

Duo held in Navi Mumbai with 293 star tortoises

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The accused duo arrived in Navi Mumbai on a bus from Pune

By **Abhishek Sharan**

The men from Andhra were to deliver the endangered animals to a city man for smuggling to South East Asia.

The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI), Mumbai zonal unit, has arrested two persons from Andhra Pradesh for being in illegal possession of 293 star tortoises, an endangered species protected under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972.

Acting on a tip-off, the DRI officers arrested Kondaiah and Srikanth soon after they arrived in Navi Mumbai on a bus from Pune. The men had come from Anantpur in Andhra Pradesh to deliver the star tortoises, which derive their name from the glittering yellow star shapes on their dark shells, to a Mumbai resident, who is absconding.

The rare tortoises, found concealed within the folds of cotton cloths inside backpacks carried by the accused, were meant to be smuggled by air to various destinations in South East Asia, where they are valued as exotic pets and good luck charm as per Feng Shui practices.



Kalyan RPF busts flesh trade racket, one arrested

Two constables sighted a woman in distress, who led the RPF to the accused.

Referred as “buttons” in the grey market because of their tiny size, the total consignment is worth around Rs 1.46 crore.

“In South East Asia, people believe that the star tortoises bring them luck. They are also kept as exotic pets. Each could fetch a price as high as Rs 50, 000,” said a DRI officer.

Speaking about the arrests, the officer said, “During grilling, the duo crumbled under pressure and admitted that were carrying star tortoises in their backpacks. Their background is being checked. It is being suspected that at least one of them may have been involved in smuggling of wild life in the past.”

The DRI team has got in touch with the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB)’s western region’s regional deputy director, M Maranko, for handing over the seized tortoises for further action.

Star tortoises are listed as a vulnerable species as per the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)’s Red List and have been also included in Schedule IV of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. The endangered species is prohibited for export under Foreign Trade Policy and the same are liable for confiscation under Customs Act,1962.

According to sources, the star tortoises, whose scientific name is *Geochelone elegans*, are found in dry areas and scrub jungles across the southern peninsula from Warangal to Chikmagalur.



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