proactive. Most seizures identified between 2017 and 2022 were instigated by citizens' complaints or occurred during routine inspections at logistical nodes such as roads, bus stations, and airports. In numerous instances, law enforcers coincidentally detected illicit live bird shipments as they heard chirping noises from boxes or luggage hidden in cars or buses. In most countries, criminal justice efforts appear to focus mainly on seizing illicit wildlife, with little effort directed to investigating and dismantling wildlife trafficking networks and prosecuting those who operate such networks. Peru and Colombia are noteworthy exceptions. Among other counter-trafficking efforts, Peru's government has adopted a strong anti-wildlife trafficking law and shown high-level commitment to tackle wildlife crime by hosting the first conference on illegal wildlife trade in the Americas in 2019. In 2021, Colombia's national police launched a national strategy to tackle environmental crime and increased its investigative capacity to fight wildlife and natural resources crime. Nonetheless, challenges remain throughout Hispanic America.

The rate of arrest in wildlife crime cases (based on information provided in media reports) is low in many countries. On average, 27% of seizures and poaching incidents recorded by this study resulted in arrest. Variation among countries was high, however, ranging from 7% of cases leading to arrest in Peru to 51% in Guatemala. Of course, these percentages say little about the effectiveness of criminal justice responses to wildlife crime in Hispanic

America, including whether law enforcement agencies managed to arrest key wildlife crime actors, whether they were prosecuted, and whether they received meaningful sentences.

In many countries, public acceptance of prohibitions on the sale of protected wildlife is low. A symptom of this widespread attitude is the aggression that wildlife law enforcers sometimes encounter from wildlife sellers. For example, on 22 December 2022 Mexican wildlife inspectors who were undertaking an inspection of the Mercado Mixihuca in Mexico City were attacked and threatened by more than 20 people, forcing the inspectors to terminate the visit and leave the site immediately.

Convergence

Several sources have reported that organised crime groups in Hispanic America primarily involved in drugs and human trafficking have branched out into the illicit wildlife trade to diversify their sources of revenue. For instance, Mexican criminal groups are allegedly selling legal and illegal wildlife products to Chinese traders in exchange for fentanyl and methamphetamine, which the criminal groups send to the United States, Europe, and elsewhere.²⁰ In the Dominican Republic, prosecution authorities have reported that criminals purchase expensive, exotic wild animals with illicit cash and subsequently sell them to launder money.²¹

This study has identified several incidents (the majority in Mexico) in which wild animals were seized along with other illegal commodities such as drugs (marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamine), stolen vehicles, illegal weapons, and ammunition, and proceeds of crime such as vehicles and luxury jewellery. However, these seizures usually occur in ranches or homes of

members of organised crime syndicates, and concern wild animals kept as pets or in private zoos. Big cats and other rare and exotic wildlife are favoured status symbols for drug traffickers in Hispanic America (for more on this, see Section 3.12 on Mexico).

The wildlife seizures described in media reports between 2017 and 2022 provide evidence of crime convergence. Examples that were recorded include: a major marine turtle egg poaching event in a Nicaraguan wildlife reserve involving around 800 poachers employed by members of the M-19 crime group in 2018; several interceptions of vessels from Venezuela, which were smuggling wildlife and humans to the Dutch Antilles; the seizure of a massive cache of jaguar and other wildlife parts and products, along with a large sum of domestic and foreign currency and a loaded .22 calibre gun from a restaurant in Santa Cruz, Bolivia in 2018, suggesting convergence with financial crimes and possibly violent crime; and several seizures of illicit wildlife that was transported and sold jointly with illicit timber in Peru.

It is important to note that media reports on wildlife seizures (the primary source of information for this study) are ill-suited for comprehensively assessing the existence of crime convergence, as such reports rarely provide significant detail regarding the perpetrators and their activities. Moreover, high-level criminal actors engaged in wildlife crime are rarely identified, as they use low-level poachers and smugglers to procure and transport wildlife.

▼ SERFOR seized 184 parts of dead wild animals and seven taxidermed kalechics that were used for 'healing' at the Alasitas Fair in the cities of Puno and Juliaca, Peru.



Photo: © SERFOR



Photo: © Gendarmeria Nacional Argentina CC BY 4.0

▲ Argentinian officials stopped a man transporting two turtles in a cardboard box in his van, in violation of the Wildlife Protection Act, December 2022.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study set out to compile and analyse data on wildlife seizures and poaching incidents reported in the media between 2017 and 2022 in the 18 countries of Hispanic America. It has succeeded in generating an unprecedented range of data, providing an important baseline to inform the understanding of illegal exploitation of reptiles, birds, mammals, and amphibians in Hispanic America. The following conclusions emerge from this study.

First and foremost, the data demonstrate that illegal wildlife exploitation is pervasive across Hispanic America, affecting a myriad of species and significant numbers of wildlife. As was noted several times

throughout this report, the seizures and poaching data collected for this study represent just a fraction of actual levels of wildlife poaching and trafficking in Hispanic America. Even so, the data provide valuable insights concerning key trafficking hotspots and trafficking routes; species most affected; the high percentage of live animals trafficked; the significance of domestic versus foreign demand; drivers for poaching and trafficking; indications for organised crime involvement and crime convergence; and noteworthy trends, such as the rise in illegal online sales. The data also draw forth important considerations concerning the impacts of wildlife crime on species' conservation; animal welfare; public

health; and the need to ensure adequate rescue and rehabilitation facilities. Finally, the data suggest that fighting wildlife crime is not a priority in most if not all Hispanic American countries, resulting in insufficient allocation for responsible law enforcement agencies. Although laudable successes against wildlife crime networks are reported in some countries, law enforcement responses to illegal wildlife exploitation are predominantly reactive and by and large fail to effectively disrupt and dismantle wildlife crime networks.

Recommendations

The following recommendations represent opportunities to more effectively fight wildlife poaching and trafficking in Hispanic America.

The governments of Hispanic America are urged to:

- ▶ Strengthen efforts to fight wildlife poaching and trafficking in line with the Lima Declaration on Illegal Wildlife Trade of 4 October 2019, which was adopted by all Hispanic American countries except for Cuba and Venezuela. The Declaration contains a holistic set of commitments to enhance responses to wildlife poaching and trafficking in Hispanic America and the Caribbean region, with an emphasis on:
 - Strengthening domestic laws, including by recognising wildlife poaching and trafficking as serious crimes and by addressing wildlife crime linked to the internet with effective penalties and sanctions.
 - Strengthening criminal justice responses to illegal wildlife trade, including by strengthening public institutions engaged in fighting wildlife poaching and trafficking; adopting financial investigation techniques; strengthening cross-border and regional cooperation; and leveraging innovative new technologies and tools that can facilitate the identification and control of illegal trade in wildlife species, their parts, and derivatives.

- Raising public awareness and reducing consumer demand for wildlife, including by encouraging active participation by and close collaboration with indigenous peoples, local communities, civil society organisations, the private sector, and academia.

- ▶ Inasmuch as they are not covered by the Lima Declaration, Hispanic American governments are furthermore urged to implement the following specific measures:

- Enhance monitoring and investigations of illegal online wildlife trade, including through partnerships with internet service providers, civil society organisations, and academia.
- Adopt and apply dissuasive and proportionate penalties and sanctions.
- Increase surveillance and controls of illegal trade in wildlife species that poses risks for zoonotic disease transmission, such as the trafficking of live monkeys and monkey parts.
- Ensure that there are adequate facilities to rescue and rehabilitate and, where appropriate, provide long-term, expert care for live wild animals seized from poachers and traffickers.

Donor countries, agencies, and international financial institutions are urged to contribute to efforts by Hispanic American states to fight wildlife poaching and trafficking through the provision of funding and technical assistance in support of countries' national, cross-border, and subregional efforts.

International organisations and civil society organisations are urged to provide technical assistance in support of countries' national, cross-border and subregional efforts to address wildlife crime.



Photo: © Gendarmería Nacional Argentina. CC BY 4.0

▲ Five French citizens were found to have illegally hunted 84 wild ducks of various species in Santa Fe, Argentina, June 2024.



Photo: © Alejandro Prieto

▲ An illegal hunter showing off a poached wild jaguar skin in Tabasco, Mexico, June 2018.

Endnotes

Endnotes

1. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (www.cites.org)
2. The Lima declaration on Illegal Wildlife Trade was adopted by the following states: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Spain, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay. See: https://lamejorreceta.ins.gob.pe/sites/default/files/2020-12/Lima%20Declaration_4.oct_2019_1.pdf
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Annex - list of figures and tables

Figure 1: Number of seizures and poaching incidents in Hispanic America between 2017 and 2022, based on media reports.

Figure 2: Number of seizure and poaching incidents reported per country between 2017 and 2022.

Figure 3: Number of animals seized or poached per country between 2017 and 2022, based on media reports.

Figure 4: Regional distribution of seizures and poaching incidents reported between 2017 and 2022.

Figure 5: Number of animals seized or poached in Hispanic America between 2017 and 2022, based on media reports.

Figure 6: Wildlife (percentage) seized or poached per country in Hispanic America between 2017 and 2022, based on media reports.

Table 1: Guidance for calculating number of seized animals.



▲ SERFOR recovers Andean puma that was prowling in the Andean area of Chíncha, Peru.

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for Animal Welfare

Wildlife crime in Hispanic
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and poaching incidents in
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