Loggers. Hunters. Death. This is the unholy trinity of the bushmeat crisis in Africa. Many people have heard about it and even seen the pictures, but very few have witnessed the butchering, profiteering and destruction firsthand. Conservationist and wildlife photographer Karl Ammann is one of the exceptions. During the past decade, the Swiss native has travelled to every forest and local wildlife market in Africa, capturing the slaughter on camera. Recently, however, Ammann and his investigative partner Jason Mier have switched gears, focusing on exposing an extensive wildlife smuggling ring that stretches from Central Africa to Egypt.

The sale of young primates as pets or zoo attractions is generally regarded as a by-product of the bushmeat trade, but in the course of these investigations, Mier has become convinced that, in many cases, babies are the primary target. It all started in January 2005 when an illegal shipment of six young chimpanzees – with a black market value of US$5,000 each – was intercepted on a Kenya Airways flight at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. The crate, lacking the necessary health certificates and travel permits, had been rejected by the authorities in Cairo and was being returned to Nigeria via Kenya. The journey had taken its toll on the chimps, which ranged in age from seven months to two years. Crammed into a wooden box only 60 centimetres tall, 118 centimetres long, 70 centimetres wide and divided into six compartments, they had travelled for five to six days without any food or water. One had died, while the other five, covered in their faeces, were suffering from severe starvation, dehydration and, in one case, pneumonia.

Ammann and Mier launched an investigation right away. Starting with very little information, they uncovered a trail that took them from Egypt to Nigeria and back to Egypt over a long, arduous year. It was complicated and...
Meet 54-year-old Heba Abdel Moty Ahmed Saad. She lives in Cairo and wildlife trafficking is her family business. Heba is the mastermind; her son and three daughters are her travelling sidekicks and her husband assists from Nigeria where, conveniently, he owns a transportation company that also has offices in Cameroon and Egypt. With dual citizenship, Heba has been operating between Nigeria and her homeland for almost 30 years, selling primates to influential buyers throughout the Middle East.

The power of bribes has been instrumental in keeping her in business. Under CITES, permits are necessary for the import and export of all fauna and flora listed under Appendix I, which includes gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos. But, as Dr Mohammed Assaad, quarantine manager at Cairo Airport, points out, 'It's very easy in Africa to get documents, illegal papers.'

Mike Pugh, now an inspector for the RSPCA in the UK, says he learned about Heba in 1995 when he was working undercover at the animal market in Kano, Nigeria. 'I was informed by two wildlife dealers at the market that she was the main exporter,' he recalls. 'They estimated that she was exporting around 50 chimpanzees and gorillas annually.'

This infuriates Ammann. He says the problem with CITES is its dependence on the efficacy of the member country to enforce it. 'This doesn't work in poorly governed African countries like Egypt, where you have corrupt officials investigating themselves. You end up with a situation where the wolves are left watching the henhouse. It's a mockery.'

Dr Ragy Toma, the CITES wildlife officer in Egypt, admits there has to be a harsher punishment. 'When I see a chimpanzee in Egypt I think it is probably from Heba but I cannot prove this. The law for smugglers here is too easy. It must have more power. The EEAA is making corrections to this law to introduce a prison penalty.'

It also doesn't help that Heba's clientele consists of high-powered people whose status and money mean they can get away with it. "There's a lot of money to be made and the delivery is fast. One might think that the authorities would have penalised her at some point during her 30 years of smuggling activity, but a chronic lack of law enforcement has allowed Heba to slip through the net."

Although Egypt signed and ratified CITES in 1978, the country still has no prison penalty for wildlife traffickers. They can only be held accountable by Law 4 of 1994 under the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA), which imposes a rarely enforced fine of less than US$1 000.

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Another collector is Tarek Abouel Makarem, owner of Africa Safari Park. Heba has been operating from Egypt's capital, Cairo, for the past 30 years and has yet to incur even a fine. The Egyptian market for trafficked animals includes private menageries, roadside zoos and circuses. A solitary teenage chimpanzee, classified as a ‘biter’, lives in isolation at the Hauza Hotel; a lion cub, declawed, is offered as a photographic prop by a roadside zoo – a new fashion in Egypt; tigers at another roadside zoo: a hidden camera captures a chimpanzee being offered for sale at the national circus.
Heba’s primates. A close-up and a wide-angle view of the ape cages at the Safari Park; Karl Ammann attempts to interact with the same young chimp; a Safari Park; Karl Ammann attempts to interact with the same young chimp; a

The chimps who survived will stay there until we decide what will stay there until we decide what to do. These chimps are lucky to be living in these private zoos. You cannot compare Nigeria with Egypt; we conserve our wildlife. You know what they do in Cameroon, in Congo? They eat the ape meat. If we stop smugglers and ask them why they take this animal from the wild, they say, ‘We do it to save the animals’. So what can we say?’

Defensiveness regarding Egypt’s lackadaisical approach to a trade that is threatening the survival of Africa’s great apes is common among Egyptian authorities. El-Fellaly did not even file a report about the January 2005 case until Ammann and Mier placed pressure on the authorities and informed Interpol of what was happening. In fact, when confronted with their lack of enforcement, the authorities unanimously point the finger at Kenya Airways for allowing illegal shipments of wildlife on its planes in the first place.

The airline has been pegged by many as the worst for wildlife smuggling. Asked about its poor track record, George Faltaous, Kenya Airways area manager for North Africa, says it is up to the customs officials, and not the airline, to inspect luggage and check for the correct documentation. ‘Maybe Kenya Airways routes are convenient for the smugglers,’ he elaborates. ‘We are always the final part of their journey, so I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them were accepting bribes and letting smugglers go through.’

While there may be no easy solutions to those deep-rooted problems, Ammann and Mier’s vociferous anti-smuggling campaign, with Heba as its poster girl, is having an effect. In October and November last year, El-Fellaly met with Faltaous to discuss wildlife trafficking. He also sent letters to Sudan Airways and Egypt Air. Then he met with the Nigerian ambassador to Egypt (and suggested to Ammann and Mier that Heba could be extradited to Kenya or Nigeria if she had broken any laws there). And, finally, he sent Ammann’s documents to Maher Hafez, general director of Egypt’s Environmental Police, and asked him to investigate Heba and her family, as well as place their names on the passport and immigration watch list.

Although Ammann points out that this last action failed to include a vital Interpol ‘Blue Listing’, which requires police and immigration authorities worldwide to monitor suspicious parties, this collective effort is a step in the right direction. Both he and Mier just hope that action comes sooner rather than later, or there won’t be any apes to save.

Last March, I visited the surviving chimpanzees from the January 2005 case in their new home at the Sweetwaters Chimpanzee Sanctuary in Kenya, where they were nursed back to health. The newly named Ezard, Julia, Jane, Romeo and Victoria were swinging on ropes, making faces and running around like little kids. I would never have guessed that they had been on the brink of death just one year ago.

The survival of Africa’s great apes is common....