

Ethiopia: Tax Authority Confiscates Cheetah Cubs

Officials at the Ethiopian Revenues and Customs Authority (ERCA) handed over four cheetah cubs to the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA) that were confiscated last week in Denbel Arapea, in Dire Dawa City, while allegedly being smuggled to Somaliland.

The cubs were found when officials at the checkpoint became suspicious of the noises coming from plastic containers, on January 19, 2011. They asked the two individuals who were transporting the animals to open the containers but they refused and fled to the nearby jungle when officials insisted, according to Mihretab Assefa, manager of law enforcement at the ERCA's Dire Dawa Branch.

When the containers were opened, officials found five cheetah cubs, of which one was already dead.

"This is not the first time the authority had confiscated such animals," he told Fortune. "We have caught many lion and cheetah cubs being smuggled before."

Ethiopia has signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) of wild fauna and flora that prohibits the hunting of endangered animals, of which cheetahs are included. They are hunted for their skin, bones, teeth, claws, which are used for making jewellery.

"Mostly, cheetah cubs are poached after the killing of their mother," Daniel Assefa, expert in wildlife and products movement control at the EWCA, told Fortune. "Since the hunting of cheetahs is illegal, there is no market value, legally" Daniel added.

However, the black market value of each is estimated to be around 5,000 dollars, according to Mihretab.

The Somali Regional State has been identified by the EWCA as the major area in which wildlife is illegally hunted and transacted.

"The authority has established a task force in collaboration with the region's police to prevent these illegal activities," Daniel told Fortune.

The confiscated cheetahs were placed in the office of the Born Free Foundation, a UK based non-profit organisation that was officially established in July 1998. The organisation is building a zoo on a 77.5ht plot in Holeta Town, located 74km from the capital.

The cubs will be trained by the organisation to adapt to life in the wild and will be set free once they are strong enough, according to Daniel.

The identities of the smugglers are being investigated. The maximum fine for anyone found hunting illegally and selling the animals is 30,000 Br and the minimum 5,000 Br.

It also carries a prison sentence of up to three years. Offenders can be punished with either or both, unless the criminal code carried a more severe punishment for the offence.

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