

Scandal of Russia's

Turtles are scooped from shells for ashtrays

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THOUSANDS OF exotic pets, including rare birds and monkeys, are being smuggled in inhumane conditions from the former Soviet Union into the European Community.

A ring of Moscow animal dealers, whose exploits have included attempts to ship endangered falcons worth £26,000 through Britain to the United Arab Emirates, has been revealed by undercover Polish investigators.

Russia's under-funded wildlife authorities, powerless to control the growing trade, have sought help from international conservation bodies. In Britain, the RSPCA is launching an appeal today for funds to support public education campaigns in Russia on the humane treatment of animals.

Evidence of cruelty in the Russian animal trade, which has sprung up in the centuries-old Moscow bird market, is documented in a Channel 4 *True Stories* programme, *Dog Eat Dog*, to be broadcast on Thursday.

The year-long investigation reveals how many captive animals suffer appalling treatment at the hands of the traders. Monkeys, leopards, crocodiles, bears and turtles are kept in cramped cages, with their legs stuffed in cans; pigs are slaughtered for fun.

They are sold to dealers from Poland, Germany, Austria, Korea and China and smuggled by bus or train out of the country through Poland, where Russian dealers bribe customs officials.

Several leading animal dealers told the Polish investigators



Cruel beyond belief: Trader Alec Pavlov's right-hand man filmed forcing monkeys to

that thousands of Russian neon fish and turtles — in demand because of the Western Ninja turtle craze — are smuggled every month into Poland and sold for £1.35 each as pets. Hundreds more turtles, taken from the shores of the Caspian Sea, are scooped from their shells to produce ashtrays for a lucrative market in Germany and Austria.

Many die in transit after being packed into boxes in their hundreds with their legs taped to their shells. In one secretly-filmed incident, four-fifths of a shipment of 500 turtles died while stuffed under a train seat for a day-long journey from Moscow to Warsaw.

Growing numbers of more exotic animals, including rare

parrots and monkeys, are also being channelled through Russia into the EC as the republic's vetting procedures collapse.

One cache of animals smuggled by train to Warsaw included a rare African grey

parrot worth several thousand pounds and dozens of yellow-crested cockatoos banned from export from their native Australia and Indonesia. Another dealer was secretly filmed offering an endangered pygmy