

VICTORIAN FAUNA AUTHORITIES HAVE EGG ON FACE

According to a recent news report a failed investigation, code-named Operation Janitor, into an alleged international bird-egg smuggling syndicate by the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment has spent several hundred thousand dollars chasing "rumours and innuendo", without launching a single prosecution.

The department claims that since 1999 an egg smuggling syndicate has been active in northern Victoria. It is alleged that couriers wearing modified vests and underwear smuggled up to five hundred eggs a month both into and out of Australia, with an estimated profit per trip of more than \$300,000.00

In 2005 eight people allegedly linked to the syndicate were arrested and charged with conspiracy to control wildlife under the Victorian Crimes Act. However, documents obtained through freedom of information show the charges were dropped when it was realised the accused should have been charged under federal wildlife laws. In September last year the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions advised there was insufficient evidence to mount a successful prosecution, and the entire case fell apart.

A spokeswoman for the department refused to say how much money had been spent on the failed operation. But confirmed Operation Janitor had been shut down and monitoring of the alleged syndicate's movements stopped. She did, however, state that the department would continue to investigate any unlawful wildlife activities.

Lou Dall'Est, of the Victorian Avicultural Council, accused the department investigators of wasting time and money chasing "rumours and innuendo" as most bird-breeders acted legally. "We're just working-class people who do this as a hobby," Mr. Dall'Est said. "I don't know if there's a syndicate operating or not, but it looks as though it's all been blown out of proportion."

The department alleged over forty native bird eggs were being smuggled out of the country each trip and eggs of foreign species rare in Australia smuggled into Australia on the return trip. These exotic eggs were then artificially incubated and the chicks hand-raised for sale on the local market. It was claimed the syndicate was linked to smuggling gangs in other Australian states, as well as in South Africa, the Philippines and Singapore. The department alleged the syndicate laundered the birds raised through legitimate bird-breeding businesses, fake record books and remote storage sites.

Existence of the alleged syndicate was first brought to public attention in September 2004, when customs officers raided five rural properties across Australia, including two in Bendigo, and announced they had disrupted "an international wildlife smuggling racket" after approximately a thousand birds were found on the Bendigo properties. However, only seven parrots, alleged to have been illegally imported, and a number of eggs were seized. No arrests were made.

Subsequently, further raids occurred in Gippsland and central Victoria in December 2005. Six properties were searched and exotic and native bird collections were inspected at another ten. The forty officers involved seized computers and documents during the raids in an effort to identify the syndicate members and their financial backers.

The maximum penalty for wildlife trafficking under federal laws is ten year's jail and a \$110,000.00 fine.