



06 MAY, 2025

## A REPTILIAN RORT

Daily Telegraph, Sydney



Asian criminals are getting reptile licences under fake names to keep blue tongue lizards (left and centre) and shingleback lizards (right) which can fetch thousands of dollars on the black market.

### SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

Mark Morri



Asian crime gangs are acquiring NSW reptile licences in fake names to buy snakes and lizards that are then smuggled out of the country, netting them millions of dollars on the black market.

In order to show how easily the licences can be obtained, The Daily Telegraph went online and secured a two-year reptile keeper's licence in the name of serial killer Ivan Milat with the address given as the Bondi Icebergs recently.

It cost only \$113 paid to the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy and Environment and Water. The approved licence came back in minutes.

"Mr Ivan Milat ... Congratulations! Your application for a Native Animal Keepers licence for the following classes has been approved," an email read.

The next day after being told how easily the Telegraph was able to obtain a licence without having to provide any proof of identification, the department cancelled the licence.

An email headed "Notice of Cancellation" was sent to the Telegraph that read: "Ivan Milat, 1 Notts Avenue Bondi Beach, NSW.

"It has come to my attention that the application did alleg-

edly contain information that was false or misleading in a material particular, including the name and address of the applicant," the email read.

The department said doing so was an offence that carries a penalty of \$330,000 for an individual and \$1,650,000 for a corporation.

It was signed off by a National Parks and Wildlife executive but it failed to acknowledge the only reason the department knew the information was false was because the Telegraph had told them.

Questions about how many fake licences have been detected or the number of people prosecuted have not been answered by the department.

"This has been going on for years all over the country, but NSW is the slackest and the hub of most of the illegal reptile trade in Australia," said a former NSW Parks and Wildlife officer.

"Asian crime gangs have stepped into this space and are making massive amounts of money."

For example, people on student or tourist visas from Asia acquire a licence online and then post the

reptiles to Hong Kong, with the common blue tongue lizard fetching more than \$1500 or up to \$5000.

Shinglebacks, which retail for around \$500 to \$600, can fetch well over \$10,000 in the US.

Australia's leading expert on wildlife crime, Adelaide University professor Phil Cassey, has testified in several court cases against reptile smugglers.

He said reptiles being smuggled out of Australia was a growing problem.

"We are seeing an increase in illegal smuggling of reptiles from Australia to Hong Kong, which is really only a transit point for places such as Europe and America," Prof Cassey said.

"A reptile bought here can regularly get 10 times its value on the black market overseas - and often more."

Other experts have told the Telegraph that some reptiles,

particularly those with exotic colourings, can get close to 30 times their retail value on the black market.

"There are some people operating small syndicates, but there is also an organised crime element as well, illegal wildlife smuggling ranks only behind



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drugs, weapons and human trafficking, which is an indication how profitable it can be,” Prof Cassey said.

NSW Police’s Raptor Unit boss, Detective Superintendent Andrew Koutsoufis, said his squad are often called into work with National Parks and Wildlife.

“It is not uncommon for the criminal element that we target to be involved in the illegal trafficking of exotic animals,” he said.

“Criminals are drawn to big snakes and reptiles because they represent two things they value most: power and money.

“The animals themselves are a show of power, while the illegal trade is lucrative.”

Australian Herpetological Society president Craig Williams said the whole licensing system needs to be scrapped.

“All it does is make money for National Parks and Wildlife and serves no purpose, you don’t need a licence for a budgie and many of those being traded will have just been picked up in the wild anyway,” he said.

From June 2023 to January this year, arrests across the country for smuggling have tripled and parcel detections have increased by more than 500 per cent.

Man Lung Ma, 37, was arrested in a Hurstville hotel last year and charged with trying to mail \$360,000 of lizards to Hong Kong from

24 different post offices all over Australia.

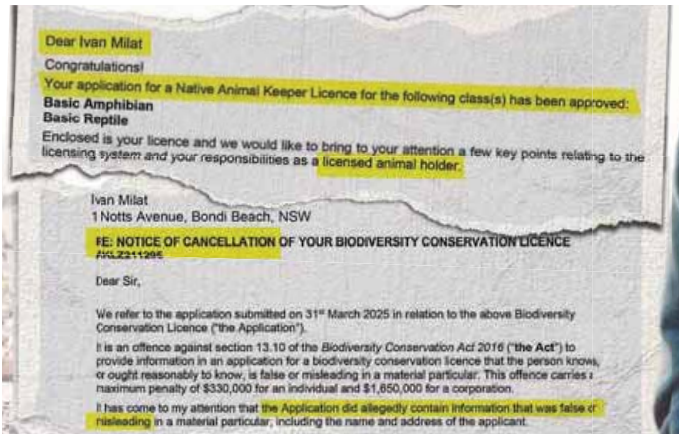
He had 99 reptiles including blue tongue lizards, shinglebacks, geckos, monitors and skinks.

They were stuffed in socks and then put in plastic containers mixed in with toys, clothes and food packages.

Ma was recruited while driving an Uber in Hong Kong and paid \$300 per reptile using a permit in another person’s name to buy lizards in NSW.

The 99 animals would have netted \$364,417, with three shinglebacks worth \$20,000 alone. He was sentenced to three and a half years jail.

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The email addressed to dead serial killer Ivan Milat (right)



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