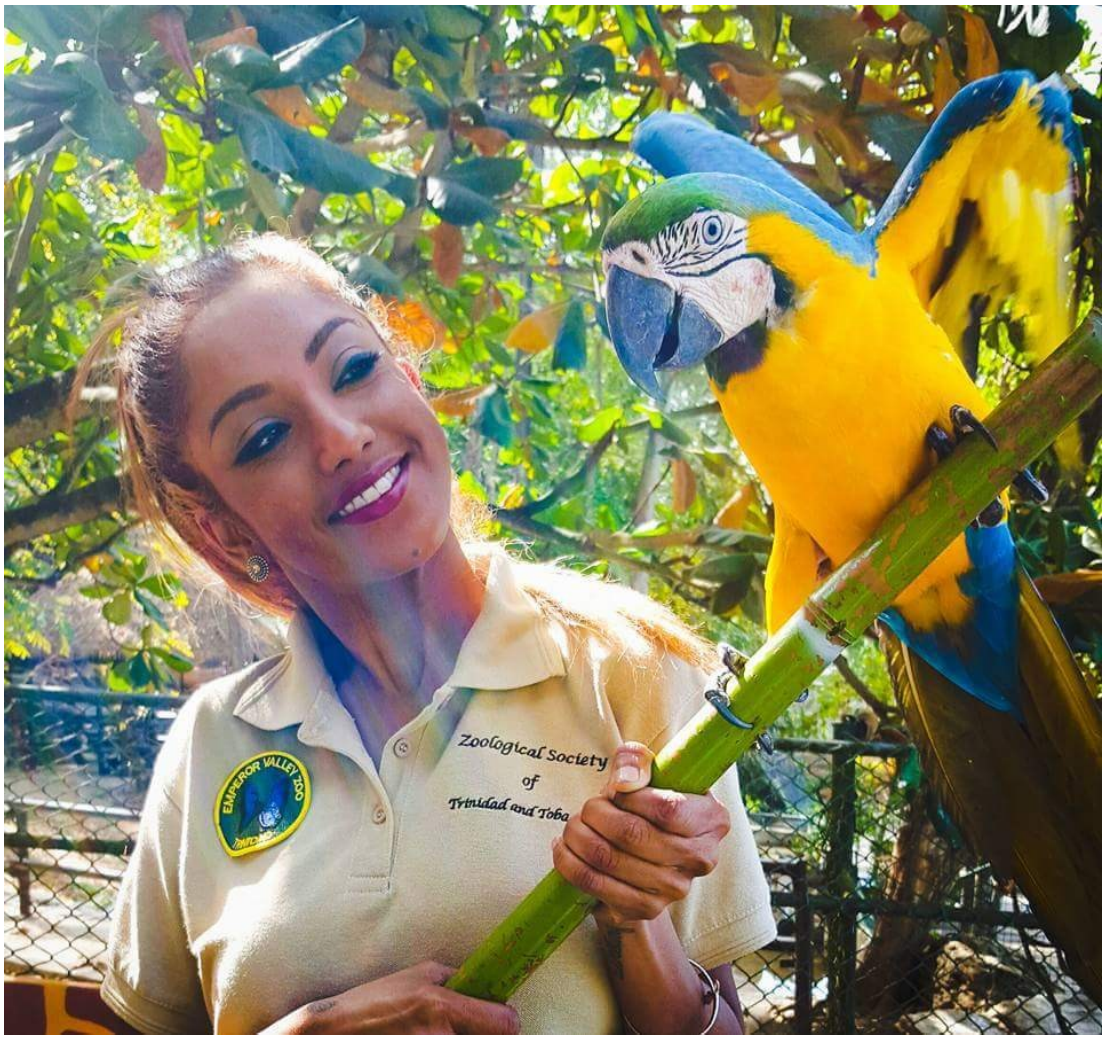
# A Caribbean-Led Effort to Stop Wildlife Smuggling Takes Flight




Sharleen Khan holding a blue and gold macaw at the Emperor Valley Zoo in Trinidad.
This macaw is the zoo's Animal Ambassador and is part of the zoo's education program where the macaw is used to raise awareness of wildlife conservation, specifically conservation of this species in the wild. *Photo courtesy of Emperor Valley Zoo.*

*This article was written by Kareena Anderson, Laura Baboolal, Scott Johnson, and Sharleen Khan, who are participants in the Conservation Leadership in the Caribbean Program (CLiC), a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service supported program.*

When people hear the word "Caribbean" they usually think of palm trees, sunny, clear skies, umbrella drinks, and delicious foods. Although it's true that the Caribbean offers a lot in terms of the perfect getaway from the colder northern climate and the thrill of a new exotic cultural experience, it also boasts other amazing attributes. In terms of wildlife, the Caribbean is a biodiversity hotspot, with thousands of species of plants and animals.

Every year, millions of people travel to the Caribbean to revel in the warm tropical sun, cool turquoise blue water, and white (or in some places like parts of the

Bahamas, pink) beaches. They also come to enjoy the wildlife, such as the over 170 endemic birds found in the Caribbean, swimming with sharks, interacting with endemic rock iguanas, and even enjoying the opportunity to watch the nesting sea turtles on the beaches! Unfortunately, there are many people who are interested in more than just observing the animals. They desire to take them and smuggle them out of the Caribbean.

Because of its rich biodiversity, the Caribbean, like many other places on earth is a prime location where smuggling occurs. For example, in 2001, a medical doctor was visiting an island in The Bahamas and tried to smuggle three Bahamian boas out of the country. The doctor was caught and sentenced.

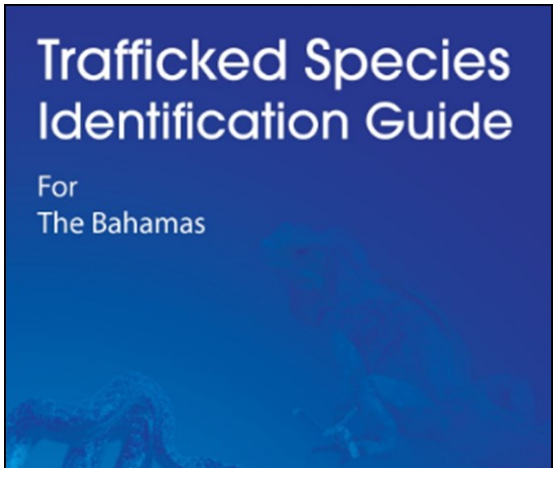
In Trinidad and Tobago, exotic birds from South America make up the majority of animals smuggled into the country. Birds such as seed finches and Blue and Gold Macaws are highly prized birds, with seed finches being used in songbird competitions. On the island of Hispaniola, Hispaniola Parrots have been captured and sold in the wildlife trade and are illegally kept as pets. In The Bahamas, 13 critically endangered Bahamian Rock Iguanas were smuggled out of the country by two Romanian women in 2014. They were caught and arrested at the Heathrow Airport in London and the iguanas were eventually repatriated back to The Bahamas and later released in a Bahamian National Park. Sadly, four iguanas died during the whole ordeal.

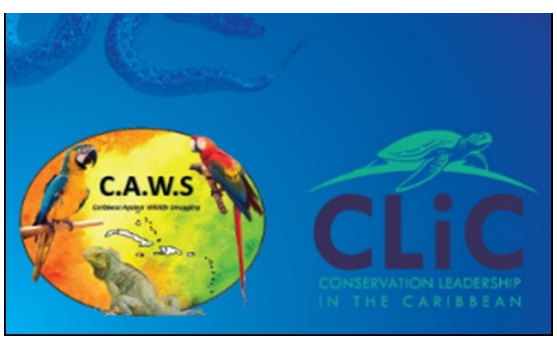
Photo of a Bahamian Rock Iguana, the same kind that was smuggled out of The Bahamas in 2014.
The smugglers were caught and the animals were later released in a National Park in The Bahamas. *Photo courtesy of Scott Johnson.*

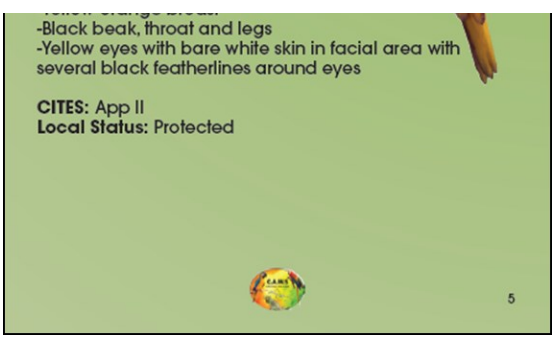
Law enforcement is an extremely important tool in the battle against wildlife smuggling. Unfortunately, in the Caribbean, wildlife crimes are not a major priority for many countries even though wildlife smuggling is a multibillion dollar black market industry and believed to be one of the largest illegal activities in the world, following drugs, arms, and human trafficking. Fortunately, some organizations and countries in the Caribbean are working with international partners to counteract this problem (read more). One such program is the Conservation Leadership in The Caribbean program (CLiC), which we are part of.

The CLiC program is a newly established conservation training fellowship program that provides young conservation professionals with leadership development training and an in-depth opportunity to learn from renowned Caribbean conservation leaders. Seventeen participants from 13 countries across the Caribbean have participated over the past year and a half in the first cohort, and have divided into five groups to work on conservation projects.

One of the topics is wildlife smuggling / trafficking. Participants from The Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago have taken on the task of working on this very challenging and complex topic in their respective countries. As the CLiC Wildlife Trafficking project group, we are working towards a vision of a wildlife trafficked-free Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago. One of the key tools we have developed are two Trafficked Species Identification Guides to assist enforcement agencies in the identification of protected species.





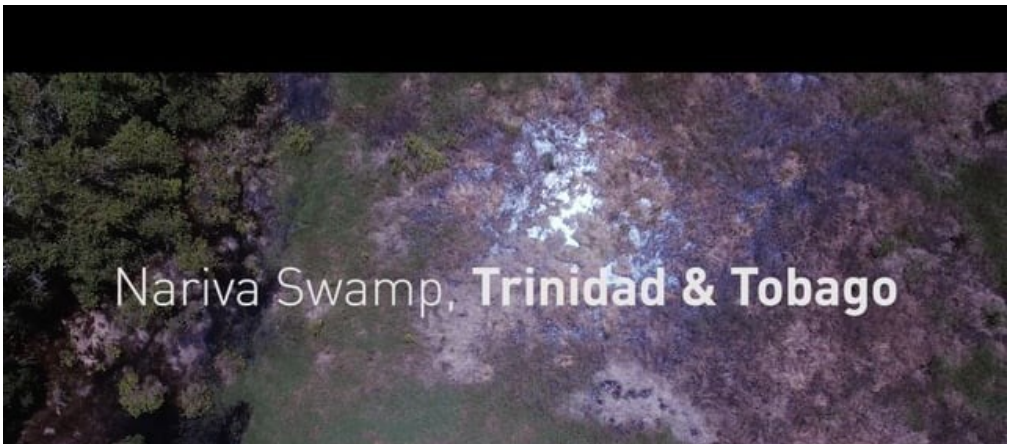




An example of the information contained within the Trafficked Species Identification Guides. **Credit:** Levi Novey / USFWS

Scott Johnson, Science Officer at The Bahamas National Trust (BNT) and CLiC Wildlife Trafficking group member has been working with several enforcement agencies in The Bahamas, educating them about Bahamian wildlife and why smuggling is such a threat to The Bahamas. He has led presentations and activities to help train Bahamian enforcers to identify terrestrial Bahamian animals that have been or have the potential to be smuggled out of The Bahamas.

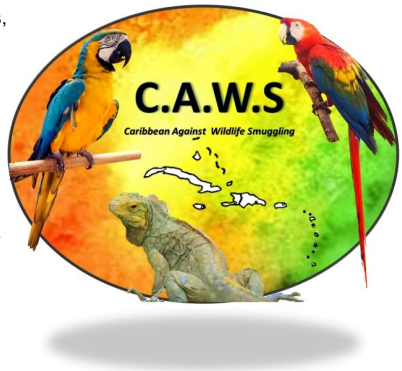
Scott Johnson, CLiC “Team Traffic” member and BNT Science Officer speaks to Bahamian and Turks and Caicos Islands enforcers on wildlife smuggling during a workshop. *Photo courtesy of Scott Johnson.*

In Trinidad and Tobago, CLiC Wildlife Trafficking group members Kareena Anderson, Laura Baboolal, and Sharleen Khan have been working towards the group’s vision and goals. Recently, the team presented and held a training session with the government in Trinidad and Tobago where the Trafficked Species Identification Guide was officially presented to Mr. Romano Macfarlane, who is the current Head of Wildlife Section in Trinidad and Tobago and who also has been very supportive of the project. The presentations included the issues faced due to wildlife trafficking and the issue of not being able to identify species.



Laura Baboolal, a CliC Fellow working in Trinidad, also recently took part in a short film that was produced by JetBlue Airways, the U.S. Wildlife Trafficking Alliance, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to combat wildlife trafficking. Her segment (shown above) features blue and gold macaws. JetBlue is currently showing the full film on its flights. Learn more.

The Caribbean is an amazing region, teeming with thousands of one-of-a-kind species. Our unique geographic histories, wildlife, and culture make this region one of the most exciting places on earth. However, as the demand for exotic animals continues to increase, our Caribbean wildlife faces an uncertain future. Many persons from around the world want to purchase wildlife products for fashion, pets, and novel foods. Some wealthy buyers even pay persons to act as "mules", using them to smuggle our wildlife out of the region. As Team Wildlife Trafficking, we believe in protecting our precious wildlife and are working with enforcement agencies to thwart the advances of wildlife smuggling in the Caribbean.




We have also created a Facebook page called CAWS - Caribbean Against Wildlife Smuggling to help raise awareness about the dangers of smuggling and how it negatively affects wildlife in the Caribbean and around the world. You can like and follow us on Facebook for more information.

We are asking visitors — please do not purchase items such as coral, products made from turtle shells, feathers, or any exotic animal product, as you may be a conspirator helping to fuel the illegal wild animal market (learn more). Just enjoy the beauty of the animals in their natural habitat to ensure them for future generations. If everyone puts in a concerted effort to learn about wildlife and wildlife smuggling, our region will be one step closer towards eradicating this illegal activity once and for all.

CLiC Team Traffic group members (Left to right: Scott Johnson, Kareena Anderson, Kelvin Alie- Team Traffic Advisor, Sharleen Khan and Laura Baboolal). *Photo courtesy of Conservation Leadership in the Caribbean Program.*