

Social Media Platforms – An Emerging Threat to Biodiversity of Sri Lanka

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With the topographic and climatic heterogeneity, Sri Lanka is considered a biodiversity hotspot in the world. Since recent years, a growing demand and enthusiasm can be observed in pet trade in Sri Lanka with the development of technology and communication. With this trend, social media can be considered a major platform for illegal pet trade in Sri Lanka. The current study aimed to investigate the extent of illegal wildlife trade carried out through social media platforms and local websites. Pet trade can cause immense destructive effects to our biodiversity mainly by means of illegal wildlife trade, exotic species invasion and indirect destruction by exotic animals to the local biodiversity. In this study, data was collected from social media platforms and direct interviews. Traders who have posted advertisements were interviewed regarding the movements in the pet trade, traded species, their price ranges, and the role of competent authorities and interested parties from January 2019 to January 2021. All collected data was analyzed for species, location, protected status of the species and frequency of illegal wildlife trade postings with the activity of Department of Wildlife and Conservation (DWC) in social media platforms. Many bird species such as all species of parrots, birds of prey, small to medium sized mammals such as giant squirrels and palm squirrels, freshwater fish species and native and endemic plant species were observed to be frequently traded in these platforms. Here, a total of 290 social media posts and advertisements including 12 species of birds (155 posts), 7 species of fish (23 posts), 12 species of mammals/ parts of mammals (47 posts), 4 species of reptiles (14 posts) and 9 species of plants (51 posts) were observed. Though the implementation of law and reinforcements were observed to be in a debatable situation regarding the illegal trade, a clear relationship was observed with respect to the actions of competent authorities and illegal dealers. Proper awareness programmes, equipping DWC with information technology and introducing alternative commercial varieties to highly demanded species are observed as timely needs in addressing these issues. The highest possible practical answers are important to protect the biodiversity of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Demand, Illegal, Pets, Social media, Trade