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Fauna smuggling from Kerala to be probed

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: A senior Kerala forest official has said he would inquire into the alleged smuggling of rare fauna species from Kerala by a team of British and Canadian experts.

"I have not received any complaints and I am surely going to order an inquiry into the whole episode," said P.K. Surendaranathan Asari, principal chief conservator of forests, who said he had read the reports.

The New Indian Express said foreign teams smuggled out various samples of fauna including more than 10 tarantula, reptiles and amphibians.

The present going rate for a tarantula in the US market is \$200. These poisonous spiders are kept as drawing room curios.

V.K. Sinha, chief conservator of forests (wildlife) whose name figures in the report, however, has denied the story. "All the stories of stealing of the rare tiger spider are nothing but white lies," Sinha told IANS.

"The report is nothing but blackmail by the journalist. Nothing of this sort has happened and can happen. We do not allow anyone to carry away precious forest wealth. I am going to meet the editor and register a complaint."

The foreign delegation comprising top experts such as Rick West of the Canadian Wild Life Service, Andrew Smith and Peter Kirk of the British Museum visited the Parambikulam wildlife sanctuary in the state's north last fortnight to attend a seminar.

Nearly 30 delegates from various parts of the country and outside took part in the seminar that was jointly organised by the Forest and Wildlife Department, Kerala, Fish and Wildlife Service, US, and Zoo Outreach Organisation (ZOO), Coimbatore.

Despite repeated warnings against carrying anything from the forests, team members reportedly took samples from the field training, the paper alleged.

Some foreign experts left immediately for Chennai, where they are staying, while some left the country through Colombo.

Sinha also denied he had written any letter to the visiting team, offering to have the samples collected by them regularised by the forest department.

"I do not know of any such letter claimed to have been written by me in the report," said Sinha.

Allegations of bio-piracy had been made against the prestigious Tropical Botanical Garden Research Institute at Palode, 40 km from here, a few years ago when a large number of samples were reportedly sent to Singapore.

(IANS)