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Poachers target Helmeted Hornbill

NATION

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By EDDIE CHUA



PETALING JAYA: The critically endangered Helmeted Hornbill is facing a gra who are after its famed red crown, which is prized by collectors.

International wildlife syndicates pay these poachers between US\$80 (RM33 per crown, prized as “red ivory” that can be carved into souvenirs and trinket

The hunt for these magnificent birds has intensified in Malaysia following a c activities in Indonesia. The authorities there are keeping a tight watch on air

Checks by The Star indicate that online chatter via underground poaching cl with offers being repeatedly made to those who could supply syndicates wit

The Helmeted Hornbill crown or casque is a solid thick layer of keratin found fingernails or rhino horn.

It can fetch thousands of ringgit in the black market as these casques can be exotic pendants, beads, necklaces, bracelets and other decorative ornament

It is sold three to five times more than the price of elephant ivory.

A small carving from Chinese master craftsmen can fetch anything between US\$10,000 (RM42,100) a piece.

A former poacher told The Star that syndicates raised their price to obtain the more locals, especially Orang Asli, to hunt the species in Peninsular Malaysia; there is a huge demand among China's rich for accessories and ornaments made from hornbill.

At the 17th International Hornbill Conference in Kuching, Sarawak, two years ago, it was revealed that there were more than 40 places in Peninsular Malaysia where this exclusive trade takes place.

In Sarawak, forests near the Sarawak-Kalimantan and Sarawak-Sabah borders are the main areas where hornbills are poached.

The source said poachers were lured by the lucrative payments to hunt for the birds, where their poaching activities often go undiscovered.

The source said aside from encouraging locals to hunt for these birds' crowns, syndicates also come from Kalimantan before ending up in China and Taiwan.

"With Indonesian wildlife authorities intensifying their enforcement activities in Kalimantan – Pontianak Supadio airport and Balikpapan Sepinggan airport – forced these syndicates to turn to Malaysia," said the source.

These two airports are known to be the major smuggling gateways for helmeted hornbills. Over the years, many seizures were made at these two airports.

"Wildlife syndicates are using human couriers to smuggle the casques across the border and ship these red ivories through Kuching airport.

"Syndicate members would also go as far as Kota Kinabalu airport to make seizures," the source said.

The syndicates, said the source, preferred Kuching airport as the gateway to consignments abroad as the authorities there, including Customs and airport security, never dealt or seized such illegal items before.

Therefore, they might not know or were aware of how the casque looked like, the source said.

Meanwhile, the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan) director-general Abu Hassan said they were monitoring such poaching activities in the jungle through a special 24-hour monitoring operation on tiger habitats or "hotspots" in Malaya to curb poaching activities.

He said under the operation, rangers were not only on the lookout for tiger poaching but also for other protected animals, including Helmeted Hornbills.

The department, he said, was also working with all the related government agencies to carry out monitoring and enforcement activities to protect the e being smuggled out of the country.

“We are also working with airport and port authorities, through intelligence other joint operations, to curb the smuggling activities, including Helmeted Hornbill said.

Abdul Kadir said those with information on Helmeted Hornbill poaching should headquarter or state offices immediately and action would be taken.

A Sarawak Forest Department official said they were working closely with the surveillance on its porous border with Kalimantan and all the entry points to curb wildlife smuggling activities, including the illegal shipment of hornbill casques.

“To date, we have not seized any hornbill casques at the airport.

“However, we are keeping a close watch for such smuggling activities to protect species,” said the officer.

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