Illegal Philatelic Issues in the Name of the Republic of Rwanda, Depicting Sri Lankan Snake Images

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The Republic of Rwanda, a landlocked country in east-central Africa, is bordered by Uganda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Tanzania. The first philatelic materials known from the country were from German East Africa, until after World War II and conquest by Belgium. Postal usage of stamps indicated as from Rwanda-Urundi were then issued, up to the time of independence in 1961.

On 1 April 2003 (also, All Fool’s Day), an unknown agency, probably based in eastern Europe, produced a series of two labels, purportedly to be philatelic in nature, in the name of the Republic of Rwanda. They exclusively depict species of snakes found in Sri Lanka, images of which have been used without permission from watercolors executed by the third author of this note. With the exception of one image, these were published in a folio volume by the second author (de Silva 2009), the images previously available at the third author’s personal website.

The contents of the series include a miniature sheet and a souvenir sheet. The first item (Fig. 1) comprises a single label, the miniature sheet measuring 99 x 94 mm, the label itself, 51 x 44 mm, and depicts the Sri Lankan Green Pit Viper, Trimeresurus trigonocephalus, with a face value of 500 Rwandan Francs. On the bottom of the sheet are the words “The Wildlife Trusts”, and a matching logo of the Wildlife Trusts, showing the European Badger, Meles meles. The borders of the sheet show a xanthic Boa constrictor.

The souvenir sheet (Fig. 2) measures 137 x 109 mm, and comprises six labels, each measuring 38 x 43 mm, and features six species of snakes. The face values shown are 100 Rwandan Francs for the three stamps printed in the left column (showing Dryocalamus nympha, Trimeresurus trigonocephalus, and Aspidura trachyprocta) and 200 Rwandan Francs for the three stamps in the right column (featuring Xenochrophis piscator, Hypnale hypnale, and Lycodon striatus). Of these, only the image of T. trigonocephalus was not illustrated in de Silva (2009) but was printed earlier, in Jinasena’s (1998) portfolio of snake paintings. Additionally, the images of D. nympha, X. piscator, and H. hypnale have been printed inverted, while the image of A. trachyprocta has been printed upside down. On the top of the souvenir sheet are the words “The Wildlife Trusts” and the same logo, and at the bottom are the words, “Protect Mother Earth”. Additionally, the souvenir sheet is adorned with half-tones of numerous, and partial images of snakes in the form of a collage on the left and right margins of the sheet, that are also the work of Jinasena, the artist; all these were printed in the work of de Silva (2009). These images are as follows: left margin, top to bottom: Oligodon sublineatus, Lycodon aulicus, Amphipesma stolatum, and Coelognathus hel-
ena; right margin, top to bottom: Xenochrophis species, Boiga ceylonensis, Coelognathus helena, Dendrelaphis bifrenalis, and Amphiesma stolatum. Most of these images have been printed inverted, relative to the original paintings of Jinasena.

These labels can be found on sale online (including at eBay and Delcampe), retailing for about US$1–4 for the souvenir sheet. One dealer was even found selling “postally used” versions of the stamps from the souvenir sheet for US$4.10, with a “Rwanda” cancellation (genuine postmarks/cancellations on stamps typically bear names of post offices of transit, rather than country names).

The Wildlife Trusts (http://www.wildlife-trusts.org), an independent charity, is a group of 47 individual Wildlife Trusts that cover the United Kingdom and the Isle of Man and Alderney, and is Britain’s largest non-governmental organisation involved in ecological restoration of land and sea. In response to our email enquiry to the Trusts’ head office for further information on these philatelic issues, we received a response from Belinda Grindrod, Receptionist with the Trust, that the organization is “not aware of any Wildlife Trust branded stamps (and) if any did exist, they would have been produced in the UK, as UK stamps as we are UK based charitable organisations and have no involvement in conservation outside the UK”. Standard stamp catalogues (including those of Stanley Gibbons and Scott) do not list these stamps, as expected of such issues (termed “Cinderella”), and defined by Mackay 2003, as “virtually anything resembling a postage stamp, but not issued for postal purposes by a government postal administration and therefore usually omitted from the standard catalogues.”

In response to the aforementioned philatelic issue depicting Sri Lankan snakes, the postal agency of Rwanda wrote the following to the Universal Postal Union (UPU), an agency within the United Nations that coordinates postal policies among member nations, in addition to the worldwide postal system, that was published in its International Bureau Circular (McKeown 2003), distancing itself from the products and possible charges of copyright infringements:

“This is to apprise Universal Postal Union member countries and the World Association for the Development of Philately of the piracy that is again being perpetrated against Rwanda Post through the issue and sale of illegal postage stamps bearing the word ‘Rwanda’.

Unidentified, unscrupulous individuals are seeking to discredit our country by circulating postage stamps that they claim have been issued by Rwanda. This situation is even more reprehensible since it reflects badly on Rwanda’s moral and economic integrity. As the only body authorized to issue and disseminate postage stamps under Rwandan law, the National Post Office deplores this usurpation of its rights and condemns these shameful actions which undermine the reputation and tarnish the image of Rwandan philatelic products. We therefore ask the postal administrations of Union member countries and all their partners to support the efforts being made by the Rwandan postal administration to tackle this phenomenon which has a disastrous effect on our sector of activity. A non-exhaustive list of illegal postage stamps is annexed. We would like to take this opportunity to point out that philatelists wishing to receive information on Rwandan philatelic products should contact the National Post Office at the following address: National Post Office, P.O. Box 4, Kigali, Rwanda. Fax: (250) 514091; Tel: (250) 82703; (250) 516075. The Rwandan Post does not have a philatelic representative outside its territory.” The Rwandan Wildlife Trusts issues are listed thereafter.

Illegal issues of such labels by commercial enterprises or those printed for propaganda, is a major threat to postal revenue, can under-
mine the dignity of a nation’s people, cause political instability, and damage the investment value of philately. It is arguably akin to bank note counterfeiting (stamps being readily convertible to currency), and possibly also, money laundering, and has been classified as organised crime (Pocock 1999; Winick 2002). Thematic stamp collecting is a major market in philately (topics being as specific as ships, trains, US Presidents, celebrities, and especially floral and faunal groups). Amphibians and reptiles are a popular thematic topic, and at least one specific catalog exists for these groups (that of Domfil 1992).

On 1 January 2002, the WNS (World Numbering System) was established by the World Association for the Development of Philately and the Universal Postal Union. This database lists all postage stamps issued by member countries and available to the public online (http://www.wnsstamps.post/en). Nonetheless, about 40 postal authorities of the Universal Postal Union are still not contributors to the WNS.

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FIGURE 1. Miniature selvage purportedly issued by Rwanda, depicting *Trimeresurus trigonocephalus*, a snake endemic to Sri Lanka on the label, and a xanthic *Boa constrictor* on the sheet. Both species are non-indigenous to Africa.

FIGURE 2. Souvenir sheet purportedly issued by Rwanda, depicting snakes (including *Dryocalamus nympha*, *Trimeresurus trigonocephalus*, and *Aspidura trachyprocta*, in the left column and *Xenochrophis piscator*, *Hypnale hypnale*, and *Lycodon striatus* in the right column) from Sri Lanka. All species are non-indigenous to Africa.