

#WORLD NEWS AUGUST 16, 2017 / 3:54 PM / 4 MONTHS AGO

Police believe thieves steal Venezuela zoo animals to eat them

Lenin Danieri, Isaac Urrutia

2 MIN READ



MARACAIBO, Venezuela (Reuters) - Venezuela authorities are investigating the theft of animals from a zoo in western state of Zulia that were likely snatched to be eaten, a further sign of hunger in a country struggling with chronic food shortages.



Tapirs are seen at the Zulia's Metropolitan Zoological Park in Maracaibo, Venezuela
August 16, 2017. REUTERS/Isaac Urrutia

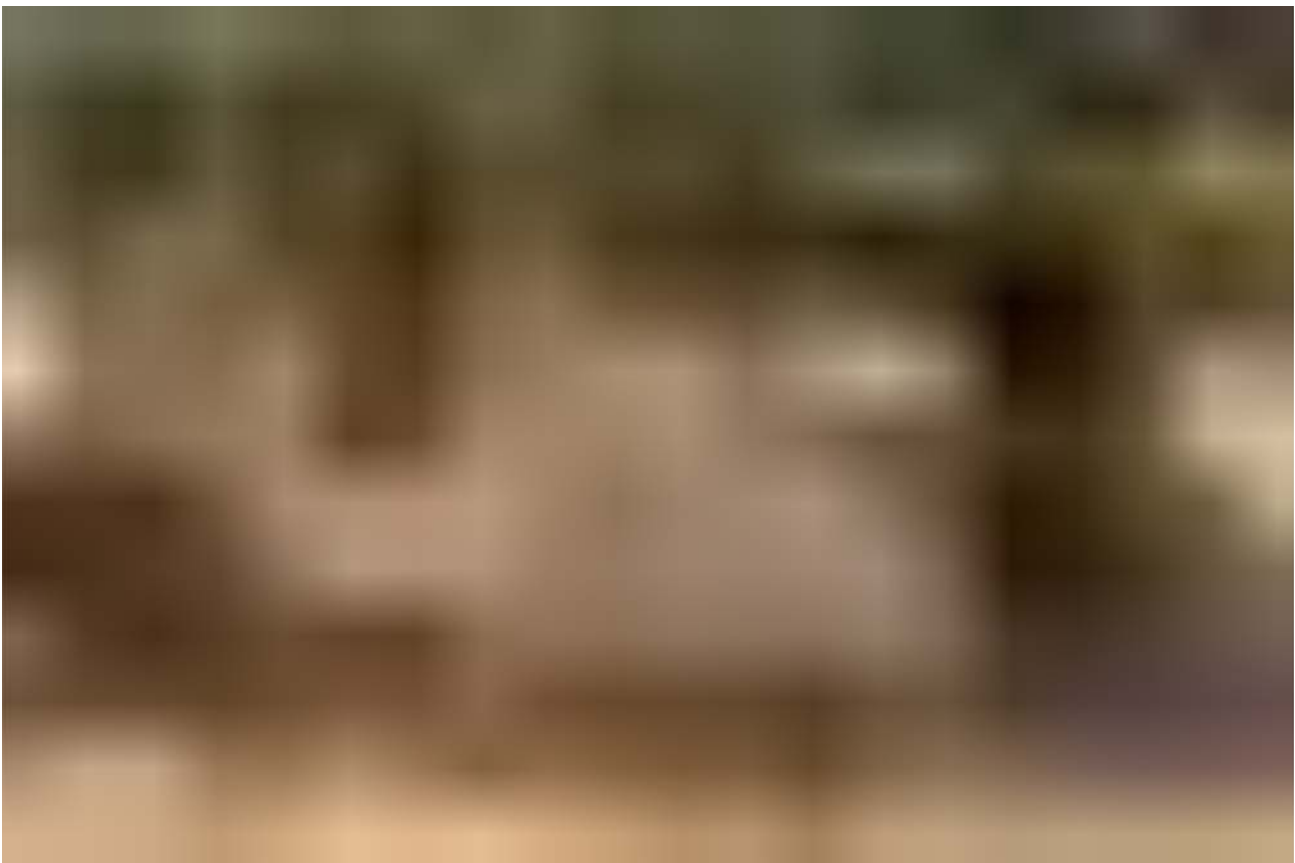
A police official said two collared peccaries, which are similar in appearance to boars, were stolen over the weekend from the Zulia Metropolitan Zoological Park in the sweltering city of Maracaibo near the Colombian border.

SPONSORED

“What we presume is that they (were taken) with the intention of eating them,” Luis Morales, an official for the Zulia division of the National Police, told reporters on Tuesday.

The chaotic collapse of the country's socialist economic model has created chronic food shortages that have fueled malnutrition and left millions seeking food anywhere they can find it, including in trash cans and dumpsters.

President Nicolas Maduro blames food shortages on opposition protests that have blocked streets and highways and a broader “economic war” led by adversaries with the help of Washington.



A camel and a llama are seen at the Zulia's Metropolitan Zoological Park in Maracaibo, Venezuela August 16, 2017. REUTERS/Isaac Urrutia

But zoo head Leonardo Nunez said a wave of thefts that in recent weeks had affected 10 species including a buffalo, which he said was cut into pieces, was orchestrated by “drug dealers” seeking to sell the animals.

“They take everything here! The animals weren’t stolen to be eaten,” Nunez said in an interview on Wednesday.



Slideshow (4 Images)

Mauricio Castillo, a former zoo director, said thieves had made off with two tapirs, a jungle animal that is also similar to a pig that is described as vulnerable to extinction by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Shortages have also left zoos without sufficient food to feed animals, with some 50 animals starving to death last year at a Caracas zoos, according to a union leader.

The government denied the animals had starved, insisting they had been treated “like family.”

Additional reporting by Isaac Urrutia in Maracaibo, Writing by Brian Ellsworth; Editing by Alexandra Ulmer and Marguerita Choy

Our Standards: [The Thomson Reuters Trust Principles.](#)

SPONSORED