



Illegal export of geckos from New Zealand

Hoplodactylus and *Nautilus* (some formerly known as *Heteropholis*) species complexes are endemic to New Zealand and include at least 38 species; some have only been recently discovered. While some are widespread and common, others have restricted ranges and are highly endangered. They are generally colourful, are small in size and are appealing to the pet market. Most species were protected pursuant to New Zealand's Wildlife Act 1953 although a few species have only recently been protected due to an amendment to the Wildlife Act in 1996. From October 1996 all New Zealand gecko species have become totally protected. Since then, the Department of Conservation, the authority responsible for managing the Act, has had a blanket policy of prohibiting their export except for recognised conservation programmes. Domestic hobbyists and collectors holding geckos legally prior to their protection were required to have permits to hold the species and whilst permit holders were permitted to swap geckos with other permit holders within New Zealand; all commercial sales were prohibited.

In the latter part of 1997 and into 1998 wildlife crime authorities within New Zealand began to receive intelligence in respect of the apparent burgeoning illegal trade in New Zealand geckos to some countries. Since that time wildlife crime authorities in New Zealand have become aware of the presence of *N. gemmeus*, *H. rakiurae*, *N. elegans*, *N. grayii* and *N. stellatus* in several countries. *N. gemmeus* and *H. rakiurae* were previously unheard of in the overseas markets and are not believed to have been part of any legal export prior to 1996 – to the contrary they are believed to have been smuggled out of New Zealand in the early part of 2001 in at least one country.

The New Zealand wildlife crime authorities firmly believe that because New Zealand geckos are attracting high prices on the black market that the demand for the species will increase. New Zealand will be seen as a haven for making easy money, thereby putting more pressure on a fragile and vulnerable wildlife resource.

There is considerable concern that the illegal take from some populations is having serious impacts on the species populations, and may be contributing to declines. There is also the potential for illegal take of other more common species to have serious impacts on the conservation of the species at a population level.

We would therefore urge all Parties that have the possibility to enforce controls on the importation of New Zealand gecko species to do their utmost to collect information on this trade.

In particular, we recommend the following actions:

- Enforcement agencies are encouraged to scrutinise any lizard species brought into the country, especially when carriers have recently visited New Zealand.
- That Parties be on the look out for New Zealand geckos for sale within their countries and communicate any information to New Zealand's Management Authority.

- That Customs officials, whose primary task is to combat other forms of illegal activity, be alerted to the possibility of encountering illegal geckos originating from New Zealand, and their personnel should be briefed accordingly.
- All Parties are encouraged to conduct joint operations against poachers, exchange information regarding illegal activity and, thus, combat illegal activity that may threaten populations of these species.

New Zealand Management Authority would welcome any information regarding the import and export of New Zealand geckos. Such information may help enforcement officers in combating illegal collection and export.