



Exporters from India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore loot and sell millions of marine animals with impunity

While OFI, as well as all the other trade organisations throughout the world, from the PIAA, to PIJAC, to AEDPAC (Spanish Pet Trade Organisation), to SAFEA (Singapore Aquarium Fish Exporters' Association), to the FTFFA (Florida Tropical Fish Farmers' Association) and the rest, vigorously condemn such practices, there's no denying that it still occurs. The sad thing is that every time a seizure is made, it reflects negatively on what is an industry that, apart from notable exceptions such as these, is pretty clean and plays to the rules.

The latest seizure, which is the largest one on record in terms of the number of Amazonian species involved (seven), is no exception and, like most of its predecessors over the years, makes headlines because of the high-profile (and high-priced) species involved. In this instance, the fish in question are numerous zebra plecos (*Hypancistrus zebra*), some freshwater stingrays and other plecos (sucker-mouthed catfish), among them, two as-yet undescribed species. Of course, the fact that these two species are undescribed doesn't necessarily make them rare or illegal within the trade. What makes them illegal in this particular instance is that the two men who were arrested were trying to smuggle the fish out of Brazil.

It is the zebra plecos, though, that were the major cause for concern (other than for the illegality of the attempt to take the fish out of the country). The reason is that this spectacular fish has been driven out of most of its natural habitat in the Rio Xingu by the construction of the controversial Belo Monte dam, which is now about 50% completed. Even now, the wild population of *H. zebra* is being squeezed hard, but this is nothing compared to what will happen once the dam nears completion. Basically, the species

is expected to disappear altogether from its home waters, or become so restricted as to make its future survival most unlikely in the wild.

Such is the level of concern for this small catfish that, following an official request from Brazil, CITES listed it on Appendix III with effect from 3 January, 2017, alongside several South American freshwater stingrays. This makes the zebra pleco and these stingrays the first ornamental fish species ever to be listed on this Appendix. While such listing does not prohibit trade, or carry the same stringent documentation demands required for Appendix I or II species, it does bring in certain controls on trade.

The Appendix III listing by Brazil is widely believed to represent an effort to combat smuggling of zebra plecos from its waters via neighbouring countries and onto the world market.

However, there is no way of knowing how effective or otherwise this move is proving to be, since we are only made aware that zebra smuggling is actually occurring when a consignment is intercepted, such as this latest one. So, for all we know, Appendix III listing might, indeed, be preventing or restricting attempts to smuggle the fish... or are we seeing the tip of a much bigger, hidden-from-view iceberg?

In the video that accompanied the press report on the seizure on the AquaA3 website (www.aquaa3.com.br), I counted over 50 zebra plecos. Bearing in mind that the image did not appear to include the whole of the container into which the fish had been transferred by the authorities, or show if there was another similar container with more fish, it would seem reasonable to conclude that there were more than just these zebras among the 672 specimens seized.

But... let's assume that there were 55 specimens. With individual fish retailing at several hundred US\$ dollars each (say, US\$300) in the US, we are looking at around US\$16,500 for this little haul! If there were more than 55 specimens, then... you can do the arithmetic yourselves! Whichever way we look at it (and not forgetting that the total seizure came to 672 fish), this single illegal consignment could have netted the perpetrators quite a handsome pay packet.

In closing, it would be relevant to mention that the zebra pleco is currently being bred in captivity in Asia.

We don't know too much, either about the exact locations of these breeding establishments, or how many fish they are producing. Nonetheless, if the zebra pleco story has a (limited) silver lining, despite the awful prospect that it may soon be wiped out in the wild by the Belo Monte dam, we can perhaps draw a little comfort from knowing that the species, as such, is likely to survive.

It may not do so in the natural surroundings in which it should be swimming and breeding, but, at least, it is not likely to become extinct in the foreseeable future. A crumb of comfort, but a valuable crumb nonetheless. ■

PHOTO: BIRGOR A (WICKIMEDIA COMMONS – GNU FREE DOCUMENTATION LICENCE)

Juvenile *Hypancistrus zebra* specimen exhibiting the attractive markings that make this such a desirable species.