

High-tech trafficking

by DOUG GIMESY

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Documenting the illegal trade in Australian reptiles, Doug encountered native lizards concealed in electrical equipment.



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When scanners at a Melbourne sorting office detected blue-tongued lizards hidden inside a DVD player, you'd think the discovery would have come as something of a surprise. Sadly, such findings are all too common – a symptom of the growing illegal international trade in Australian reptiles.

This image, of a lizard being measured by wildlife officers, was captured by photographer Doug Gimesy, who spent several months documenting the issue. "This was just one of two blue-tongues stuffed inside that DVD player, which was intercepted en route to Asia," Doug recalls. "That same day, another package was detected containing four more blue-tongues, individually bound with tape and wrapped in socks."

Cruel and criminal

The illegal capture and export of endemic Australian reptiles – which, along with native amphibians and birds, are highly prized overseas, mainly as pets – is a lucrative trade, and one that represents a significant conservation and welfare problem. Removing individuals from the wild not only impacts local populations, but can also result in habitat destruction. And transporting the animals, in food packaging, toys or electrical appliances, can lead to starvation, stress, exposure to cold, injury and, all too often, death.

"The reptiles rescued that day were dehydrated and had suffered skin damage from the tape," says Doug. "They also had ticks, suggesting that they had been taken from the wild." The lizards were given fluids and feed, and checked by animal experts. Sadly, though, some have to be euthanised.

Australia's federal government is contributing to the development of 3D X-ray scanning technology to combat such crimes. As yet, though, the cruel trade continues. **Paul Bloomfield**

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