

# The Role of U.S. Experimenters in the Illegal Trade in Wild-Caught Monkeys

**U.S. laboratories are not just the end users of monkeys—they're also part of a global supply chain tied to illegal capture, falsified records, and transnational monkey laundering, all of which have driven two species of primates to the brink of extinction, caused immeasurable suffering, and failed to produce meaningful improvements in human health.**

## U.S. Department of Justice Indictments for Alleged Monkey Laundering

- A multiyear investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service uncovered evidence of a large-scale scheme to launder wild-caught long-tailed macaques into the global research trade using falsified Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) permits.
- Court filings from 2022 described the alleged false labeling of tens of thousands of monkeys as captive-bred and identified U.S.-based companies as part of the supply chain receiving these animals.
- The investigation exposed a system in which origin can be obscured, documentation manipulated, and wild monkeys funneled into laboratories.

## Intercepted Smuggling of Long-Tailed Macaques Into Cambodia

- Between 2025 and early 2026, authorities disrupted at least six monkey-smuggling operations along the Thai-Cambodia border, seizing more than 300 long-tailed macaques before they reached Cambodia.
- In these cases, monkeys were found bound in mesh bags, packed into containers, and hidden in agricultural fields.
- Officials involved in these seizures described the incidents as part of coordinated wildlife-smuggling networks, reinforcing concerns that wild-caught macaques continue to be trafficked into Cambodia.

## Importation of Primates Into the U.S. for Use in Laboratories

- Since 2020, U.S. entities have purchased and imported over 145,000 primates.
- Long-tailed macaques—the species most heavily traded for use in primate experimentation—account for 96% of the total number. These monkeys (*Macaca fascicularis*, also known as “cynomolgus monkeys” and “crab-eating macaques”) have been captured or bred and imported from Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Mauritius, the Philippines, and Vietnam.
- Between 2020 and 2022, Cambodia was the largest exporter of primates to the U.S. Mauritius then became the top exporter, while the [U.S. remains the largest importer of primates](#) in the world.
- Smugglers in countries like Cambodia trap mother monkeys, pry their babies away, and stuff them into mesh bags. They take the monkeys to massive breeding farms, where the mothers will be forced to breed in filthy, barren conditions, and others are falsely labeled as “captive-bred” and sold to U.S. buyers. Injury and illness are extremely common at these facilities, and many of the monkeys die.
- Once imported, these monkeys can be bred or are sold to third parties, including the National Institutes of Health, contract research organizations that test for pharmaceutical companies, U.S. military research facilities, and many public and private universities for invasive experiments.

Year	Number of primates imported into the U.S. <sup>1,2</sup>	Number of long-tailed macaques imported into the U.S.	Number of long-tailed macaques imported from Cambodia
2020	26,728	24,879	15,664
2021	32,276	31,242	18,586
2022	29,667	28,765	17,992
2023	17,042	16,290	189
2024	17,396	16,989	0
2025	22,843	22,210	1,440
<b>Total</b>	<b>145,952</b>	<b>140,375</b>	<b>53,871</b>

<sup>1</sup>This figure includes multiple species of primates.

<sup>2</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ports of entry for shipments are restricted to Chicago, Dulles, Houston, Miami, Newark, and New York.

## The Secretive Monkey Trade and Its Appalling Lack of Transparency

- To bring monkeys into the U.S. for experimentation, importers must be registered with the CDC. The agency currently lists a small number of approved importers, including commercial companies, universities, and government entities.
- Once a plane carrying monkeys arrives in the U.S., they are offloaded and transported to CDC-approved quarantine facilities at undisclosed locations around the country.
- During the mandatory 31-day quarantine period, commercial importers, not the CDC, control every aspect of animal care, disease detection, testing, and reporting. This system relies on the companies importing and profiting from these animals to monitor, interpret, and report the risks they carry.

## Protections for Endangered Animals

- In July 2022, the International Union for Conservation of Nature reclassified long-tailed macaques as “endangered,” citing the exploitation by the U.S. experimentation industry as a major factor in the species’ decline. Despite attempts by the primate experimentation

industry to challenge that finding, the designation was reaffirmed in October 2025.

- Long-tailed macaques are protected under Appendix II of the CITES permit system, which requires permits to verify that trade in the animals [is legal, sustainable, and traceable in accordance with articles III, IV, and V of the convention](#). In reality, this system depends on paperwork that can be falsified, allowing wild-caught monkeys to be laundered into the legal trade as “captive-bred” and exported to U.S. laboratories.
- In the U.S., laws like the Lacey Act prohibit the importation and sale of illegally sourced wildlife. But enforcement typically occurs after animals have already entered the country, meaning that U.S. demand continues to drag animals through a system in which illegality is often detected too late, if at all.

## Consequences for Science

The primate experimentation industry asserts that its use of purpose-bred, specific pathogen-free, well-characterized primates helps control variables and protect public health. But when wild-caught monkeys are mislabeled as captive-bred, a critical and uncontrolled variable is introduced, undermining data reliability and reproducibility.