Red flags for suspicious illegal wildlife trade

Many indicators of suspicious cargo are common to all forms of contraband, including trafficked wildlife. High levels of corruption in countries or in ports should be considered a major overarching red flag, since traffickers will look to exploit these weaknesses.

Questions you should ask yourself to spot possible red flags:

1. Are shipped commodities incompatible with the origin/destination country’s technical capacities or natural resources?
   - For example, timber is unlikely to be shipped to a country that is already a major timber producer and exporter.

2. Do the commodities shipped involve high-risk countries and routes?
   - Much of the most trafficked wildlife originates in just a small number of the countries in Africa, while several locations in Asia consistently appear as key transit and destination hotspots.

3. Are weight and cargo appearance inconsistent?
   - For example, actual weights are different than those stated in the bill of lading or packing lists; declared weight is not reasonable or realistic for the declared commodity; and/or the appearance and characteristics of the shipment do not seem to match the description in the import declaration or other documentation.

4. Are cargo descriptions dubious, vague or misleading?
   - Examples of vague or misleading descriptions for wildlife shipments include “fish,” “shell,” “horn” and “rosewood” (there are many species of rosewood, only some of which may be traded legally).

5. Does the value of cargo tally with its description and size?
   - The value of cargo can help authorities determine whether the shipment is identical to what is declared.

6. Is the paperwork questionable?
   - For example, are photocopies used instead of original documents? Are there spelling mistakes or inconsistencies? Is there a mismatch of permit number or date? Are documents expired? Is the official counter signature missing or do the documents seem altered (for example, look out for odd formatting, blurry text or cut and pasted logos).

Disclaimer: The trafficking of protected wildlife is an illegal act under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). It is to be understood that the organisations endorsing this document oppose such trade and do not speak for, or condone, those who undertake or facilitate it.

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One risk indicator alone, or without additional information about the customer or transaction, is not likely to be sufficient to confirm there is an illegal activity. If you suspect something suspicious, ask the customer to provide you with more information and follow your company’s Standard Operating Procedures. Companies are encouraged to consider using a system of green/orange/red lights for the indicators described that could help assess the overall risks and take action where required.