

SANDALWOOD SMUGGLING SEES SURGE IN HYDERABAD

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Distribution of Key Natural Resources - Forest Resources of the World

Sandalwood chips recently seized from passengers bound for Gulf countries.

Sandalwood smugglers from the country have stepped up their illegal activity at the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport at Shamshabad.

The temporary ban on international flights amid COVID-19 lockdown did not deter the smugglers with the growing demand for scented sandalwood, also known as 'liquid gold' in the underworld lingua franca for its lucrative value, in overseas markets. The demand has attracted new players into the game as the number of cases has gone up by four times from two cases in 2019 to eight cases last year.

According to the data shared by the Customs officials, in 2019 they seized 69.4 kg of sandalwood, while in 2020, the number rose to 139 kg, apart from one litre of sandalwood oil.

It is learnt that a large number of passengers smuggle the sandalwood chips in small quantities to Gulf countries, to further export it to African countries where it is used in traditional medicines, perfumes and pharmaceuticals. They also extract oil from the sandalwood and use it in medicines.

"The bootleggers try to smuggle various products from India, which have a high demand in other countries, and as a result these days they are focusing on sandalwood," a senior Customs officer told *The Hindu*.

A few weeks ago, a passenger travelling to Sharjah by an Air Arabia flight was detained by the Customs officials after they found him carrying 5.30 kg of sandalwood chips in his baggage.

And in July, the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel detained five passengers who were trying to smuggle out 78.5 kg of sandalwood.

Though the passengers manage to get local purchase bills, carrying sandalwood in passenger flights is a violation of the provisions of Customs Act, the officer said, adding that many African tourists or students become a conduit for this contraband during their return journey.

As sandalwood is not grown in Telangana, it raises many questions on how it is being procured by foreigners in large quantities and later smuggled in small packets.

However, smuggling of foreign cigarettes had seen a sharp decline this year with Customs officials seizing 5.21 lakh sticks in 11 cases, as against 17.85 lakh tobacco sticks in 37 cases in 2019.

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