

National

Sssssmuggling wildlife

The person sitting next to you on the plane could have a highly venomous snake wrapped around their leg, writes **Yolandi Groenewald**

M eet the inland taipan and common taipan — two of the world's most dangerous snakes. The inland taipan is estimated to be 20 times as venomous as a common cobra. A single bite of the fast, highly venomous Australian snake might be potent enough to kill 100 men. The common taipan, also one of the deadliest snakes in the world, has a kill rate second only to the black mamba, nearing 100%. Now imagine being on the same flight as these guys.

You might be forgiven if you thought this was the plot of a bad Hollywood movie, but this little incident actually happened a few months ago at OR Tambo International airport when snake traders tried to smuggle the unique Australian snakes into South Africa using a children's book collection box and James Bond DVD packaging.

"When we opened the boxes, those snakes were not happy chappies," says Dirk (not his real name), a member of the environmental task force, the Green Scorpions. Dirk is one of the main investigating officers of wildlife smuggling at OR Tambo; he works with airport customs.

"Imagine if someone had been bitten. There is no antivenom in South

ings or hide them under their pants. One smuggler had sedated birds in small cups wrapped around his leg.

Most often the wildlife products that Dirk confiscates are already dead. Collectors pay up to R100 000 for the privilege of having a rare moth or butterfly in their collection. Some collect the animals, or what is left of them, purely for the sake of fashion.

In the corner of Dirk's office lies a pile of at least 100 handbags and 50 belts, all made out of the skin of the highly endangered Nile crocodile. "For every handbag and belt you need one crocodile," says Dirk. "In that corner lie about 150 crocodile carcasses."

Three rhino horns occupy a suitcase filled with children's clothing and are stinking up the room. The blue suitcase became the coffin of the three black rhinos that were shot in Namibia for their horns.

New research from Traffic, the wildlife trade monitoring programme of global wildlife fund WWF, discloses an alarming increase in the volume of rhino horns entering illegal trade since 2000, something of which the team at OR Tambo has first-hand knowledge.

Large quantities of ivory and rhino horns are smuggled out of the country each year, says Dirk.

"It is like looking for a needle in a



One of the taipans found inside a DVD box at OR Tambo airport (left). Dried seahorses (right) are sold as curios and as treatments in traditional Chinese medicine (below). Wildlife smugglers transport tarantulas in plastic containers hidden on their person. Photographs: OR Tambo

customs and Lisa Skinner



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