

Seized snakes had disease unknown in Australia

Customs officers prevented a possible disease threat to Australia's important and growing aquaculture industry, and to many native animals, when they intercepted two python smugglers at Cairns airport last year.

Customs officers found 10 baby green pythons (*Chondropython viridis*) hidden in one man's underclothing. An endangered species, the pythons were seized because they are prohibited imports under Australian legislation. Later, they were found to be carrying an exotic disease—iridovirus.

Scientists from the CSIRO division of Animal Health in Geelong, Victoria, isolated the virus, which belongs to a group that can cause diseases in Australian fish and amphibians.

"It is possible this virus, which hasn't been identified in Australia before, could have seriously affected Australia's valuable aquaculture industry as well as our wildlife", said the division's Dr Deborah Middleton.

"We know this type of virus can cause disease across a range of species, and survives well in the environment."

She said that if not discovered, the virus had the potential to infect many species including perch, Atlantic salmon, rainbow trout, barramundi, cane toads and several species of frogs.

Pictured (from left) are Senior Aquaculture Technician for the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, Julian O'Brien and Cairns Customs officer, Jim Eagles holding a barramundi in a fish farm in Cairns, November 1998.



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These photographs show how the baby snakes were discovered bundled in stockings and, later, at a Cairns wildlife park.



The pythons were released to Wild World, a wildlife park in Cairns, under the authority of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and Environment Australia. Later, five were sent to Melbourne Zoo for full quarantine. The trip to Australia had stressed the snakes and they were given antibiotics for mouth cankers. One had a prolapsed bowel. Two snakes died soon afterward and all the snakes were put down after the virus was discovered.

"While it is a shame these beautiful snakes had to be destroyed, it is clear the disease risks they posed to other animals, both in the zoo and to wild native population, left authorities with no realistic option," said Mr Chris Banks, Curator of Herpetofauna, Invertebrates and Education Animals at Melbourne Zoo.



In Cairns District Court in August 1998, two Singaporean men pleaded guilty to importing the snakes. One was sentenced to 15 months jail under the Crimes Act for conspiracy to commit an offence, and 15 months under the Quarantine Act for importing a live animal without a permit. The other was sentenced to nine months for importing an animal without a permit, nine months for cruelty to an animal, both under the Wildlife Protection Act, and six months under the Quarantine Act for importing an animal without a permit. All sentences were concurrent and the men were each given non-parole periods of three months. On release they were required to enter into \$2000 two-year good behaviour bonds.



In handing down the sentences the judge said importation of the virus was of significant national importance to Australia's primary industries.

Green pythons are native to the Cape York Peninsula in far north Queensland, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.

The smuggled pythons are a threatened species listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of World Fauna and Flora, and are protected under the Commonwealth *Wildlife Protection (Regulation of Exports and Imports) Act 1982*. It is a serious offence to import live snakes or other animals without prior approval under the Wildlife Protection Act and the Quarantine Act.