



Press release

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Embargo

Switzerland is strengthening its controls and international cooperation to better combat the illegal trade in shawls made from Tibetan antelope wool

Since 2013, the Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office (FSVO) has strengthened its controls in cooperation with the Federal Customs Administration (FCA) in order to combat the illegal trade in shawls made from Tibetan antelope wool (shahtoosh). As a result, more of these shawls have been confiscated every year. Moreover, international cooperation and awareness raising among potential shawl buyers are essential in order to counter this illegal trade effectively and to help to safeguard this strictly protected and endangered species.

International trade in the Tibetan antelope and its products has been prohibited since 1979 by virtue of the species' registration in Annex I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), just like the elephant, tiger and rhinoceros for example. Despite this, more than 70 shawls have been seized in Switzerland in 2015 (compared to 29 in 2014). "This result is worrying because in order to produce a pure shahtoosh shawl you need to kill two to five antelopes, which represents more than 280 animals for the shawls seized in 2015," explains Mathias Lörtscher, head of species conservation at the FSVO. It is impossible to domesticate these animals in order to shear them, and their poaching has caused a drastic collapse in the population by around 90 % since the beginning of the 20th century. Despite numerous efforts to prevent their eradication, such as the creation of a large protected area in China, the population remains endangered.

Need for international cooperation

The number of shawls seized in Switzerland in recent years is only the tip of the iceberg in this illegal international trade. To combat this type of trade effectively, international cooperation is vital in terms of strategy, networking, sharing of specific information and cooperation with the police in order to pursue the criminals. It is also a prerequisite in order to guarantee an effective support structure in the policing, customs and legal spheres for the countries concerned.

Specifically, the FSVO, which is the Swiss Management Authority for the CITES or 'Washington' Convention, collaborates closely with the Federal Customs Administration (FCA) and FEDPOL at the national level and with the CITES Secretariat and INTERPOL on an international level. "A well-coordinated network of investigators and analysts is crucial for the exchange of information between the countries involved. Switzerland is very active and has demonstrated by its seizures that the global market in shahtoosh shawls is established; armed with information gathered from its seizures, Switzerland has intensified cooperation with INTERPOL's networks and can therefore benefit from INTERPOL's specific information service and network," explains Ioana Botezatu, responsible the Strategic Development Unit of INTERPOL Environmental Security area

Awareness raising remains the best prevention

Under Federal law CITES, the illegal importation of shahtoosh wool shawls is punishable by a fine. In addition, the products are confiscated by the authorities. The rise in seizures since 2013 demonstrates the need to continue with controls and to intensify national and international collaboration. It also illustrates the need for enthusiasts prepared to spend large sums on this wool, regarded as the most precious, softest and warmest in the world, to know that behind each shawl lies the unlawful killing of two to five animals and that it is strictly prohibited to buy these products.

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