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Orangutans in Odisha Point to the Rise of Illegal Primate Trade in India

By: Arathi Menon

The illegal wildlife trade in India is growing with primates emerging as significant commodities in this market. The complex and often violent processes involved in the trafficking of orangutans and gibbons highlight the urgent need for more effective conservation strategies and legal frameworks.

Recently, pictures and videos of five orangutan babies in a forest in Odisha, thousands of miles from their real home, were plastered across many screens. As authorities investigate the antecedents of the critically endangered animals and discuss their future, one thing is becoming increasingly clear: international wildlife trafficking is widening its reach, and India is emerging as a destination.

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Keeping exotic animals and birds as pets, is not new in India. Non-native parrots have long dominated the scene. But keeping them legally involves navigating a complex set of legal procedures.

The repertoire of species illegally reaching Indian shores, however, has expanded significantly in recent years.

Primates are the new parrots. Gibbons, lemurs, marmosets and macaques, once difficult to find outside their native ranges, are increasingly turning up in seizures linked to the illegal pet trade.

Primates are a group of mammals that includes humans, apes, monkeys, lemurs and lorises, generally characterised by grasping hands and feet, forward-facing eyes and relatively large brains.

The seizure of an orangutan from an apartment bathroom in Mumbai in 2024, a Tamil actor's pet Lar gibbon, and the controversy over two lemurs at Vantara highlight the emerging trade.

Gibbons, the most visible part of the trade

A 2026 global assessment of wild mammals kept as pets identified 702 mammal species worldwide, including 280 non-human primates. Primates were the largest order represented, accounting for almost 40% of the mammal species recorded as pets.

In 2022, nearly 4,000 exotic animals were seized in India across 56 incidents, according to a 2023 TRAFFIC analysis of media reports. More than 100 of these animals were primates, including orangutans, chimpanzees, siamangs, marmosets, tamarins and capuchins. Seizures occurred at airports, air-cargo stations, railway stations, international post offices and near international borders.

Gibbons, protected under CITES Appendix I alongside great apes, appear to be a prominent part of the trade. In 2025, Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru airports reported multiple gibbon seizures, involving species such as agile, eastern grey, silvery, Bornean white-bearded and white-cheeked gibbons, as well as siamangs.



Conservationists are raising concern around the alarming influx of gibbons into the country, primarily by air from Thailand and Malaysia, as noted in a recent [report](#) on India's exotic pet trade by Humane World for Animals (HWA).

"That does not necessarily mean they originate there. We do not know where they were sourced from before entering those countries," shares Sumanth Bindhumadhav, the India director of HWA who co-authored the report, indicating that the two countries could also be transit countries in the trade route.

A [2025 TRAFFIC report](#) identified India and Malaysia as key links in the illegal gibbon trade chain, with gibbons moving from Malaysia to India.

Several experts say primates in the trade are mostly wild-caught, which means they were taken from their natural habitat. There are no known legal, commercial orangutan or gibbon breeding facilities in the world so even if they are claimed to be captive-bred, it would not be under legal conditions.

The violent transport of an infant

There are 20 recognised species of gibbon and all are at extreme risk of disappearing from the wild. They are [all are listed as threatened](#) with extinction on the IUCN Red List: five are critically endangered, 14 endangered and one vulnerable. All three recognised orangutan species, Sumatran, Bornean and Tapanuli, are [critically endangered](#), with only a few thousand remaining in the wild.

|| The increasing trade of orangutans and gibbons can have lasting consequences for their populations and habitats.
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The five orangutans that were recently found in an Odisha forest are believed to be younger than a year and are currently housed at Odisha's Nandankanan Zoological Park. How they ended up in an Indian forest, miles away from their native habitats in Sumatra and Borneo, remains under investigation, with [authorities probing](#) a possible international smuggling network.

Irrespective of how these infants were obtained, their separation from their mothers raises serious welfare concerns. A [2009 TRAFFIC report](#) on gibbon and orangutan trade in Sumatra notes that obtaining a young orangutan for the pet trade requires killing its mother.

"It is difficult to capture a baby gibbon or orangutan because mothers do not simply abandon their young and flee. So, in order to obtain a baby, mothers are killed. And sometimes, in the process, even the babies are injured," says Uttara Mendiratta, a conservation researcher working on illegal wildlife hunting and trade. "Separation from the mother at such a young age is extremely stressful for an infant primate."

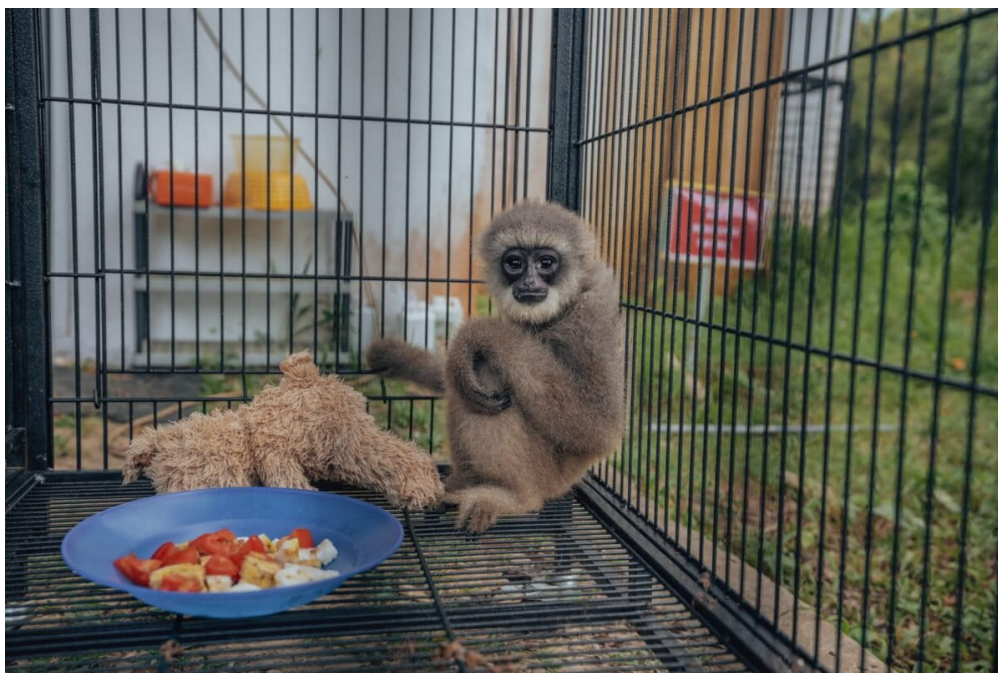
The report notes that the pet trade targets infant and juvenile orangutans that remain highly dependent on their mothers. "When the mother is shot, the infant is often killed in the process as well, falling from the trees, still clinging onto its dying mother," the report says.

The violence and ensuing trauma can continue during transport, with cramped and unsuitable conditions severely compromising the welfare of the animals. Many of them die in transit.

The cost of separation

Separation from the mother can be highly traumatic for young primates. "Research describes intense phases of agitation. The animals may run around, cry, scream and show other forms of distress following separation," says ecology and animal behaviour expert Mewa Singh. Studies of [pigtail and bonnet macaques](#) and [rhesus macaques](#) have documented heightened stress following separation, marked by agitation and depression.

Singh also points to anaclitic depression in infants as a coping mechanism. "When they are stressed, two things can occur. One, they stop eating. They also expend a lot of energy crying, screaming, running around and agitation. That energy expenditure can even cost them their lives. So anaclitic depression can be understood as an adaptive response to severe stress," he explains.



Transportation adds another layer of stress. In one [2025 case](#), nine young primates were intercepted at Mumbai airport after being smuggled from Malaysia in a suitcase. "Eight died from starvation, suffocation, dehydration and captivity stress; the surviving pigtail macaque was critical, dehydrated and had a pellet lodged in its head," says advocate and wildlife conservationist Pawan Sharma of RAWW, a non-profit for wildlife rescue and conservation.

The loss of breeding adults and juveniles can have long-term consequences for slow-reproducing species. The [2009 TRAFFIC report](#) notes that orangutans mature slowly: females have their first infant at 12-15 years, with an interbirth interval of about eight years, while males may breed at 15-20 years. An [18-year study](#) found wild white-handed gibbons first reproduced at about 11 years, with an average interbirth interval of 3.5 years.

The money and the trade route

"There has always been a desire (among humans) to own something different from what other people have," says Sharma. Social media can amplify this desire while making exotic animals easier to acquire. "Wildlife trafficking is one of the world's major illegal trades and people involved in it may also be involved in other forms of illegal trade, such as narcotics, arms or hawala (illegal cash transfer). For someone looking for easy, fast or unaccounted money, the commodity does not necessarily matter," he adds.

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The increasing trade of orangutans and gibbons can have lasting consequences for their populations and habitats. Indonesia lost nearly 20% of its [Sumatran orangutans](#) over 15 years, according to one estimate.

Sinan Serhadli, a Kuala Lumpur-based conservation scientist and adviser to the Yayasan Orangutan Sumatera Lestari-Orangutan Information Centre (YOSL-OIC), speculates that the five orangutans found in Odisha could have been smuggled from northern Sumatra via the Andaman Islands. Sharma agrees that sea routes are a major concern as checking may not be as efficient.

Serhadli also identifies the UAE as an ape-trafficking hub, where, he says, animals may be "laundered" and exported to India. He identifies Thailand as a potential transit route for orangutans from Sumatra.

Jose Louise, CEO of Wildlife Trust of India, who has tracked wildlife trade for decades, identifies the India-Myanmar border as an important trafficking route, along with the India-Bangladesh border. Animals also enter by air, he says, although increased checks by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence and Customs have made airports more difficult for smugglers.

While primates may be sought as exotic pets for their human-like qualities, their complex cognitive and social needs are difficult to meet in household settings, particularly for apes, says the [Humane World for Animals report](#).

The report warns that trauma and early social deprivation can contribute to behavioural problems that intensify with sexual maturity, when aggression and territorial behaviour may increase. It documents cases of captive chimpanzees and macaques attacking owners in the U.S., sometimes causing serious injuries or death.

Such challenges also lead to pet owners abandoning the animals. A [rare siamang gibbon](#) found balancing on cables on the streets of Tiruvottiyur, Chennai, left authorities questioning how it got there, although abandonment was neither confirmed nor ruled out.

What happens after the seizure

"When exotic animals arrive at an airport such as Bengaluru and are detected, the preferred option, and what is generally considered best practice, is to repatriate them to the country they came from," says Bindumadhav.

Indonesia has [sought the repatriation](#) of the five baby orangutans found in India, saying preliminary assessment suggests they may have originated in Sumatra, pending genetic identification. Indian authorities, however, are delaying DNA testing, citing the infants' [delicate health](#).

"There are a lot of discussions happening between the two governments. But even if they turn out to be Bornean rather than Sumatran orangutans, they should still go to Indonesia because all three orangutan subspecies are found in Indonesia," says Serhadli.

Mongabay-India contacted WCCB officials for an update but received no response. Meanwhile, the Odisha government has [requested permission](#) from the Central Zoo Authority to permanently keep the five orangutans at Nandankanan Zoological Park.



Under [CITES repatriation guidelines](#), countries have three options for disposing of live confiscated animals: returning them to the state of export, placing them in an appropriate captive facility, or returning them to the wild where appropriate.

Bindumadhav says CITES recommends consultation with the state of export before a decision is taken on confiscated animals. "We don't yet know the state of export or the country of origin. Our view is that repatriation should be explored first in the interest of these animals. The broader concern is to ensure there is no precedent set for trafficking seizures becoming a route to acquisition for any facility."

Mendiratta notes: "CITES repatriation guidelines are not binding so there is technically no 'law' that says India has to repatriate. However, it would be the correct conservation decision and the morally correct thing for India to do."

Going home isn't going wild immediately

Indonesia has a strong track record of orangutan rehabilitation, says Serhadli. "A wild orangutan mother is obviously better than a surrogate, but surrogate care followed by rehabilitation has been done successfully in the past. So there is a good chance that these animals could eventually be integrated into the wild," he says.

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Repatriation, however, does not mean putting the orangutans back into the wild in Sumatra or Borneo. It involves medical assessments, skill development at forest schools and, eventually, a carefully managed release.

Indonesia has an established network of rehabilitation facilities. The animals are also sent to [forest schools](#), where they learn skills they would normally acquire from their mothers, including climbing, finding and processing food, building nests and navigating the forest.

"If they are unreleasable, for example because of a disease, there are long-term care centres and orangutan havens in Indonesia," says Serhadli. Some facilities allow them to live in more natural environments, including on islands. He acknowledges that recovery from stress due to maternal separation and transportation can take time, but says young orangutans raised alongside others of a similar age tend to integrate and improve.

"An (exotic) animal is just another commodity for a trader. It is purchased for one price and sold for another. That is the business," says Louise. The animal, he adds, may have been taken from the wild, subjected to violence and endured stressful transportation before eventually reaching someone's home. "No amount of compassion from owners can erase the suffering involved," he says.

Arathi Menon is an Editor with over two decades of experience in journalism. She reports on climate change, wildlife, biodiversity, indigenous communities, among others.

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