

Exposed: A loophole for illegal trade in animals

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THE Spanish Government is to be warned by the European Environment Commission that it must stop illegal trade in wild chimpanzees or face prosecution in the European Court following a complaint from the World Wide Fund for Nature.

The young chimps are used as a tourist gimmick by beach photographers and are widely available in Spanish pet shops, despite an international ban in their trade.

The warning, the first step in international legal proceedings, comes after claims by British wildlife campaigners that Spain is being used as the main conduit for the illegal movement of rare animals coming mainly from Thailand and Equatorial Guinea to the United Kingdom and other EC countries.

The animals, like hundreds of species of flora and fauna, are an endangered species supposedly protected by an international convention.

They have become part of an international trade that sees millions of specimens of

wildlife illegally traded for huge profits. Thailand alone is believed to be responsible for the yearly export of as many as three million rare orchids, some of which are at the point of extinction.

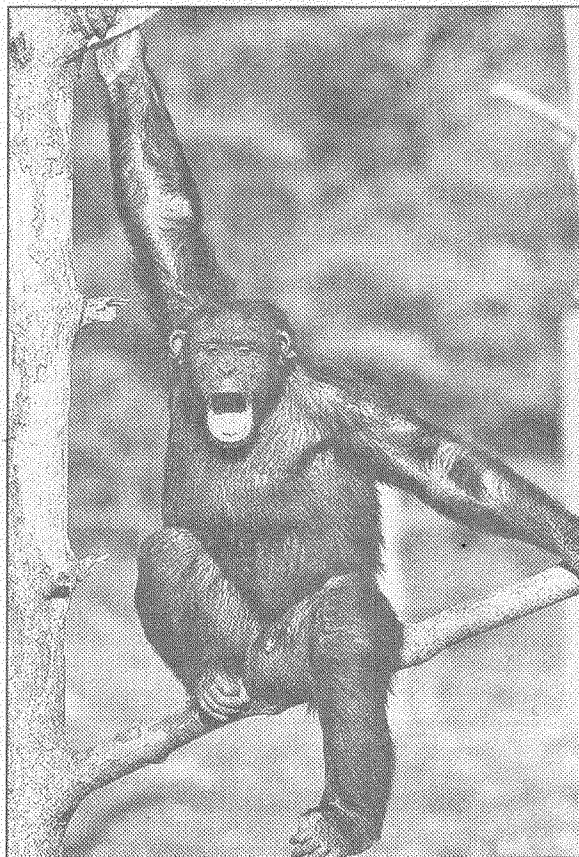
Spain is heavily involved in this trade. In one week earlier this year, Customs Passenger Control at Madrid airport discovered a Patas monkey, two Amazon parrots and 12 species of parrot from Argentina, all hidden in hand luggage.

Experts believe that these clumsy smuggling attempts are the tip of the iceberg.

Spain has become the main route into Europe for illegally trapped animals for two reasons. The country is notorious for its poor customs enforcement and smugglers see it as the easiest point of entry into prosperous northern Europe and its enormous market for rare pets.

According to the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), once such animals are accepted into Spain, permits can then be issued to allow them to travel unhindered throughout the EC.

British customs admit that once an animal is given



Rescued from a life of drugs

appropriate documentation by one EC country, they are powerless to question it.

The legal moves are being seen as a key test of Spain's poor record in implementing regulations of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) which are enshrined in EC law.

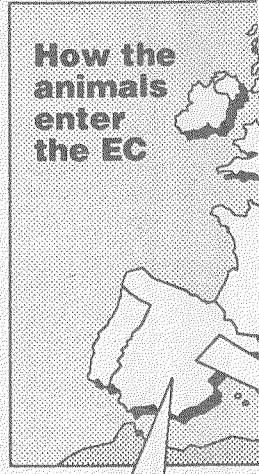
They coincide with growing concern about the British Government's poor record on monitoring the trade in endangered species entering this country. *The Observer* last week reported conservationists' claims that Britain is failing to uphold

Cites by not having adequate checks on whether animals offered for sale in this country have been obtained legally.

Next month a coalition of conservation groups, including the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Environmental Investigation Agency and the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit are expected to launch a campaign to tighten Whitehall rules.

The Observer has obtained documents showing how

How the animals enter the EC



Imports

Chimpanzees and other species banned from international trade are shipped from Equatorial Guinea and Thailand to Spain on bogus or forged CITES documentation (right).

shipments of wild animals illegally trapped in West Africa are 'laundered' for the EC market by being shipped through Spain.

Investigators working for the EIA and the International Primate Protection League have obtained copies of the certificates issued by Cites, which are required by European law for any protected species imported or shipped through an EC country. Other material reveals the way in which chimpanzees and other species pass illegally through Spain.

The documents clearly