



# Endangered at the Border

## Animal Trafficking Closely Tied to Drug, Human Trafficking

By Matt Sussis

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Closely tied to the criminal networks involved in illegal immigration and drug smuggling across the U.S. border is illegal wildlife trafficking, a \$10 billion industry that harms vulnerable animal populations and brings various endangered species closer to extinction.

When Americans picture illegal animal smuggling, they may imagine black markets in distant, underdeveloped nations, but the reality hits closer to home. The United States is one of the top destinations for illegally trafficked animal goods, and every year thousands of illicit animal products are smuggled across both the northern and southern border and into various American ports.

In recent years, smugglers have increasingly imported not just animal parts such as rhinoceros horns, elephant ivory, and various leather products — but also live endangered animals, used sometimes as pets and sometimes for commercial purposes.

One cannot explain the full story of animal smuggling without looking at its close ties to illegal immigration and border security. Animal smugglers and human smugglers are often connected to the same cartels, travel the same routes, and require many of the same federal resources and personnel to combat. The prevalence of smuggled live animals originating in Latin America highlights the need for border enforcement solutions to jointly tackle animal and human trafficking.

In this report, we analyze over 30 years of government data on live endangered animal imports seized in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

### Key findings:

- There have been 4,968 seizures of endangered live animals by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) between 1982 and 2016.
- FWS has averaged 274 seizures per year over the last decade compared to under 100 per year from before 2008.
- One hundred and fifty-four different nations have exported endangered live animals to the United States, but by far the largest exporter is Indonesia (1,287), followed by Mexico (480), and Australia (263).
- The most commonly trafficked endangered animal seizures into the United States are coral (2,095), parrots (1,105), and lizards (466).
- Of the 4,968 live endangered animal seizures, 257 have been of animal species that face a threat of extinction (“Appendix I seizures”).
- Illegal immigration and animal smuggling are closely linked: Among the top-10 ports where animal products are seized, six are located in cities in southern border states and all five of the cities with the most illegal immigrants are included.

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# Introduction

High-profile animal seizures at the southern border have been repeatedly making headlines. In May 2018, for example, three aliens crossed the border into Texas with a black duffel bag, which they abandoned when they realized there were Border Patrol agents nearby. When agents searched the bag, they discovered an unconscious tiger cub. The tiger was turned over to a zoo in Brownsville, Texas, where it was nursed back to health. Many other smuggled animals have not been so lucky.

Due in part to the long history of sensitive animal seizures such as that one, the United States and 178 other nations signed on to a multilateral treaty entitled CITES, or the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, otherwise known as the Washington Convention, in 1975. At the time, the international community was particularly interested in combating the depletion of animal populations for luxury goods such as furs, but the Convention’s primary goals have since expanded to target a much broader range of products and species.<sup>2</sup>

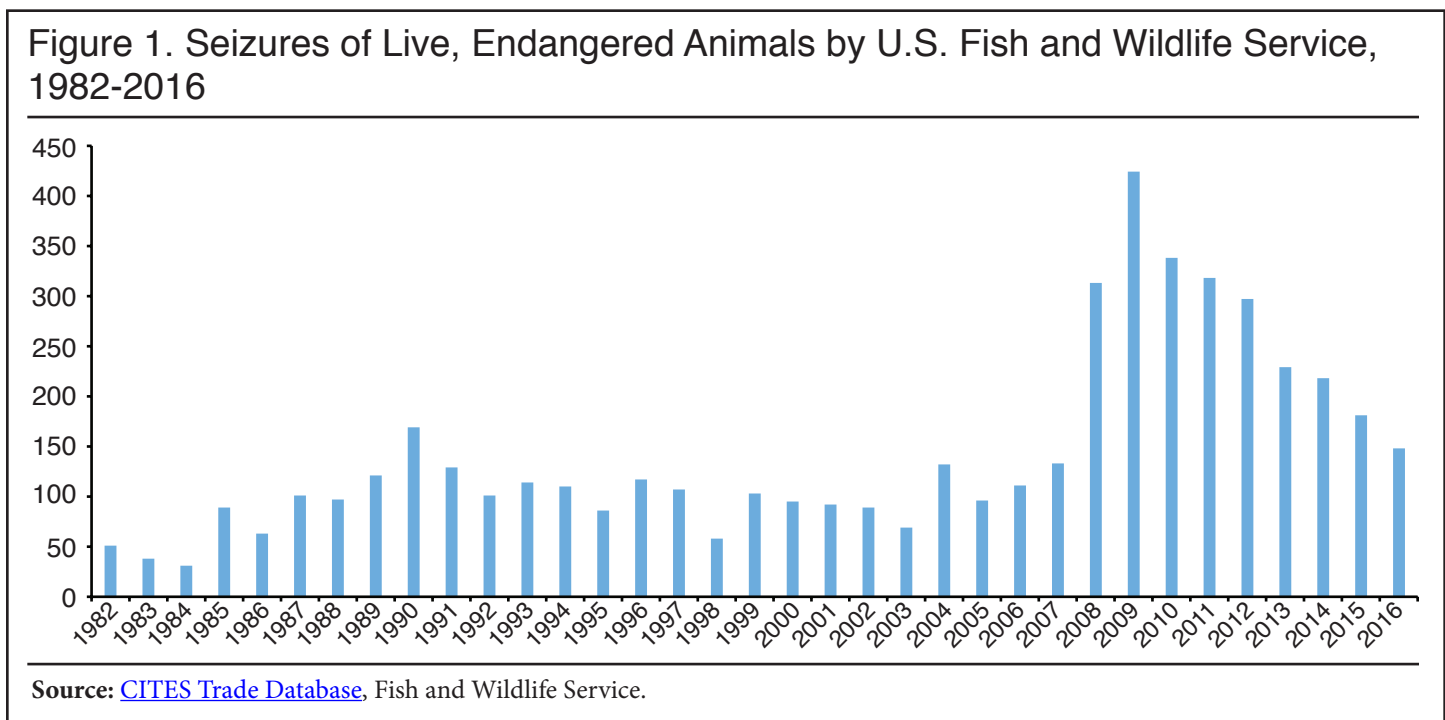
Under CITES, all signatory countries track the illegal trade of endangered animal products within and between their borders, and publicly report their findings. In the United States, the U.S. Fish & Wild Service, an agency within the Department of the Interior, is responsible for CITES implementation, reporting, and enforcement. FWS has wildlife inspection agents positioned at all major U.S. ports and has agents positioned across both the southern and northern borders who coordinate closely with Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Such cooperation highlights the hand-in-hand relationship that human and animal trafficking share.

Analysis of CITES/FWS seizure data provides insight into changing trends among live endangered animal trafficking into the United States. Our data begins in 1982, the first year for which full CITES seizure data is available online.<sup>3</sup>

## What’s Going on with Live Animal Seizures?

Seizures peaked sharply during the 2008-2009 economic crisis, and have steadily declined since. However, seizures remain significantly higher than the average of approximately 100 seizures per year in the several decades leading up to the economic crisis. Overall, there were 4,968 seizures between 1982 and 2016. The most recently released full-year data for seizures is for 2016, in which 148 live endangered animal seizures took place.

One hundred and fifty-four different nations have exported live, endangered animals to the United States over the tracked period, but the large majority come from a small number of nations. The top five exporters — Indonesia, Mexico, Australia, Tonga, and Canada — combined account for nearly half of all seized shipments. The top-10 trafficking nations combined account for 60 percent of the shipments. In other words, while the total number of shipments is quite high, this is a problem



concentrated in a relatively small number of places.

## Which Live Animals Are Being Smuggled?

Animals belonging to 386 different genera and 127 different families have been seized in the 1982-2016 period, but several species show up much more prominently in the data.

A whopping 42 percent of the live endangered animal species are of coral, particularly stony corals. Many of these coral shipments come from the Coral Triangle, a triangular area of tropical marine waters around Indonesia and Malaysia.

Overfishing, tourism, and habitat destruction have left many species in the Coral Triangle under threat, which are now tracked under CITES. Beyond coral, popular animal shipments include parrots, particularly the colorful, hook-billed species collectively known as “true parrots”, and lizards, particularly iguanas. While some birds and lizards are resold for commercial purposes, the majority are kept as pets.

CITES classifies all seized animal shipments as either Appendix I, II, or III. Appendix I is the most serious classification, and represents species that face an extinction risk. Appendix II represents species not necessarily threatened with extinction, but whose trade still must be controlled as protection. Appendix III represents species that are protected in at least one country, which has asked other CITES signatories for help regulating the trade.

**Table 1. Exporting Countries with the Most Seized Shipments of Live Endangered Animals into the U.S., 1982-2016**

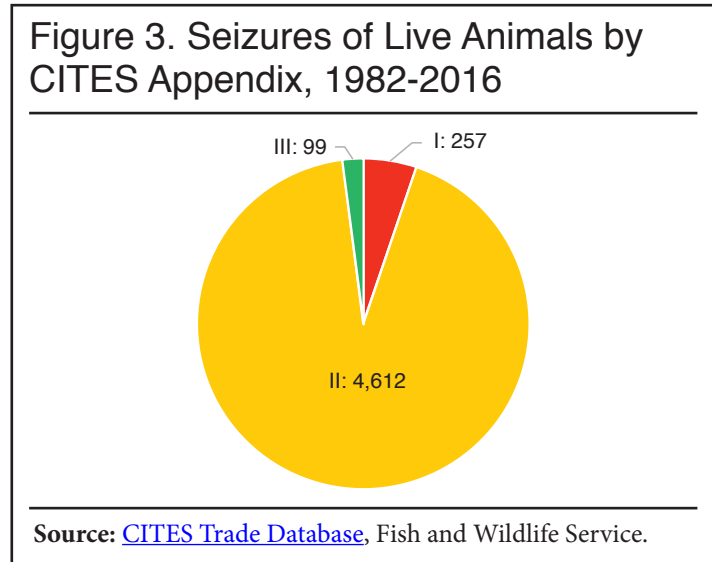
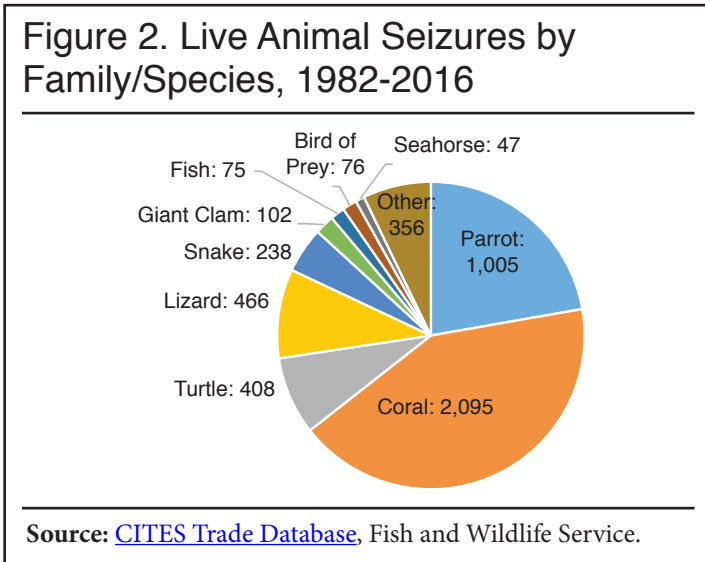
Country	Seized Shipments
Indonesia	1,287
Mexico	480
Australia	263
Tonga	224
Canada	190
Fiji	135
Madagascar	110
Solomon Islands	106
Guyana	97
Vietnam	94
Tanzania	86
Colombia	79
Honduras	70
Peru	66
Unknown	60
Togo	58
Ghana	55

**Source:** [CITES Trade Database](#), Fish and Wildlife Service.

**Table 2. Most Commonly Seized Live Animal Families, 1982-2016**

Animal	Family	Number
Parrot	Psittacidae	1,047
Coral	Faviidae	343
Coral	Mussidae	290
Turtle	Testudinidae	284
Coral	Caryophylliidae	277
Coral	Acroporidae	218
Coral	Fungiidae	183
Lizard	Chamaeleonidae	161
Coral	Dendrophylliidae	146
Coral	Poritidae	142
Coral	Pectiniidae	114
Snake	Pythonidae	108
Snake	Boidae	106
Giant Clam	Tridacnidae	102
Lizard	Varanidae	102
Lizard	Iguanidae	86
Coral	Scleractinia	84
Coral	Merulinidae	68
Coral	Pocilloporidae	60
Fish	Osteoglossidae	54
Bird of Prey	Accipitridae	52
Lizard	Gekkonidae	50
Coral	Trachyphylliidae	48
Seahorse	Syngnathidae	47
Parrot	Cacatuidae	46
Turtle	Geoemydidae	38
Coral	Oculinidae	38
Feline	Felidae	33
Coral	Tubiporidae	31
Monkey	Cercopithecidae	30
Other	Other	580

**Source:** [CITES Trade Database](#), Fish and Wildlife Service.



Of the 4,968 live endangered animal seizures, 257 have been Appendix I species — primarily freshwater fish and several species of parrots including scarlet macaws, Cuban amazons, and yellow-shouldered parrots.

## Coral Trafficking Has Driven the Changes in Live Animal Seizures

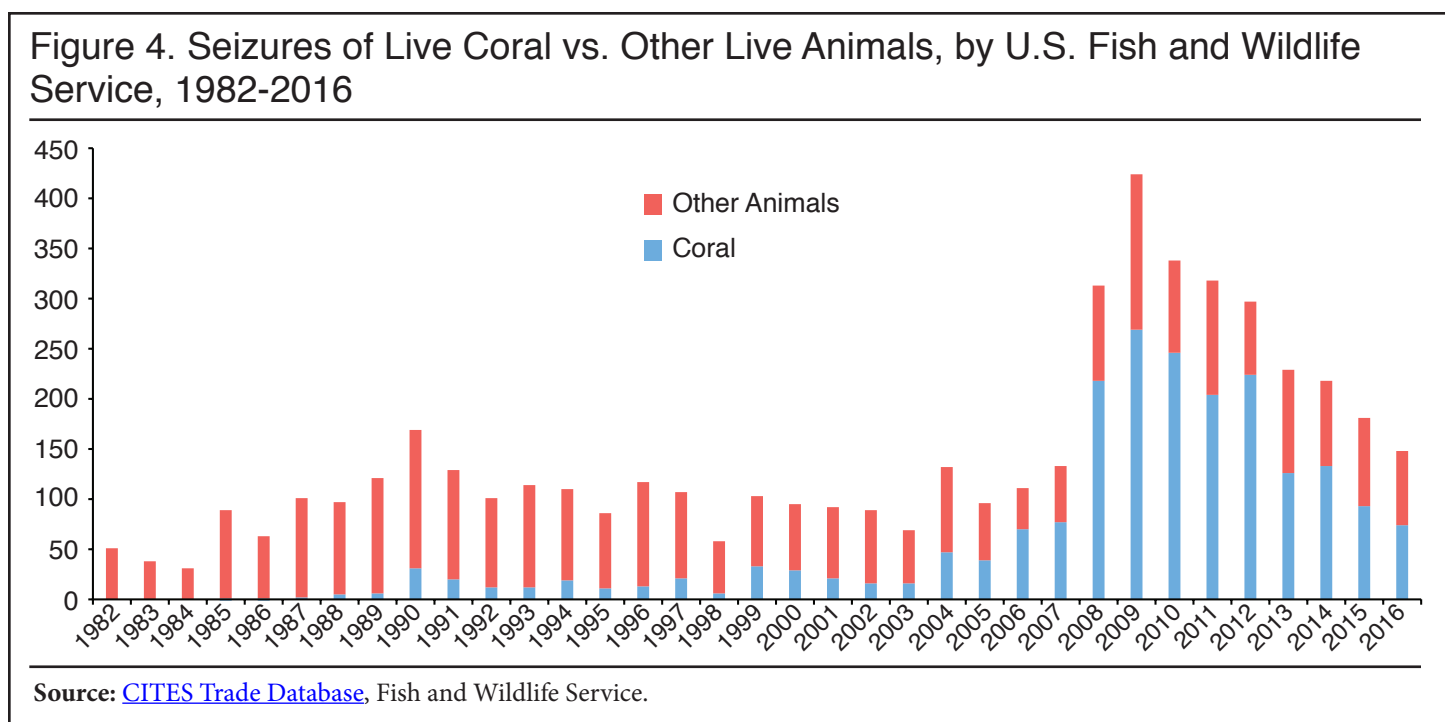
While seizures of various species of animals increased during the economic crisis of 2008-2009, the bulk of the increase was driven by coral seizures, especially from Indonesia, specifically, and Asia more broadly. All stony and blue coral species were added to CITES’ Appendix II in 1985 over rising concerns about the fragility of coral ecosystems. These groups of species account for nearly all U.S. coral seizures.

In the 1980s to early 2000s, less than one-quarter of all seized shipments were coral. But now, over half of all seizures are coral. However, while the proportion of coral remains high, the total number of coral shipments seized has declined since 2009.

The government has completed several high-profile crackdowns on coral traffickers in recent years that have likely contributed to the decrease in the illicit trade of CITES-protected coral. In 2013, a former jewelry company executive and Virgin Islands resident was handed \$1.1 million in fines and a short jail sentence for trafficking black coral via Taiwan. The same year, the co-owner of one of the largest live coral import businesses in the United States was fined over \$500,000 for mislabeling and smuggling CITES-listed stony corals into the country. Most recently, in 2017 a federal grand jury returned an indictment charging an individual with stripping CITES-protected corals from Vietnam and smuggling them into the United States via hidden air cargo shipments.<sup>4</sup>

Just as the increase in coral drove the total increase in seizures around 2008, so too did the decrease in coral seizures explain the overall decrease in live animal seizures in recent years. The number of non-coral seizures — parrots, giant clams, lizards, etc. — has remained quite consistent since the economic crisis, averaging approximately 100 per year. In 2016, it declined to 74. This is a far smaller change than we saw with coral — there were only 74 coral seizures in 2016 compared to a high of 269 in 2009.

Overall, fluctuations in coral seizures — which spiked during the economic crisis and declined after the federal government’s crackdowns — explain the majority of the year-to-year changes in the data, as other live animals have been smuggled at relatively consistent rates.



# Animal Smuggling Is Closely Tied to Illegal Immigration

Animal and human smugglers share much in common. They travel many of the same routes, they are combated by many of the same government agencies and resources, and in many cases, they are part of the same criminal groups.

In February 2017, President Trump signed an executive order entitled “Enforcing Federal Law with respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking”.<sup>5</sup> The order redirected more resources to the identification of transnational criminal networks. In the order, the president noted that the same criminal networks are often jointly responsible for “the illegal smuggling and trafficking of humans, drugs or other substances, wildlife, and weapons.”

In fact, over one-quarter of all animal products and live animals smuggled into the United States come from Latin America, making the southern border a hot-spot for wildlife seizures. According to FWS, some of the biggest entry points include San Diego, El Paso, and Nogales, Ariz. It is no coincidence that these cities are also hot-spots for illegal immigration.

Both human and animal smugglers often enter the country via Mexico. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), of the top-10 U.S. ports for seized wildlife shipments between 2007 and 2016, six are cities in southern border states (Los Angeles, San Francisco, El Paso, Dallas, Houston, and Miami). Further, all five of the metro areas with the largest illegal immigrant populations — New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, and Miami — are among the top ports for wildlife seizures. While this is of course also due to population size, the fact remains that wildlife and human smuggling occurs in many of the same major urban areas.

Additionally, one of the ways in which cartels smuggle drugs across the border is by using animals. While FWS/CITES data does not provide information on how many of the animals seized were being used as drug mules, there have been several high-profile cases.

Perhaps the highest-profile case yet came this spring, when a Spanish veterinarian was charged with collaborating with a Colombian drug cartel to surgically place packets of heroin inside puppies. The drugs were shipped from Colombia to his clinic in Spain, and then from Spain to the United States, with each puppy holding roughly one pound of heroin in its belly. The veterinarian was charged after evading American authorities for over a decade. The authorities ultimately arrested 21 people across Colombia and the United States, and seized \$2 million of heroin.<sup>6</sup>

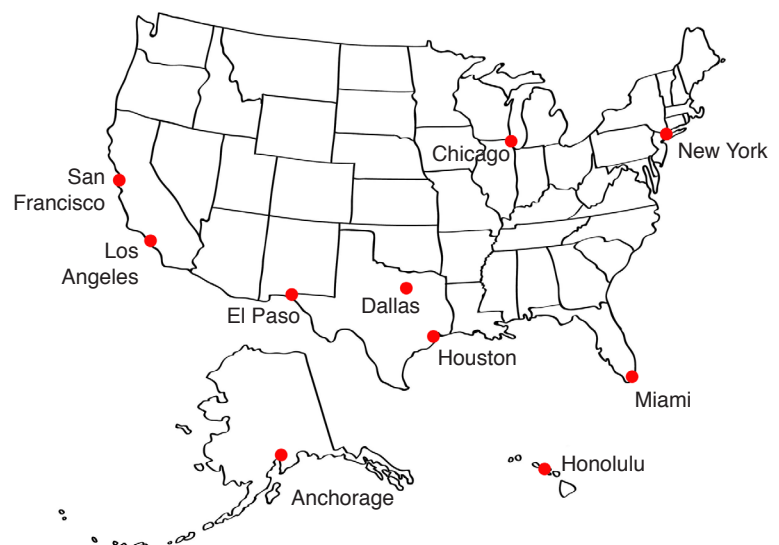
Overall, such cases highlight the inseparable connection behind animal smuggling and other forms of trafficking, from illegal aliens to drugs.

**Table 3. Latin American Countries Account for 25 Percent of Live Animals Seized in the U.S.**

Country	Number	Pct. of Total
Mexico	480	9.7%
Guyana	97	2.0%
Colombia	79	1.6%
Honduras	70	1.4%
Peru	66	1.3%
Nicaragua	51	1.0%
Suriname	41	0.8%
Argentina	40	0.8%
Brazil	37	0.7%
El Salvador	36	0.7%
Venezuela	35	0.7%
Bolivia	31	0.6%
Panama	31	0.6%
Ecuador	26	0.5%
Dominican Republic	23	0.5%
Other Latin America	108	2.2%
<b>Total Latin America</b>	<b>1,251</b>	<b>25.2%</b>

Source: [CITES Trade Database](#), Fish and Wildlife Service.

**Figure 5. Six of the Top-10 Ports for Live Animal Seizures Are in Southern Border States**



Source: [CITES Trade Database](#), Fish and Wildlife Service.

## Conclusion

Animal trafficking highlights serious vulnerabilities at America's ports, but the issue is not unsolvable, and some steps have already been taken.

The biggest single-year decrease in live animal seizures was in 2013, when the number of coral seizures fell by nearly 100 from the previous year. It's almost certainly not a coincidence that this was the same year that the Fish and Wildlife Service concluded several of its most high-profile crackdowns on smugglers of CITES-protected coral.

Further, the government's passage of the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt (END) Wildlife Trafficking Act in 2016 elevated animal trafficking to the same level of offense as trafficking in drugs or weapons. The 2017 CITES data will likely reveal the degree to which the act was effective.

The number of non-coral live animal seizures has declined since 2009, but remains well above pre-recession levels. Publicizing crackdowns with serious fines on traffickers of other CITES-protected animals such as true parrots or turtles might have a similar deterrent effect, and help return overall live seizures to pre-2008 levels.

While the legislation mentioned above will likely have an impact, wildlife trafficking legislation at the local and state levels are still lacking. Most border states do not yet have multi-species legislation on the books against animal smuggling. When debating such solutions, lawmakers ought to consider the wide-ranging impact of animal smuggling on everything from vulnerable species populations to international criminal organizations to illegal immigration.

More broadly, they should recognize that because illegal immigration and animal smuggling are inextricably linked, a secure border that reduces illegal immigration would necessarily reduce wildlife trafficking as well.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The CITES Trade Database can be found [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Willem Wijnstekers, *The Evolution of CITES, 9th Edition*, International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The first year of accessible CITES data is for 1979, but it is highly incomplete and contains only a few entries; 1982 is the first year with complete data across a range of species.

<sup>4</sup> [“Grand Jury Issues Indictments Alleging Three Schemes to Smuggle Protected Coral Species In and Out of the United States”](#), Department of Justice press release, September 26, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> [“Enforcing Federal Law with respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking”](#), Executive Order, February 9, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Lia Eustachewich, [“Over \\$1 million in heroin found stashed with dog in crate”](#), *New York Post*, March 27, 2017.