

Fashion District's Other Illegal Inventory: Animals

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Near Santee Alley, baby rabbits with no protection from the heat wait to be sold. Selling animals has been a visible, and illegal, industry since the 1990s.

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES — At the corner of 12th and Maple, two stacks of cages sit in the mid-afternoon August sun. Inside are baby rabbits with underdeveloped legs — barely supporting their body weight — shaking on top of wilted lettuce leaves.

On top are plastic aquariums occupied by young turtles. When a buyer asks to see a turtle, they are handled with jarring hands that cause the animal to panic, making them seem healthy and active to a potential pet owner.

While crackdowns on counterfeit designer wares and pirated DVD sales bring media attention and large fines, the Fashion District's illegal animal trade continues unabated.

According to a report by the City Attorney's office, many of the small animals found in the Fashion District, mostly near Santee Alley, are bred in rural animal farms as far away as Temecula. They are then transported to Los Angeles to be stored near Downtown, waiting to be sold by vendors who are closely monitored by what could be referred to as pet cartels.

"We have been working with LAPD and Animal Services, trying to remove illegal sales since 1999," said Lynn Myers, General Manager of the Fashion District Business Improvement District. "It's cruel treatment of animals." Often conditions keep the animals near death, Myers added.

Randall Tampa, Operations Director for the BID, has seen those conditions many times. "You will see these rabbits in small cages, in the hot sun, with only lettuce and carrots," said Tampa. "They are supposed to be fed pellets, and are sold malnourished."

Once the un-weaned baby rabbits are sold, some as young as a few days old, new pet owners discover their bunnies have diarrhea. "What people are buying are animals at the end of their lives," explained Tampa.

Sometimes the pet owners simply return and purchase another, and turnover is constant. "Animals have been found caged," said Tampa. "They are packed in vans sitting in lots with no protection from the heat."

Due to dense fur on bunnies, experienced pet owners keep a frozen bottle of water in the cage a rabbit can cool themselves. Walking by cages on Maple this past week, baby rabbits were seen only protected by shade provided by the upper cage, if they were lucky. None had water nearby, and many were sitting quietly, listless with fast shallow breathing; the first signs of heatstroke.

Health risks apply to humans as well. Turtles are often contaminated with salmonella. They are so contagious at a young age that turtles with shells smaller than 4 inches long have been illegal to sell or distribute in the U.S. since 1975.

"It's hard for kids to walk by when the animals are so cute," said Patricia Hernandez, shopping for summer wear with her three children. "I may have to give in one day."

When someone asked how much for one baby rabbit, the bunny vendor said "Twenty Dollars!" while looking around. Prices are known to fall to five dollars with negotiation.

While animals are sold year round, the peak season is Easter. That's when vendors add appeal by dressing baby rabbits in outfits, and ducks are added to the inventory of hamsters, iguanas, lizards and turtles, plus exotic birds smuggled in from southern Mexico.

Currently, fines for breaking ordinances on selling illegal pets are \$25, doing little to discourage sales.

LAPD Senior Lead Officer Randy McCain, who has enforced laws on illegal sales in the Fashion District since 1994, noted that arrests are made complicated when parents assign their children to be the front person in selling the small animals -- thwarting an immediate arrest. Still, arrests have been made, with Animal Control present to handle the rescue.

One afternoon of raids in the last few weeks collected more than 55 animals. That number hardly wiped out the population, according to Tampa. "We could easily reach that number everyday," he said.

Even when rescued, most animals are short of options. The Animal Cruelty Task Force, Animal Control, and the Department of Animal Regulations have few resources to find them homes.

Luckily, the baby rabbits have a caretaker in Lejla Hadzimuratovic, an actress and former member of PETA who was assaulted last year after taking photos of animal vendors at 12th and Maple. She and two other members of her group were battered by individuals who jumped out of a car to protect their investment.

Despite news coverage and an investigation, no charges were filed by Newton Division, she said. The incident did, however, prompt her to form an

organization, now operating as the non-profit [Bunnyworldfoundation](#), to heal and help find homes for newborn rabbits sold in the Fashion District.

"We are still working closely with LAPD," said Hadzimuratovic, who is making a documentary on the animal sales near Santee Alley. "Since June 2008, we have saved 450 baby rabbits, and found homes for 250 of them."

A quick walk around the Fashion District shows that the group still has a long way to go.