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One of eight stuffed green sea turtles sits in the foreground as the media interview officials who participated in the seizure of the turtles and raw Philippine coral.

U.S. search of Korean tanker reveals rare sea turtles and coral

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ALAMEDA, Calif. — A search for drugs on a South Korean tanker revealed stuffed sea turtles belonging to an endangered species and about five tons of coral from protected Philippine reefs.

"This is unique. We've never seen this amount of coral before," said Rick Ellison, chief of U.S. Customs inspectors for the San Francisco waterfront.

Importation of the items violates federal and international laws prohibiting transporting and possessing endangered or protected wildlife.

Eight stuffed green sea turtles, one over 3 feet long, and 1,100 blooms of

coral were seized last week from the ship, the Bum Dong, which has since left for Korea. No charges were filed.

Crew members said the items were destined for Korea, authorities said.

There is an active market in endangered wildlife items in South Korea because it is not party to an international treaty regulating trade in such species, said Ginette Hemley with the World Wildlife Fund, based in Washington, D.C.

The eight turtles were valued at between \$3,000 and \$5,000, with the coral estimated to be worth \$30,000, said Scott Pearson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Customs had been tipped off that the ship, hauling coconut oil, might be carrying drugs, said Ellison.

He said no drugs were found, but the coral and turtles were discovered in the living areas of the ship.