

NOTES and INFORMATION

THE ONLINE TRADE OF FALSE GHARIAL *Tomistoma schlegelii* (Müller, 1838) (GAVIALIDAE) IN THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT – The False Gharial *Tomistoma schlegelii* (Müller, 1838) (Gavialidae) is an Endangered crocodilian native to Southeast Asia and listed in the CITES Appendix I. Despite legal protection across its range and prohibition on international trade of wild caught individuals, habitat destruction and illegal trade continue to pose a threat to its survival. This study documents the presence of the False Gharial in the Philippine pet trade through systematic online trade monitoring, review of wildlife seizure records, and collation of open-source news articles. From January to December 2024, we surveyed 20 Facebook wildlife trade groups specializing in the trade of reptiles. We documented 15 juvenile False Gharials offered for sale by four traders, mostly located in the National Capital Region. Wildlife traders offered one to three individuals each, while one trader offered nine. Two traders claimed to possess legal permits. Review of wildlife seizure records from 2020–2024 revealed eight seizure incidents involving crocodilians, including one case of False Gharial seizure in a police operation in June 2024. No legal importations of the species into the Philippines have been recorded in the CITES Trade Database since the species was listed in Appendix I in 1975. The availability of several juveniles strongly suggests recent smuggling and claims of legal trade permits warrant scrutiny. This study confirms the continued trade of *T. schlegelii* in the Philippines and highlights the need for continuous monitoring, verification of permits, and stricter enforcement of the R.A. No. 9147 to prevent further trafficking of this highly threatened species in the country.

Keywords: CITES, Facebook, smuggling, social media, wildlife laundering

INTRODUCTION

The False Gharial *Tomistoma schlegelii* (Müller, 1838) (Gavialidae) is a large freshwater crocodilian characterized by a slender, elongated snout (Bezuijen et al., 2010; Lariman et al., 2021). It is one of the only two living species in the family Gavialidae, the other being the Gharial *Gavialis gangeticus* (Gmelin, 1789) (Hekkala et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2007). Information on the False Gharial breeding ecology is scarce with only 20 nests recorded in the wild (Shaney et al., 2019). Extant populations of False Gharial inhabit lowland swamps, lakes, and rivers in Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia (Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Sumatra), and Malaysia (Peninsular, Sarawak) (Bezuijen et al., 2010; Shaney et al., 2023;

Stuebing et al., 2004; Stuebing et al., 2006). Historical records from Thailand and Vietnam may be extirpated as no confirmed sightings have been reported for several decades (Stuebing et al., 2006).

The Indomalayan subpopulations of the False Gharial were harvested for its meat, skin, and eggs, trophy hunting, and for display (Bezuijen et al., 1997; Bezuijen et al., 2005; Shaney et al., 2019). Craftsmen's preference for Saltwater Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) over False Gharial diminished the demand for False Gharial skin in recent years (Bezuijen et al., 2005; Fuchs, 2006). Nevertheless, rapid loss of peat swamp forests and illegal hunting continue to imperil the wild population (Rodder et al., 2010).

The False Gharial is legally protected throughout its range countries. In Indonesia, wild fauna and flora are safeguarded under Government Regulation No. 7 of 1999 and Law No. 5 of 1990 on the Conservation of Biological Natural Resources and Their Ecosystems as amended by Law No. 32 of 2024. The trade of second-generation (F2) captive-bred individuals remains permitted under Government Regulation No. 8 of 1999. In Malaysia, the Wildlife Conservation Act of 2010 accords protection to the Peninsular Malaysia subpopulation, while the Wild Life Protection Ordinance of 1998 regulates the species in the State of Sarawak. In Brunei Darussalam, the Wild Fauna and Flora Order of 2007 serves as the primary legal framework governing the conservation of wildlife. Collecting, hunting, harming, killing, possessing, propagating, transporting or trading of wild False Gharials is punishable under these national legislations.

With its fragmented distributional range and reduced population, it was assessed as Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List (Shaney et al., 2023) and listed on the Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Despite the presence of False Gharials in private facilities and zoos (Shaney et al., 2019; Stuebing et al., 2015), there is no CITES-registered breeding facility for the Gavialid as of 20 September 2025 (CITES, 2025).

The availability of the False Gharial in the Philippine pet trade was first reported in 2015 (Sy, 2015). However, no legal importations of the False Gharial to the Philippines have been reported since its inclusion in the CITES Appendix I in 1975 (Sy, 2015; UNEP-WCMC, 2025). At the national level, Republic Act No. 9147, otherwise known as the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act of 2001, regulates the collection, importation, exportation, transportation, possession, and trade of wildlife through the issuance of permits by the appropriate wildlife authorities. Violations of this law are punishable by monetary fines and/or imprisonment upon conviction.

This study aimed to document the illicit online trade of the False Gharial in the Philippines by compiling information from an online trade monitoring, wildlife seizure records, and open-source news articles.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An online survey was conducted by monitoring 20 Philippine Facebook wildlife trade groups engaged in gharial species from January to December 2024. Groups that were actively utilized in reptile trading and had regular offers of wildlife were selected. Groups that became inactive or were deactivated during the survey period were replaced with others of similar focus to ensure continuous monitoring of 20 groups during the entire survey period. For each False Gharial advertisement, we recorded the seller's account name and location, number of individuals offered, advertisement wording, and price where available.

In addition, we reviewed open-source information on wildlife seizures involving the False Gharial from law enforcement and publications, specifically covering the periods 2010-2019 (Sy, 2021; Sy and Lorenzo, 2023) and 2020-2024. To complement these sources, we also collated news articles to provide supplementary information on reported incidents of trade and seizure.

The exchange rate of the Philippine Peso (PHP) to the United States Dollar (USD) fluctuated in 2024, but we used the rate of PHP57.816 = USD 1 in this report for consistency (www.oanda.com/currency-converter/en as of 31 December 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Online Trade

A total of 15 False Gharial *Tomistoma schlegelii* (Fig. 1) individuals were offered for sale by four traders during the survey period. All individuals were juveniles, each measuring approximately 30 cm in snout-vent length (SVL). Based on publicly available information, three traders were in the National Capital Region (NCR) and one in Region VIII. The advertisements offered between one and three individuals, with a single trader offered nine individuals. Two traders stated that they possessed legal permits to trade (Fig. 2). During the survey period, 13 groups were deactivated and another 14 groups became inactive. These were immediately replaced upon detection with more active wildlife trade groups (Table 1).



Figure 1. Juvenile False Gharials *Tomistoma schlegelii* offered for sale on Facebook in 2024. Screen captured by TRAFFIC.

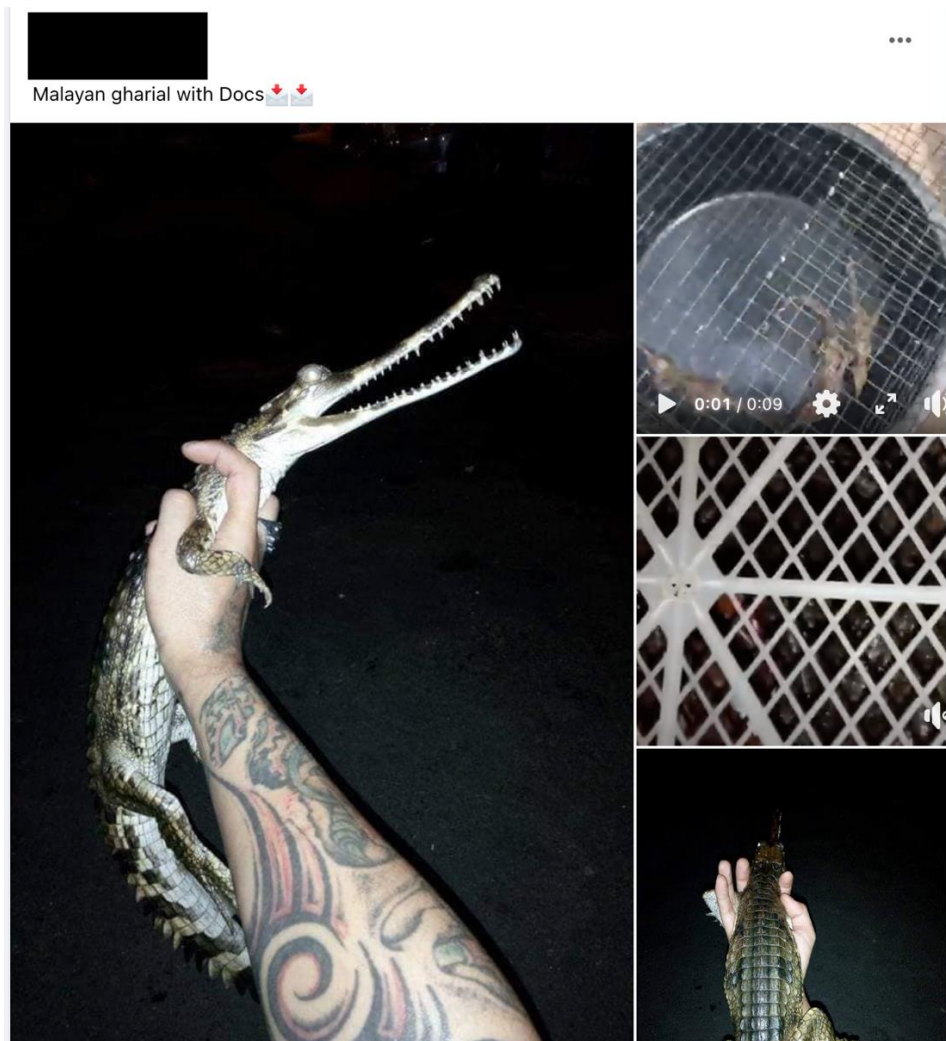


Figure 2. An online wildlife trader offered three juvenile False Gharials with “Docs” (i.e. permit). Screen captured by TRAFFIC.

Seizure records and news articles

A review of open-source news articles and wildlife seizure records documented eight seizure incidents involving crocodilians between 2020 and 2024, of which only one involved the False Gharial. On 22 June 2024, the Southern National Capital Region Maritime Police Station (Southern NCR MARPSTA) of the Philippine National Police-Maritime Group (PNP-MG) arrested a suspected illegal

wildlife trader during a buy-bust operation and seized a juvenile False Gharial. The suspect had allegedly offered the live specimen for PHP 50,000 (USD 865).

Based on the information in the CITES Trade Database, there are no legal importations of the False Gharial into the Philippines over the past 50 years. However, during the initial implementation period of the R.A. No. 9147, smuggled or illegally acquired wildlife individuals were allowed to be legalized through a registration process between 2004 and 2005 (Sy, 2018). It is therefore possible that some private individuals and zoological institutions have registered False Gharials, although no captive breeding successes have been reported in the Philippines to date.

The juvenile False Gharials offered for sale in Facebook wildlife trade groups may have been recently smuggled into the country. The claims by two wildlife traders of possessing permits to trade the species require further scrutiny and verification, as fraudulent practices have been documented within the reptile-keeping hobby, including wildlife laundering and the insertion of illegally acquired specimens into existing Certificates of Wildlife Registration or Wildlife Farm Permits (Sy, 2015; 2018; Sy et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study confirms the presence of False Gharials in the Philippine pet trade and underscores the importance of continuous wildlife trade monitoring to detect the ongoing trade of highly threatened species. While national policy on wildlife protection and conservation is established, the results also serve to alert authorities to review and strengthen standard operating procedures for more effective detection of wildlife smuggling and trafficking in the country.

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STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

NAMA conducted the online survey, analyzed the dataset, and wrote the initial draft. EYS conceptualized the study, analyzed the dataset, collated seizure records, and validated and edited the paper.

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Table 1. Philippine Facebook wildlife trade groups surveyed from January to December 2024.

Group	Link	Number of Members (as of May 2026)
2023 Sulcata and Redfoot Philippines	https://www.facebook.com/groups/702864538237105/	5,005
BAYAWAK INVASION	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1994556437610518	deactivated
Exotic Keeper's / Eksoitik Talipapa / Reptile Sharing PH / Exotics Manila	https://www.facebook.com/groups/458111739556143	2,997
Manila Enhanced Society of Exotic Keeper (Ma.E.S.E.K)	https://www.facebook.com/groups/653055239863059	deactivated
CEBU EXOTIC PET KEEPERS AND ARACHNIDS.	https://www.facebook.com/groups/613913357125748/	deactivated
philippine exotic pet keepers	https://www.facebook.com/groups/619792283693213	9,294
IGUANA ENTHUSIASTS PHILIPPINES PH	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1139665343683096/	6,682
pateros, taguig, makati, pasig EXOTIC PET KEEPERS	https://www.facebook.com/groups/835581470634048	deactivated
Luzon Exotic Keeper	https://www.facebook.com/groups/831816522033254	2,181

Table 1 (Continued). Philippine Facebook wildlife trade groups surveyed from January to December 2024.

Group	Link	Number of Members (as of May 2026)
Cavite Exotic Keepers [CEK]	https://www.facebook.com/groups/253053771533774/	10,764
PAMPANGA REPTILES AND EXOTIC SOCIETY	https://www.facebook.com/groups/300187142594970/	deactivated
Tortoise Turtle Buy & Sell Philippines	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2512904102204508	deactivated
BAGUIO EXOTICS/REPTILES/TARANTULA/SCORPION	https://www.facebook.com/groups/746637263481933	2,625
Bacolod exotic keeper	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2636009043242143/	deactivated
Manila Exotic Keepers	https://www.facebook.com/groups/781373703683972	deactivated
Exotic Breeder and Seller (Pampanga)	https://www.facebook.com/groups/150143153339908/	4,120
Official reptile owners of cebu	https://www.facebook.com/groups/3175364226103307/	3,807
TURTLE PETS bulacan	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1008212090322496/	3,783
Philippine Exotic Keepers / PHILIPPINE EXOTIC KEEPERS	https://www.facebook.com/groups/453603238780942	40,619
San Pedro Laguna Aquatic And Exotic Keepers	https://www.facebook.com/groups/378785667502842	2,520
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IGUANA KEEPERS PHILIPPINES 3.0	https://www.facebook.com/groups/336851209225252/	9,763
Burmese & Retic Python Philippines	https://www.facebook.com/groups/842644137516183	4,937
Cebu snake lovers.exotics keepers	https://www.facebook.com/groups/394367023119739	2,275

Table 1 (Continued). Philippine Facebook wildlife trade groups surveyed from January to December 2024.

Group	Link	Number of Members (as of May 2026)
AST/CST Snapping PH	https://www.facebook.com/groups/5043560712340700	2,003
Leopard gecko and crocodile skink bulacan manila	https://www.facebook.com/groups/5235028283209403/	1,150
Tortoise PH (all breed)	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2194275707490630/	17,180
CAVITE EXOTIC KEEPER	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1479364405640558/	deactivated
Bulacan Exotic Hobbyist	https://www.facebook.com/groups/289202780808558/	653
DAVAO EXOTIC PETS	https://www.facebook.com/groups/920910035349082/	3,708
sulcata MARKET.ph	https://www.facebook.com/groups/352201783718056	8,118
BULACAN EXOTICS CLUB	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1319467958855212/	deactivated
Mindanao Exotic Keepers	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1980342278975760/	4,058
Kapampangan exotic keepers	https://www.facebook.com/groups/899934934040685/	deactivated
mindanao all pet.. birds.. bantam..fish..exotic...etc..	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1667705820426981/	2,627
FTL (Filipino Turtle Lovers)	https://www.facebook.com/groups/356514591902024/	15,235
Turtle Quiting Sale philippines / Turtle & Exotic Pets Quiting Group Philippines	https://www.facebook.com/groups/250269482183046/	8,714
EXOTICS Iloilo	https://www.facebook.com/groups/662916918767779/	692
Cebu Reptile and Exotic Enthusiast (old name: Cebu Exotic/Reptile Feeders and Enthusiasts)	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1039513794494435/	deactivated

Table 1 (Continued). Philippine Facebook wildlife trade groups surveyed from January to December 2024.

Group	Link	Number of Members (as of May 2026)
TURTLE AND TORTOISE PHILIPPINES	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1470335440419168/	1,238
Tondo Wild Exotic Keepers	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2894352450851110/	3,354
Exotic Pets PH	https://www.facebook.com/groups/614374838913828/	20,189
DAVAO EXOTICITY	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1309504779870967/	817
NORTH CALOOCAN TURTLE KEEPERS	https://www.facebook.com/groups/246230416460879/	deactivated
BURM & RETIC society PH	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2343208282538030/	2,959
Turtle & Tortoise Keepers Philippines	https://www.facebook.com/groups/798313455405887/	13,921
IGUANA PHILIPPINES ALBINO,BLUE,GREEN	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1661597094599941/	6,192



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