



Falcon Trade, Legal & illegal (图)

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Last November, 80 falcons left the Mongolian steppes forever, their wings bound and eyes shut with leather covers. Onboard a special charter flight, they headed to the palaces of Arab sheikhs in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to the freedom of hunting an occasional desert fox.

The price of their freedom was U.S. \$3 million in credit for development projects pledged by the Saudi Arab Emirates and Kuwait.

«It's a political issue,» says Mr. Banzragch convincingly, an official from the Ministry of Environmental Protection. «We received repeated requests through official channels at the Ministry of External Relations.»

On top of such official deals, the illegal trade flourishes. In 1997, 26 attempts of illegal smuggling were stopped by customs. This year, the harvest of smuggled birds reached 56. In one case, 14 birds were uncovered just prior to the plane taking off.

According to Alan Parrot, an American falcon expert, the annual trade turnover exceeds \$40 million.

«It is second only to arms and drugs,» says Mr. Alan Parrot. As a teenager he developed a life-long passion for birds because of his famous grandfather-ornithologist. At 18, he was already looking after falcons for the Iranian Shah, and ever since, he has pursued falcons in different capacities - first as a trainer, then a trader, then a police informant of illegal smuggling of endangered species.

In 1993, while on an Interpol undercover mission to Kazakhstan, he first learned about falcons leaving Mongolia. Two years later, he approached the Ministry of Environmental Protection of Mongolia with an offer to buy birds from Mongolia at a stake prize, and in so doing, diminish the volume of illegal trade.

«I gave them all the information on where, how much and how,» he says. «This turned out to be my major mistake. The former Ministry of Environment, Batzhargal, promised to report it to the Government, but as I learned later, nothing has been done. On the contrary, they learned all the tricks of the trade and decided to use the knowledge for their own benefit.»

In 1994, the former minister struck a deal with Abdul Latif Al Minda, an emissary of a Saudi Arabian prince, to buy 800 falcons over a 10-year period for a total price of \$2.2 million.

«Mongolian falcons are more prized nowadays because they have natural hunting skills that cannot be developed in a falcon breeding farm. At these farms only one out of ten birds can match a Mongolian one,» says Alan Parrot. According to some media reports rich sheikhs are willing to pay as much as \$200,000 for the best falcons.

«What happened is that Mongolian high officials formed a small ring of smugglers. Mongolia has now turned into the world center in the illegal trade of rare birds.»

Although falcons are not considered to be endangered species, they are listed in the Protocol Two of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), under which the bird is not allowed to be traded freely and each case requires clearance.

«We do have this Protocol. Our ministry is in charge of issuing clearances for each case,» says Mr. Banzragch. «Since last summer, we solely are in charge of controlling the falcon trade and issuing all the permits.»

While official channels are now open, many choose unofficial ways. Customs prevented up to 12 illegal smuggling attempts last autumn. The latest case involved two Iranian brothers who managed to sneak at least 14 birds through custom controls.

In another case, three birds were apprehended at customs. The violator turned out to be the same sheikh envoy, Abdul Latif Al Minda.

«He is the personal emissary of the Saudi Arabian prince. Back in 1996, he was arrested in Singapore by Interpol while trying to smuggle three birds,» explains Parrot.

«I have a copy of a U.S. \$600,000 bank withdrawal from the Mongolian Trade and Development Bank made by him in summer of 1997. At that time, he was arranging the transportation of 80 birds. Even if he was paid the \$220,000 due to the Ministry of Environment, where did the rest of the money go? Could he have spent an average of \$7,500 per day on personal expenses? No, this money went out as a payment to high officials.»

Mr. Parrot openly challenged these «high officials» by calling a press conference and alerting the media and the Mongolian public about the dealings behind the 80 birds. «Mongolia is engaged in the illegal trade of falcons. And it is now considered to be the center of the illegal falcon trade. The Minister of Environment, Adiyasuren, blessed this deal and benefits from it,» he told journalists.

A public outcry followed his press conference. The media erupted with reports of cases of falcons being caught and smuggled out of the

e country.

To counteract the media craze, minister Adiyasuren took Parrot to court for defamation. «He attempted to undermine the reputation of the Mongolian Government. As a public official, I deem it my duty to restore my good name,» reasoned Adiyasuren, assessing the damage done to his reputation at \$100,000.

The court case never took place as Adiyasuren resigned as minister and did not appear in court to protect his «good» name.

«I knew they could not produce any evidence against my facts. The case was lost from the very beginning,» says Parrot triumphantly.

But the story did not end there. Although falcon exports had been banned since 1997, the cash-strapped Government decided to go ahead with selling the birds to Arabic sheikhs in exchange for credits and loans towards infrastructure development projects.

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