

Media Releases 2010

R4 million worth of abalone confiscated

Shipping vessel forced to return to South Africa

Pretoria, 16 August 2010 – Investigators of the South African Revenue Service (SARS) confiscated 1.6 tons (28 764 individual animals) of abalone (perlemoen) with an estimated value of R4 million this weekend, that was in the process of being smuggled out of South Africa on a commercial container vessel.

For only the second time in the history of law enforcement in the country a shipping vessel suspected of carrying illicit goods was forced to return to South Africa for inspection after SARS issued a Detention Order in terms of the Customs and Excise Act.

The Detention Order was served on the shipping agents and legally compelled the vessel to return to South Africa.

At the time of serving the Detention Order, the vessel was approximately one day away from its final destination, the port city Hong-Kong. SARS had previously received information that freight containers on 2 vessels destined for Hong-Kong were carrying abalone that was poached off the South African coastline.

The first vessel to return to South Africa, docked at the Cape Town harbour on Saturday. SARS investigators were joined by the South African Police Services (SAPS) and investigators from the Fisheries division of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, in detaining and searching the containers.

The 1.6 million tons of smuggled abalone was confiscated and stored at the State Ware House while investigations continue. The second vessel is expected to return to South African waters later next week for inspection.

SARS has also established that the suspects had ordered a third container to be used for another export of abalone from South Africa but that the order had been cancelled after SARS issued the Detention Orders.

Investigations to date clearly indicate that there remain strong links between abalone poaching, illicit trade networks, corruption and racketeering. Criminal syndicates are known to exploit vulnerable coastal communities where residents serve as poachers for abalone destined for a growing international market. In October 2006, law enforcement agencies in the country – including SARS, SAPS and Fisheries (previously Marine and Coastal Management) – set international precedence when a container vessel was rerouted back to South Africa for the first time on suspicion that it carried containers of smuggled abalone.

On that occasion domestic law enforcement agencies confiscated seven tons of poached abalone of more than R11 million.

The weekend's confiscation is another important breakthrough in combating abalone smuggling and poaching. SARS and law enforcement agencies will continue to apply the appropriate provisions in South African law to combat illicit activity and to ensure that the proceeds of organised crime can be returned even when it has already left the country.

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