

Press release

For immediate release

HKU and Hong Kong Police Force Collaborate to Dismantle Illegal Agarwood Trafficking Gang

December 4, 2024



Researchers from the Area of Ecology and Biodiversity of the School of Biological Sciences (SBS), The University of Hong Kong (HKU), played a vital role in providing evidence for a police case involving illegal harvesting of the vulnerable and protected incense trees (*Aquilaria sinensis*) on Lamma Island. This significant collaboration was further supported by the Centre for PanorOmic Sciences (CPOS), the LKS Faculty of Medicine, HKU.

In March 2023, the Hong Kong Police arrested a total of 13 individuals. On November 8, 2024, the final 10 prosecutions and convictions were completed, with significant sentences ranging from 30 to 50 months in prison. The suspects were carrying cut agarwood timber and multiple batches of logging tools, with a total value of about HK\$2.3 million. Leveraging HKU's cutting-edge biological identification techniques, the Police were able to positively confirm links between the suspects and the criminal activities, and applied for enhanced sentencing under the 'Organised and Serious Crimes Ordinance'. As a result, all ten defendants were sentenced to an additional 25% imprisonment.

This case marks the first strategic partnership between the Hong Kong Police Force and HKU, utilising advanced biological identification technology to provide evidence and leading to a significant breakthrough in the fight against environmental crimes.



HKU and the Police both highlighted the pivotal role of the collaboration, combining investigative techniques with scientific testing to dismantle the tree-cutting gang responsible for illicit agarwood activities:

‘During the arrest and investigation operation, the Police proactively contacted HKU, which used advanced biological identification technology to supply key evidence in this case, leading to the defendants' conviction and significantly enhancing the effectiveness of the Police in investigating similar cases in the future,’ said Detective KWAN Ka Ki, Senior Inspector of Police of the Regional Crime Unit Team Three, Marine Region.

‘By integrating scientific expertise with investigative capabilities of law enforcement in this landmark case, the partnership has not only brought offenders to justice but has also strengthened our collective ability to tackle criminal activity,’ adds Professor Juha MERILÄ, Associate Director (Area of Ecology and Biodiversity) and Chair Professor of Ecology and Biodiversity, SBS, HKU.

‘The proactive engagement between HKU and the Police, along with the recognition of this activity as Organised and Serious Crime, underscores a commitment to protecting Hong Kong's biodiversity and endangered species,’ said Associate Professor Amanda WHITFORT from the Department of Professional Legal Education, Faculty of Law, HKU.

Through continued collaboration and information sharing, the two entities aim to enhance efforts in combating cross-border environmental crimes and preserving the region's precious natural resources.

	
<p>1. An illegally harvested incense tree. Photo credit: Arthur Sands</p>	<p>2. Wounded <i>Aquilaria sinensis</i> can be found in areas affected by illegal logging. Photo credit: Uva Fung</p>



3. Another wounded *Aquilaria sinensis*.
Photo credit: Uva Fung



4. HKU utilised innovative biological identification technology to achieve a significant breakthrough in combating environmental crimes. This photo shows an illegally harvested incense Tree. Photo credit: Arthur Sands



5. After being cut down or injured it is difficult for *Aquilaria sinensis* to recover. Photo credit: Uva Fung



6. The Hong Kong Police recently issued a letter of commendation to scientists from the The University of Hong Kong, thanking their contributions to this case.

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