

Süddeutsche Zeitung Podcast "The Parrot King" Episode 6

Part 1: Intro

David Pfeifer: I was sitting in the car again with Wilfried and Peter, who asked me some strange questions again: about the German right wing party AfD and my taste in women. Questions like that, really. So bizarre stuff. In any case, we then drive to the first enclosures. And then it was like every time, I don't know, maybe on the series "The Crown", when the royal family arrives somewhere: we're a big entourage with the CEO Karani and his closest confidants and the German lawyer. And then I was shown how to prepare the food.

March 2025: Our SZ colleague David Pfeifer is on the road in Vantara, this huge zoo project in India. Around twelve employees are accompanying him on his tour, including Wilfried and Peter, the two Indian drivers with the strange names and the strange questions, who have already picked David up at the airport. There is also a German lawyer and the CEO of Vantara, Vivaan Karani. He obviously wants to convince David how great the Vantara project is. From the medical care to the food preparation for the animals:

David: They showed me the baskets where they mix the food for the animals, like blue baskets with vegetables in them. I thought: This looks better than in a supermarket. Simply very fresh produce. So everything is tip-top!

While David watches the food being prepared, CEO Karani talks at him incessantly. Then David is driven in an electric car to huge enclosures where lions, leopards and elephants are kept.

David: The whole thing was choreographed, of course, because the Indian Prime Minister Modi was in Vantara a week before me. And I assume they then showed me a slimmed-down version of the tour, which Modi also got. When we arrived at the elephants, for example, the elephant was already lying strapped down on a horizontal couch to show us the same thing. It was a choreography.

The mood on the tour fluctuates between pats on the back and quite blatant threats.

David: We'll sue you if you report something that isn't true, the CEO Karani threatened. He also asked about my employer, i.e. which publishing house is behind SZ. And then he said that Reliance Industries was also a large media company, in addition to many other things such as petrochemicals and steel.

The Indians suddenly approached David about Martin Guth. We are particularly interested in his role in Vantara. Our assumption is that he could be one of Vantara's animal procurers. But as we have no evidence of this at this time, we have not mentioned the name Martin Guth in our communication with Vantara so far. And we haven't asked Martin Guth anything about Vantara either.

David is therefore surprised when the Indians ask him about Guth. At first he ignores the question, but the Indians don't let up.

David: At the next stop, they asked again about Martin Guth. And then I said: Do you mean the parrot guy? And suddenly everyone started laughing. Yes, of course we mean the Parrot Guy!

The parrot guy, of course! At that moment, David deliberately pretends to be a bit more ignorant than he really is. He wants to moderate the topic and the Indians leave it at that. But they seem to sense that we are also interested in the relationship between them and Guth. And not just for the St. Vincent Amazons and Spix's macaws that Guth's association, the ACTP, has officially given to Vantara.

David: My impression was that they had some kind of deal with Guth to protect. And that they thought we were somehow trying to get at Guth.

David is then driven to the chimpanzees and even to the one mountain gorilla that lives in Vantara, which becomes important in this episode. It gets later and later. But CEO Karani still hasn't answered any of our questions about Vantara. But that's exactly why David flew to India in the first place: Because the Vantara people only wanted to answer our questions about their project, which we sent them, in person on site.

When it is finally pitch dark, Wilfried and Peter take David back to the luxury guest house on the premises. They want him to freshen up again, get some rest and eat something. Before the promised interview finally begins shortly before midnight.

David: At some point I realize, okay, now the excitement is coming back into the room and now everyone has to get to the other conference room really quickly. And Karani then says: He's not doing an interview because we already have preconceived ideas. And then he threatens again: We will come with everything at you! So he lets the whole power of it come through again: That we will be sued, including me personally. And then I asked him why he was threatening me all the time? And then he got even more upset and said: He's not threatening me at all, because it would only be a threat if he didn't do what he says later.

You're listening to "The Parrot King". I'm Christoph Cadenbach, investigative journalist from the Süddeutsche Zeitung. And this is episode 6: "The Wildlife Dealer".

Part 2: The intimidation attempt

David spends the night in the Vantara guesthouse. He has a bad feeling about the heated atmosphere. He has actually booked a hotel outside the premises at the editor's expense. But the Vantara people explained to him that the way back to his hotel was too far, also because the

tour was supposed to continue at 6 a.m. the next morning. But this also came to nothing and David left.

But his visit becomes really disturbing afterwards. Five days after David's departure from India, I suddenly receive a reply from Vantara.

"Mr Cadenbach" begins the email. Since July 2024, I had been trying to gain access to their facility under the pretext of investigative reporting. And I had bombarded them with an endless series of random questions. My lack of journalistic integrity and my deliberate smear campaign made any further engagement with me pointless. Okay, that sounds angry.

But then the email gets really nasty. Because the Vantara people claim that David insisted on sleeping in the guest house and not in his hotel. According to them, David had only booked the hotel in order to receive a receipt - as false proof that he had complied with our editorial regulations.

Of course, we don't accept invitations from people or institutions that we report on, not even for an overnight stay. We are not on the take. And it wasn't David's wish to spend the night in the guest house. The only reason he spent the night there was because he couldn't get out of the huge zoo that late.

And the email from Vantara now also states that David has offered to report positively about Vantara if Vantara makes a "charitable donation" to an institution of David's choice.

Of course, this is also absolute nonsense. David, of course, has never offered to report positively for anything in return. He has always made it clear that he will report exactly what he experiences and receives answers to on the ground.

In the email, the Vantara people then go on to suggest that they filmed David during his visit. Without telling him about it, of course. And that they had read David's and my communication, i.e. our chat history. So they insinuate that they were spying on us.

I've never actually experienced anything like it! Are they crazy, obviously trying to scare us with such methods? I would have expected such methods from the criminal organizations we are researching. But at a zoo?

David then had his smartphone checked by experts: A program that can be used to spy on cell phones was not found on it. We therefore suspect that the Vantara people were bluffing. They obviously just wanted to scare us, probably to prevent us from reporting. That didn't work. Back in mid-March, we published a long, critical article about the Vantara project in the SZ, which was also quoted in the Indian media. The article focuses on the question of whether Vantara is actually saving animals or whether it has really fueled the global shadow market for wild animals. You can find a link to the article in the show notes.

Despite all threats, Vantara has not yet attempted to take legal action against our article and its content. And when we now ask them further questions about David's experiences during his visit and about their defamatory email, about the obvious lies they put in David's mouth and about the alleged spying, they send us a 39-page letter. In it they now accuse us of slander and repeat their defamatory accusations against David. Then they write that David himself showed them the chats in which I communicate with him. That's not true, of course. But they don't want to have spied on him, they just want to have filmed him - quite legally - with surveillance cameras. They also send lots of screenshots showing David in the lobby of his hotel and in the hallway of the Vantara guesthouse, which are supposed to prove something, but basically just show that a really strange game is being played here.

I was quite surprised by the first letter we received in March. Because I didn't expect an institution like Vantara, which is so concerned about its image, to act in this way. But David was really shocked by the email. And I understand that.

David: I felt a bit poisoned afterwards. My house was burgled years ago. It was a similarly unpleasant feeling. That there were strangers in my private space with malicious intent. It took me a while to recover from that. And it's still taking a while after the trip.

David then talked to some of his Indian journalist colleagues about his experience with Vantara.

David: My Indian colleagues were relatively shocked that I, as a foreign journalist, had experienced something like that. But they were also a little relieved that a foreign journalist had experienced how journalists are treated in India. The Indian colleagues said: "This is how we are often treated here when we report critically on powerful people.

David now sees the strange questions about women, drugs and the AfD in a different light. Just like the two drivers who kept asking David these questions: Peter and Wilfried.

David: In the meantime, I assume that the two are simply security people that Vantara probably poached from the Secret Service. As I said, the Ambanis are very rich people, they can afford former military, former secret service people. The two drivers just tried relatively consistently to get some nonsense out of me: my attitudes, habits. And the questions about drugs and my taste in women seem to me in retrospect as if they were looking for something they could use against me. Things they could use to put me under pressure. But that's speculation, of course.

Part 3: Fake zoos

Incidentally, we are not the only ones to receive such threatening letters from Vantara in spring 2025. When several conservation NGOs from South Africa jointly published a critical report on Vantara, they were also threatened with legal action. In the report, the NGOs expressed their concerns about the dozens of leopards, cheetahs, lions and tigers that were exported from

South Africa to Vantara. They also questioned whether these animals really needed to be rescued?

Some Indian media picked up on the NGO report - but deleted their articles from their websites shortly afterwards. And one online medium not only deleted the article, but then even published a text praising Vantara under the same URL.

Why do the Vantara people take such an aggressive approach to critical questions? What makes them so nervous?

You remember that we were able to use a trade database to research how many wild animals have been delivered to Vantara in the past two and a half years. And these figures show a completely different picture to the one that Vantara paints of itself in public.

According to the official annual reports, around 10,000 wild animals are said to be kept at Vantara. However, according to our research, at least 39,000 wild animals were shipped there by the end of 2024, exclusively mammals, amphibians, reptiles and birds. Vantara is therefore by far the largest collection of wild animals in history. Those responsible for the project have not yet commented on the animal population figures we have researched.

David experienced during his visit that the project invests a lot of money in very modern facilities and a large number of animal keepers. The animals he saw seemed to be doing well. But of course they only showed him a few dozen and not 39,000.

For us, however, the question of where all these animals actually come from is at least as important as the question of how so many animals are kept.

Many experts who have been involved in the wildlife trade - including the illegal trade - for years are very concerned about the shipments to Vantara. Daniela Freyer, for example, from the German conservation organization Pro Wildlife:

Daniela Freyer: That's an astronomical number of animals that Vantara has imported. I don't think it's ever happened on this scale before, and it's hard for us to imagine that all of these animals were actually rescued or that they were bred. So we suspect that there are a lot of wild-caught animals among them, especially from countries that regularly trade in such wild-caught animals.

And our source, the German animal dealer, also tells us that Vantara is currently turning the wild animal market upside down. He has never experienced anything like it.

Source animal dealer: "No matter which other wholesalers I talk to: the stock of wild animals has been bought up. The supply lists are getting shorter because everything is going to India. It is obvious that this demand also leads to more wild catches.

However, the Vantara people always claim in public that they do not trade commercially in animals and do not treat animals as commodities. They have nothing to do with wild-caught animals either. On the contrary: they are the largest rescue center for animals in need in the world.

In the threatening letter they sent me after David's visit, the Vantara people reiterated this in no uncertain terms: they are a non-profit, non-commercial organization dedicated to animal welfare and species conservation. They described our questions about alleged commercial transactions as malicious accusations. Vantara has never bought or sold animals and will not do so in the future. In their second letter, their lawyers also emphasize that Vantara does not work with "animal traders".

It doesn't get any clearer than that.

In our data, however, we find many indications that these claims may not be true. Many of the animals were shipped to Vantara from countries that are considered hotspots for the illegal wildlife trade: Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia and United Arab Emirates, for example. We also see the names of the exporters of these animals in our data. Some zoos are among them and of course the ACTP, Martin Guth's association, which supplied Spix's macaws and other parrot species to Vantara.

The data also includes companies of commercial animal traders. The most important of these traders is Khaled Aldhaferi, who, according to our research, runs two organizations: the Kangaroo Animals Shelter Center and the Capital Zoo Wildlife Park. Both are based in the United Arab Emirates and together have shipped more than 5900 animals to Vantara, including 41 chimpanzees, 14 orangutans, a bonobo and the mountain gorilla that David saw on his tour of Vantara.

All of these great ape species are strictly protected. Nevertheless, criminal gangs track them down in the wild.

Daniela Freyer: The business with great apes is indeed particularly bloody because the poachers are after the babies. But if they want to sell a baby ape, they first have to kill the whole family, i.e. ten adult apes, to get a single baby. And there are hardly any breeding facilities for great apes in Africa either, so we assume that animals that come from Africa often come from poaching

According to a UN report, the price paid by these collectors for a chimpanzee ranges up to 64,000 euros. Around 140,000 euros have also been paid for a gorilla.

From the name, the Kangaroo Animals Shelter Center appears to be a sanctuary for animals and the Capital Zoo Wildlife Park a zoo. Both facilities are also registered as zoos in the Emirates. And both also have websites that give the impression that they are institutions open to the public. But only at first glance. This is because the websites contain mainly dummy text and neither of the alleged zoos can be visited. The Capital Zoo Wildlife Park, for example, is simply a warehouse

in the desert sand on satellite images. If you ask the WhatsApp number given on the website about opening hours, the answer is: "Our zoo is closed to the public until further notice." And then no more questions are answered.

Another thing that strikes us is that both facilities seem to have delivered animals almost exclusively to Vantara. The Capital Zoo Wildlife Park has only existed since 2023.

We ask the CITES control authority in the Emirates whether they have approved the many exports of strictly protected species by the Kangaroo Shelter and the Capital Zoo to Vantara. Yes, the authority replies. All exports had complied with the rules of the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Well then, all's well again.

But where did the two alleged zoos get the animals from? This should actually be stored in the CITES database, in which all transfers of protected animals by the respective exporting and importing countries are documented. This data is publicly accessible. Many of the chimpanzees exported by the Kangaroo Shelter presumably originated from Iraq, Kuwait, Egypt and Bahrain and were exported from there to the Emirates in 2022 and 2023. It is not possible to reconstruct how they originally arrived in these countries. But all of these countries are considered hubs for the illegal trade in wild animals.

The mountain gorilla is even more conspicuous. There is not a single known specimen of this species in captivity anywhere in the world. In zoos you can see lowland gorillas, of which there are still a few hundred thousand in the wild. The number of mountain gorillas worldwide is estimated at around 1000. And one of them is now in Vantara.

How did it get to the Emirates before? No idea. According to the CITES database, no mountain gorilla has ever been imported into the Emirates. So it must have appeared there out of nowhere or in some other way - but more likely it was smuggled there. In this case, the CITES authority in the Emirates would have legalized the mountain gorilla by issuing a CITES export permit. And basically, it would have done something like, well, animal laundry. Whether consciously or unconsciously.

And what does all this mean for Vantara and its suppliers? The picture we get is that of an animal trader who has set up two fake zoos that could be used to make the export of strictly protected species to Vantara possible on paper. After all, strictly protected species may not be traded under the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. However, transfers between zoos are quite common. And the Indian Wildlife Protection Act also stipulates that Vantara can only obtain protected species from other zoos.

The Kangaroo Shelter and Capital Zoo did not respond to our questions about the export of certain species, but gave a similarly general answer that the animals had been rescued from various sources - from private keepers, companies and institutions that could no longer care for the animals. All exports and imports of animals were carried out in strict compliance with CITES

regulations. And they were all non-commercial transfers for which "not a single cent" had been paid or received.

We've heard these arguments before: animal rescue and not a penny paid! However, it is hard to imagine that an animal trader like Aldhaferi, which also operates several commercial animal trading companies, would send 5900 animals - including the most valuable species - to India for free. And according to a number of experts I have spoken to, it makes absolutely no sense to send a single supposedly rescued mountain gorilla or bonobo to a rescue center in India, far from their natural habitats and conspecifics. Unfortunately, the CITES authority in the Emirates does not answer why it has approved these transfers anyway.

What we still need is proof that the Vantara people or their middlemen are actually paying for the animals. Vantara vehemently denies this.

Our research into Martin Guth, the Spix's Macaw and the parrot business has now grown into research into the global wildlife trade. But we'll be back to Martin Guth, the parrot king, very soon. It doesn't take much longer.

We continue our research, making phone calls to zoos in Germany, circus operators and breeders of rare species. Have they had any contact with Vantara? Most of them block us, don't want to talk.

Then, in a WhatsApp group of bird breeders, we discover a message from an animal dealer from southern Germany. He writes that he buys throughout Germany for export. And then comes a long list: "Parrots of all kinds (including older animals and animals with defects), flamingos of all kinds, penguins, exotic mammals, monkeys, giant kangaroos, zebras. Collection and cash payment possible daily."

That doesn't go down too well in the group. What kind of purchase request is that, asks one of them. The dealer then explains the background to his request. He is looking for "breeder friends from India", quote, "animals of all kinds, preferably African animals".

My colleague Sebastian calls the dealer. He answers questions in a friendly manner.

The dealer describes himself as a middleman, a little light. He sends the animals to an acquaintance in northern Germany, who then sends them to Holland, from where they go on to India, to Vantara, for example. It is easier to export protected animals via neighboring countries, where the rules are apparently applied less strictly.

At no point does the trader mention that he is looking for animals that are not doing well here. That they need to be rescued. However, he also says that he does not know the name Martin Guth.

In our import data, we see that an animal dealer from the Czech Republic, a man called Jindrich Blahoz, who also runs a small zoo, has delivered more than 3,000 animals to Vantara. We take a

closer look at him - and are lucky. A source provides us with invoices that this animal dealer sends to Vantara. One invoice we received from October 2024 lists hundreds of animals and the invoice amount is 237,350 euros. Another invoice from May 2025 has an invoice amount of 177,800 euros. These are considerable sums, even if the prices for the individual animals seem far too low. So what is going on here?

We try to speak to the animal dealer in the Czech Republic personally. But he is nowhere to be found at his business addresses - and, incidentally, not a single animal. But he then calls the Czech colleague back, with whom we do some research. The animal dealer immediately emphasizes that everything he does is legal. He doesn't really want to come right out with it, but what he says is very interesting. The colleague asks how Vantara came across him. He works in the pet trade, he says. And he was asked to help them get a few animals to complete the Indian zoo's stock. They were interested in, quote, "all species". However, it was not a sale, but a "non-commercial" transaction. He repeats this a few times, it sounds like he has learned it by heart. When asked why he then invoiced Vantara, he has no real answer. He is only paid for consultancy services, not for the animals, the animal dealer then says. Even if the invoices tell a different story.

And there is another argument against the claim that this is about animal rescue. We were able to trace the alleged supply chains of the animals in several cases.

Animal dealer Blahoz also received animals from a small zoo in Germany, the Graslleben Species Conservation Center. This so-called species conservation center, which is backed by a completely normal company, gave away a number of strictly protected and actually very valuable animals to Jindrich Blahoz in February 2025. Several big cats such as two clouded leopards and a snow leopard - as well as six Goeldi's Marmosets. In May 2025, Jindrich Blahoz then sold the exact number of species listed on the deed of gift to Vantara for around 70,000 euros. This is still far too little for these animals, but why should a conservation center give away animals that are then sold? Is this a commercial deal being disguised? An animal deal under the guise of species conservation? The Graslleben Species Conservation Center does not answer our questions.

A monkey sale to Vantara is even more revealing. At the beginning of the year, the Czech animal trader Blahoz also delivered 28 pygmy marmosets and 10 common marmosets to India. He had previously bought these animals from a monkey breeder in East Germany. My colleague Sebastian met this monkey breeder. She knows nothing about the destination India, but confirms that it was a normal sale and that she was paid a fair price for the animals. When Vantara says that the zoo rescues animals from terrible conditions, she suddenly becomes emotional and gets really upset. That certainly doesn't apply to her monkeys, she says, "They didn't need to be rescued, they were fine here."

We now have plenty of evidence and also solid proof that Vantara is buying animals and that its image as the world's largest animal rescue mission is just a facade, even if Vantara denies it. But we do not yet fully understand the alleged procurement system behind it. And who the really important people behind it are. But then someone passes us something that helps us a lot. We

receive CITES documents and a WhatsApp chat history. And this chat just blows us away. Because it's written and spoken by Martin Guth.

Part 4: The wildlife trafficker

Martin Guth: Offer me this if you know we can have it. And then with pleasure.

Martin Guth: Please in English with the English common names, okay, because I have to pass this on. Thank you.

Martin Guth: The prices, please!

Martin Guth: Okay, then finish what you can now in a package, white-lipped tamarins if you like, and then tell me what you get for it and then I'll pass it on.

Martin Guth: Can you check how many chimps from Dubai would be possible?

What you hear here are voice and text messages from Martin Guth. We have had them recorded. Guth sent these messages in August 2024 via WhatsApp to a German animal breeder who apparently has good contacts with other breeders and animal dealers. And also to Dubai. This breeder is supposed to compile a list of animals for Guth that he can get for him.

By the way, chimps means chimpanzees. And white-lipped tamarins are marmosets that live in South America.

The chat is always about buying these animals. And about the prices.

Martin Guth: It's all good, I pass them on and then he says yes or no. We also have other Midas Tamarins at the moment, two pairs that we are buying. And he knows the prices, of course. As I said, I pass it on and then I get the answer straight away.

Who Guth passes the prices on to is also made clear in many places in the chat: to his "Indian friends", as he writes at one point. And this obviously means the people responsible at Vantara, as the chat also shows.

At one point, for example, the animal breeder offers to buy an entire zoo. We have also had his messages recorded.

Animal breeder: A friend (zoologist) from Thailand has just called me. A zoo in Pattaya, 40 hectares in size, is for sale. Price 14 million, basis for negotiation.

Martin Guth answers:

Martin Guth: We do have a zoo 😊

At another point in the chat, Guth shares his current location. According to this, he is at Jamnagar airport. This is the city where Vantara is located. Then he writes to the animal breeder:

Martin Guth: We'll take almost anything! Phone tomorrow!

So Martin Guth is obviously pretending to be a direct representative of Vantara. He almost always talks about "us" and "we".

Just for the record: some of the messages we mention here have been slightly shortened or corrected so that the message can be understood.

This voice message shows just how close Martin Guth is to those responsible at Vantara:

Martin Guth: If my boss makes the down payment, it must of course be ensured that the animals can also be sent. Do you see any problems?

Guth refers to his contact person in Vantara as the „boss“. And it is highly likely that he is referring to Dr. Brij Kishor Gupta, the boss and mastermind behind Vantara.

Guth hints in several messages that the two are in close contact. On one occasion, he explicitly writes that Dr. Gupta will take part in a joint call with the animal breeder. At another point, Guth asks the animal breeder to write a message to Gupta. And he forwards a message, presumably written by Gupta, to the animal breeder.

Gupta is a zoologist. He has researched species protection, animal welfare and zoo management and has published many scientific papers on the subject. For years, he was employed by the Indian Central Zoo Authority. In other words, the authority that monitors zoos in India. Then he switched sides and set up Vantara. And now he is apparently the direct contact person for Martin Guth, who presumably buys animals on his behalf.

Vantara denies this. In the 39-page letter sent to us by their lawyers, they repeatedly emphasize that those responsible at Vantara are neither involved in the purchase of animals nor do they work with animal dealers. This allegation is simply false. Vantara could not make any other statement: Because according to the Indian zoo authorities, the project, as an "approved and recognized animal rescue facility", is not allowed to participate in "commercial transacting of animals" under any circumstances.

Vantara's lawyers then write that they reject "the existence, authenticity and legality of the so-called chat histories". And the Vantara people are only involved with Martin Guth in his role as a board member of the ACTP, with whom they have signed a memorandum of understanding for the protection and reintroduction of endangered parrots. Guth is in no way acting on behalf of Vantara. "Whatever he does personally or independently with third parties has never been endorsed or approved by our clients." And it is beyond their knowledge.

Martin Guth also denies acting as an animal buyer for Vantara. The Vantara project never commissioned him or even contacted him to purchase animals, his lawyer writes. And she also denies that Guth bought or ordered animals from the breeder. Quite the opposite: whenever Martin Guth becomes aware that animals need help, need to be rescued or simply need to be housed in an appropriate way, he is always prepared to do everything in his power to help give these animals a chance of a better life. And through his successful collaboration with Vantara as part of the Spix's Macaw breeding program, Martin Guth is of course aware of the outstanding commitment with which Vantara helps animals in need.

In the chat, however, Martin Guth doesn't really sound like a compassionate animal rescuer. And it doesn't sound as if the Vantara people don't know what he is doing for his Indian friends. Several times in the chat, Guth asks the animal breeder for the list of animals on offer, which he then shares as an Excel spreadsheet in the chat. It contains the species names of the animals on offer, sample photos and prices.

Midas tamarins for 10,000 euros per pair
Golden-headed lion tamarins for 20,000 euros per pair
Golden lion tamarins for 45,000 to 50,000 euros per pair

And so on.

In addition to monkeys, the breeder also offers a particularly rare breed of cats, so-called safari cats for 40,000 euros a pair. These may be of interest to collectors looking for something special. But they are worthless for species conservation.

To clarify once again: the animals on offer were not bred by the breeder himself, but obtained from people in his network.

Martin Guth answers:

Martin Guth: Do you also have videos of the Golden Lion Tamarins, i.e. the ones they offered and also a copy of the CITES?

Golden Lion Tamarins are strictly protected and can therefore only be traded in exceptional cases.

The next day, Guth reminds the breeder of the videos again in a voice message. Apparently he is currently in Vantara, presumably with Dr. Gupta - even if Vantara denies this.

Martin Guth: I would urgently need, I'm with him right now, the videos of these two pairs of Golden Lion Tamarins. Please send them to me urgently.

It's pretty obvious that this is a commercial deal. The entire list of offers and the communication about it between Guth and the breeder allow no other conclusion in our eyes. And in the chat it gets even more specific.

The breeder writes:

Animal breeder: About down payment: for animals already with me, I would like 25% down payment. (...) And 50% deposit for animals that I still have to buy myself. You didn't want to transfer in Germany, you can transfer in cash in Dubai or to an account in Dubai, whichever suits you.

Martin Guth replies that a 50 percent deposit is ok for purchased animals. For stock animals that are already with the breeder, he suggests the following:

Martin Guth: We can pay 10 % down and 40 % when the export permit is available, and the remaining amount 7 days before shipment!

So this is what the payment modalities look like in concrete terms. But what sticks in my mind above all: Apparently Guth does not want to transfer the money, at least not to Germany. How he envisions the payment becomes clear in the further course of the chat.

Guth asks the breeder to first get the Midas tamarins and the white-lipped tamarins ready for export to India, i.e. to obtain the necessary papers. Then he asks:

Martin Guth: That can just be paid for in cash in Dubai, can't it?

Apparently he wants to pay for the monkeys in cash at a meeting with the breeder in Dubai. But the breeder sends Guth an invoice: the monkeys cost a total of 120,000 euros. Of this, 24,000 euros are to be paid in advance. The invoice shows the bank details of a company that has an account with a bank in Abu Dhabi. The breeder sends the note:

Animal breeder: Cash can be deposited into the account at any FAB ATM in the Emirates.

Martin Guth answers in a voice message:

Martin Guth: No, I don't do that via ATMs. Either he comes, confirms it, and then it's done, or it's transferred.

We asked Martin Guth who he meant in this message by "the one who confirms it"? Perhaps Dr. Gupta, who flies to Dubai with cash to pay the monkeys? But Martin Guth does not answer our specific questions. And the Vantara lawyers write that our claim is fictitious and defamatory. „Vantara is not involved in the purchase of animals.“

To me, the discussion about the payment arrangements between Guth and the breeder seems as if the flow of money is being concealed. Cash payments leave no trace. Just like transfers to some company account in Abu Dhabi. Transfers to Germany do.

And there is another indication that the deals that the breeder and Martin Guth are preparing here are intended to be concealed. Martin Guth points out to the breeder several times that there are no contracts between them or between the breeder and Vantara. In other words, no paper documenting a deal.

And the breeder also says in a voice message to Guth:

Animal breeder: It's not like we have any contracts. That's what you told me, that we can't make written contracts.

Martin Guth does not contradict this statement in the chat. Apparently he only wants to get his deals done in person or in this chat.

The image that emerges for us is that of an organization that commissions middlemen like Guth to buy animals for them without leaving any traces. Vantara denies this: there is no interest in concealment, as no trade takes place.

Whether Martin Guth is also in direct contact with Anant Ambani, the son of India's richest family, who founded and finances Vantara, is not entirely clear in the chat. Guth only mentions the name Ambani at one point. After the animal breeder indicates that he wants to speak to Ambani, Guth replies:

Martin Guth: Mr. Ambani will not make direct contact with anyone.

The Vantara lawyers described Anant Ambani's role in the zoo project to us as very small. Mr. Ambani is not involved in operational, administrative or day-to-day decisions for Vantara and is not in contact with Martin Guth.

Animal breeder: Aldabra giant tortoises, quite large animals, do you have them yet? A friend offered them to me.

Martin Guth: Yes, we do, but we are still looking for really big animals. We already have medium size and XL.

The rest of the chat between Guth and the breeder is also about animals that the breeder can apparently get. Aldabra giant tortoises, for example, the second largest tortoise species in the world. Apparently, a collection of these animals in various sizes is to be built up in Vantara. M, XL, XXL. This fits in with the statement of the animal dealer from the Czech Republic, who said that he should help to "complete" the animal population.

The Vantara lawyers write: The intention was not to build up a collection of animals of different sizes. Vantara looks after all animals, from the smallest frog to large mammals, that need care, rescue or protection.

Animal breeder: "Do you know anything like this? There are only 3 animals of this kind in Europe.

Martin Guth: English name? And how much does it cost or how can it be kept?

Animal breeder: Latin name: *Hypsignathus monstrosus*.
Nine are currently being introduced, price 35,000 for all.

Martin Guth: Okay, we'd take it, I think.

Now Guth and the breeder are talking about something really exotic that you should google: a species of flying fox from Africa with a particularly large skull, in German: Hammerkopf. (*Hypsignathus monstrosus*)

Guth is interested in the price and keeping of these animals. But obviously not a bit interested in whether these animals need to be rescued because of something. Animal rescue - the great promise of Vantara, which is now also the great promise of Martin Guth himself - only plays a marginal role in the entire chat. And only when it comes to great apes. Because Guth is also very interested in them.

The breeder hints in the chat that he not only has contacts in Dubai, where he can apparently obtain chimpanzees and orangutans. But that he also has contacts in some sanctuaries in Africa. Guth asks whether gorillas are also available there. Yes, he could try, writes the breeder.

In the sanctuaries in question, for example, young animals are cared for whose parents have been shot by poachers. The monkeys are then supposed to be released back into the wild. The breeder then suggests the following to Martin Guth:

Animal breeder: I think if we donate something, they would get the animals. My idea is this: We rescue the animals from rescue centers from all over the world. It's certainly cheaper than buying from dealers or dealing with the breeding coordinators for a long time.

Martin Guth's only response to this suggestion is: Yes.

Later, he makes it clear once again in a voice message what is apparently possible and desired in terms of rescue centers:

Martin Guth: So basically nothing that is illegal. So if it is, then support reconstruction or rescue centers. And only for animals that can no longer be released into the wild. That's the only thing that works, they reject everything else.

That sounds reasonable at first. No payment, only donations. And then only ask for animals that can no longer be released into the wild. But of course donations also arouse desires, especially

in countries where corruption reigns supreme. The sanctuaries for great apes are located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example. At the beginning of 2025, a high-ranking employee of the National Institute for Nature Conservation (IUCN) actually turned up at one of the country's sanctuaries. He brought with him a written order to transfer twelve chimpanzees from the sanctuary to the zoo in Kinshasa. Conservationists describe this zoo as a "shithole". So why should the chimpanzees be moved there, some 2000 kilometers away?

Conservationists suspect that they were to be rescued from the zoo in Kinshasa - in quotation marks - by moving them to Vantara. The IUCN has rejected this accusation as "blatantly false". However, several former IUCN employees are already on US sanctions lists - for corruption. If you want to know more about the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, you should read our previously published SZ story about Vantara, which, as I said, is linked in the show notes. And now back to the chat between Guth and the breeder.

The chat is quite long and the two of them go back and forth quite a bit, as you may have noticed. They exchange their first messages at the beginning of August 2024. The last one we have is in mid-February 2025. Guth seems quite annoyed with the breeder from time to time and keeps asking him whether he has the export papers for the animals on offer. The breeder also sounds annoyed because Guth hadn't paid the invoice for the Midas and white lipped tamarins or the feed and accommodation costs for all the animals that had been waiting for months to be exported to India. In particular a group of Goeldi's Marmosets.

Martin Guth (repeated): Yes the Goeldis are paid for, and we have already paid for their accommodation too.

These Goeldi's Marmosets are particularly interesting because this is obviously about a deal where the money has already been paid and not about the initiation of purchases for Vantara. In the chat, Martin Guth confirms several times that the Goeldi's Marmosets have already been purchased and paid for. Ten in total. According to our information, 80,000 euros were paid to the original owners for these 10 monkeys.

Apparently there was another intermediary between these owners and Martin Guth or Vantara. This alleged middleman paid for the monkeys and arranged the deal. He had also already found an exporter for the Goeldi's Marmosets, a zoo in North Rhine-Westphalia. This zoo had already received the export permits for the strictly protected monkeys from the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, with the Greens Zoological Rescue and Rehabilitation Center, the organization behind Vantara, listed as the importer. But then something must have gone wrong. In any case, the monkeys were not exported, but brought from the zoo to the breeder with whom Guth communicates in the chat.

This case shows us two important things: on the one hand, the presumed actual buyer, namely Vantara, was probably to be concealed by involving another intermediary. Secondly, the export of the monkeys was probably intended to look like a sale between two zoos. And not like a deal.

Vantara denies being the "actual buyer" of the Goeldi's Marmosets. This assumption is completely unfounded, the lawyers write, and contradicts the documented, non-commercial business model, which is based exclusively on rescue and conservation.

Martin Guth does not comment on the Goeldi's Marmosets.

Another voice message from Guth in the chat history is downright curious. He sends it from Bangkok, where he apparently spends a lot of time.

Martin Guth (spoken): I had a meeting here with the new Prime Minister yesterday and today, it's about primates. ... But I'll be back here on the 13th, there are zebras going.

Of course, we asked Martin Guth whether he really met with the new Prime Minister of Thailand, who has been in office since August 2024, to talk to her about primates. And which species it was specifically about. But he didn't answer that either.

Is Guth just trying to make himself important with this alleged meeting? To show off with political contacts that he doesn't even have? Unfortunately, Prime Minister Shinawatra's office did not respond to our inquiry, nor did the German embassy in Bangkok.

Nevertheless, this message makes it clear that Martin Guth must have been involved in other Vantara deals. Because Guth also says in the message that he will be back in Bangkok on the 13th because zebras are leaving then. These are his words. This most likely refers to September 13th, when zebras from Thailand will apparently be delivered to Vantara. We check this in our import data. And indeed: According to our data, 98 zebras were delivered from Thailand to Vantara not on September 13 but on September 12 by a company called Raylinka Co. Ltd. This company had already attracted attention years ago in connection with a dubious animal shipment.

Guth also does not comment on this delivery and his role in it. And Vantara denies that Guth had anything to do with this delivery.

Part 5: Conclusion

That was quite a lot of information. To summarize it again: Martin Guth denies being an animal buyer for Vantara. Vantara also denies this. However, the chat we have available gives a different picture: the former bouncer and debt collector Martin Guth, who then became the king of parrots, is now apparently a wild animal dealer operating worldwide, who is also said to buy strictly protected species on behalf of Vantara. So he works for one of the richest families in the world, jets back and forth between India, Dubai, Bangkok and Berlin, and meets powerful politicians and monarchs, at least that's what he writes to a business partner himself. It really is quite a cinematic life, to put it bluntly.

Do you remember this scene when Martin Guth is standing in Brazil in a blue polo shirt, happy and moved by the great moment he has made possible: the release of the Spix's macaws into the wild in their homeland?

Martin Guth: Smile all the time. It's so amazing. We were waiting for 16 years for this moment and the people in the Caatinga waited for 30 years. So I'm so glad that all went well.

Guth says in the video that he waited 16 years for this moment. But now the birds are safe again, in their homeland. Now the sky is blue again.

Martin Guth: So I'm very, very happy. Now we have blue skies over the Caatinga again.

But the question is, how long will the sky over the Caatinga continue to be Spix's Macaw blue? Because what does Guth's Vantara connection mean for the Spix's Macaw now?

I asked conservation expert Daniela Freyer whether Guth's role as a suspected animal procurer for Vantara could also have consequences for his role as a Spix's Macaw breeder and rescuer?

Daniela Freyer: If what you have told me from your research is true, then of course many things in Germany would have to be put to the test. First and foremost, from our point of view: why are such an organization and such a person given permission to import and export the rarest animal species? From our point of view, this is unacceptable.

Daniela Freyer is referring to the hundreds of parrots of protected species that the ACTP has been importing for years with the approval of the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation. This has to stop.

And Guth and his ACTP have fallen out with the Brazilians anyway.

On the one hand, the ACTP only recently had 41 more Spix's macaws flown to Brazil. That was in January 2025. A sign that the reintroduction program will continue despite the dispute. But the campaign was officially supported by Vantara of all people. Even the Vantara director - Dr. Gupta - flew to Brazil to receive the Spix's macaws together with a German model invited by the ACTP. Gupta and the model were photographed together and the pictures were distributed via social media.

But the Brazilians have so far rejected Vantara as an official partner in the Spix's macaw rescue program and any further deliveries of Spix's macaws to India. Which is not at all in line with the goals of Martin Guth and his association. The ACTP apparently wants to close its breeding facility in Tasdorf and move all the birds to India. This has not yet been made public, but we have an internal document from the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation from July 2024 that states this.

The lawyer for Guth and his association nevertheless denies it: the ACTP does not want to relocate - quote - "all the birds" to India.

But even ten, twenty or sixty more Spix's macaws going to India would probably lead to a definitive break between the ACTP and the Brazilians. And once these Spix's Macaws are in India, who controls what happens to them? The Indian CITES authority, which has approved tens of thousands of wild animal imports for Vantara? Including many animals of very dubious origin.

I think these Spix's macaws would then have disappeared into a rather dark canal for good. And the species could become extinct in the wild for a second time.

We started this podcast with the question of whether Martin Guth is actually concerned with species conservation or with the business of rare animals. Or both. Martin Guth has this question answered by his lawyer: Your client has been involved in species conservation for decades, he says, both passionately and successfully. He has never personally enriched himself through the trade in animals, nor has he ever been interested in business, either in whole or in part.

However, when I look at Guth's role in the Vantara project, this doesn't really seem to be true. Martin Guth is obviously primarily a trader, at least at the moment. And his goods are particularly rare and valuable animals.

And animals like these are then transferred around the world under the guise of species conservation and animal rescue so that rich and powerful men can build up a huge collection of animals and present themselves as benefactors.

The Washington Convention does not change any of this. On the contrary: the animals in Vantara apparently all have CITES papers, as the Vantara lawyers also emphasize. But no one can reconstruct how Vantara and its associated dealers and middlemen obtained these papers. To be honest, the CITES control system strikes me as a toothless tiger, to use the language of this podcast. Large species protection conferences are held, hundreds of pages of regulations are written, but in the end, in my opinion, far too little comes out of it to really curb the illegal wildlife trade.

Even experts like Daniela Freyer are frustrated by this:

Daniela Freyer: You're right, of course, there is a lot of frustration and we would like it all to happen much faster and more consistently and the fact that there are very rich people involved and their facilities are also registered as species conservation organizations and zoos doesn't make it any easier, of course, but actually CITES is our only tool really to tackle something like this.

Our podcast should actually be over at this point. But after we published the first two episodes, a new source got in touch with us. An animal keeper from a zoo in Germany. He has heard the

podcast, he says, and that he has information about the raid in Saxony in which more than 50 rare parrots were confiscated, as we reported in episodes 1 and 2.

The zookeeper says that he looks after some of the confiscated birds in his zoo. And he gives me the tip to get in touch with Simon Bruslund.

Bruslund is Danish, works for Copenhagen Zoo and is the parrot coordinator for the European Association of Zoos and Aquariums (EAZA). In this role, he is regularly contacted by authorities who have to accommodate confiscated birds.

Simon Bruslund: Yes, so when animals are confiscated in Europe, the authorities are usually also responsible for ensuring that these animals are housed properly. So they have a direct responsibility to ensure that the animals are well cared for.

Bruslund then tries to place the confiscated birds in zoos that already keep these species. This mainly involves particularly endangered species for which there are so-called EEPs, which are conservation breeding programs.

Around a year and a half ago, Bruslund was also involved in the raid in Saxony.

Simon Bruslund: Yes, we didn't deal directly with the Saxon authorities in the case, but with various other authorities that had assumed partial responsibility for these animals. And it was mainly about palm cockatoos, for which we have an EEP, which is an endangered species.

Bruslund tells me what we didn't know before: that palm cockatoos, Banks' black cockatoos, Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos and Lear's macaws were confiscated during the raid. But no Spix's macaws.

I talk to Bruslund for a while about the illegal parrot trade, which he has been observing for decades.

Simon Bruslund: There is a very long tradition of trading in parrots in Europe. Parrots have been kept for decades, centuries, and many of the species that are now being illegally imported and confiscated in Europe were once legally imported into Europe because there was no CITES in the past.

Bruslund says that it often happens in a similar way: Suddenly, alleged offspring of these rare species appear on the European market, but he suspects that they are actually smuggled birds that are only being passed off as offspring.

Simon Bruslund: We call this laundering.

A major problem here is the understaffed control authorities, says Bruslund. And that the greed for money of many parrot lovers is greater than their love of animals.

Simon Bruslund: The problem is that when money rules, it's not about the cause. It's not about birds, it's not about species conservation, it's about business.

Bruslund knows many of the people featured in this podcast personally. The Swiss Roland Messer, from whom Guth bought his first three Spix's macaws. Sheikh Al Thani from Qatar. And, of course, he also knows Martin Guth. But he doesn't want to say anything about him.

What remains in my mind after our conversation: The birds that were confiscated in Saxony are extremely rare on the European market. Especially red-tailed cockatoos, yellow-billed cockatoos and Lear's macaws. There is an organization that has imported these three species and also palm cockatoos to Germany and breeds them. Exactly: the ACTP.

Whether the accused in Saxony had these birds from the ACTP, i.e. from Martin Guths organisation ACTP does not answer us. Guth's lawyer writes that there is no connection between the confiscation in Saxony and the ACTP and Mr. Guth. Any statement in this direction lacks any factual basis.

Incidentally, Vantara continues to import masses of wild animals. We have now been able to analyze the import data up to the end of April 2025. According to this, around 6000 more wild animals have been added. A total of 45,000 wild animals should now be kept in Vantara.

If you have any information about these animals or Martin Guth's role in this crazy Vantara project, please get in touch. For example, by e-mail to info.investigativ@sz.de or via our secure anonymous mailbox at sz.de/investigativ. Perhaps this story about the parrot king is not quite finished after all.

This was the last episode of "The Parrot King" for the time being. We would be delighted if you recommend the podcast to others. And if you are interested in more SZ podcast series, then take a look at sz.de/podcast-series.

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