

News

PEOPLE SMUGGLING SNAKES, SPIDERS, TUSKS, HORNS, SKINS – THE GREEN SCORPIONS HAVE SEEN IT ALL

By Werner Swart

THE brown cardboard box about to leave on a plane from OR Tambo International Airport outside Johannesburg looks perfectly ordinary. The label reads "clothes" and its destination is the Far East.

But the officials and advanced X-ray machines at the airport aren't fooled so easily. Thanks to a network of informants and agents an elite investigative unit is always ready to spring into action when tipped off – and the contents of the box prove why. Inside are elephant tusks and processed ivory worth hundreds of thousands of rands.

The officials responsible for intercepting the booty are the Environmental Management Inspectorate more commonly known as the Green Scorpions. They are at South Africa's final frontier in the war against smugglers of the country's flora and fauna.

The Green Scorpions protect the environment from people who have no respect for wildlife – those for whom the financial value of an endangered species matters more than its continued existence.

They have first-hand experience of the extremes to which international smuggling syndicates will go. So you thought the behaviour of the guy next to you on that flight from Australia was a little odd? Maybe he was just trying not to disturb the poisonous snake.



Green sting

bags seized on a cargo plane. Next to it is a box of Chinese traditional medicines, also smuggled in illegally.

Few of the airport staff know what these men do and they prefer it that way. In the war against the illegal wildlife trade – an international business that, at R50 billion a year, is second only to the drug trade – it's necessary that the staff remain ignorant.

"If these snakes were to escape and bite someone we would have to import the anti-venom at a cost of R300 000 per injection and you need at least eight injections to survive. Of course it would never get here in time."

Rare snakes like these fetch up to R10 000.

package of 25 film capsules destined for sale at a cost of R1 500 each.

The spiders weren't the lids of the container. "They'd been kept in the container for how long. It's cruel, especially for creatures such as these."

Recently a Zimbabwean woman caught smuggling crocodiles into South Africa. It took her a long time to be doing this for years at the Beitbridge border. When she decided to stop, she was one of 118 belts the Green Scorpions had there to arrest her.