

Illegal wildlife trade - Smuggled in syringes: how Nairobi became a nexus for the black market in giant harvester ants

Carlos Mureithi 13 May 2026

Court cases in Kenya point to a growing market for ants as exotic pets in Asia and Europe that has implications for conservation and biosecurity.

In the most recent case, a Chinese national, was sentenced to a year in prison and fined 1 million Kenyan shillings (£5,690) on 15 April after his arrest in March at Jomo Kenyatta international airport, where authorities found more than 2,200 live ants in specialised tubes in his luggage that was destined for China.

The insects included 1,948 *Messor cephalotes*, a prized species commonly known as the giant African harvester ant.

The presiding principal magistrate, Irene Gichobi, said a “deterrent sentence” was needed because of rising cases of ant smuggling in Kenya and the ecological impact of the trade.

Ant collectors and hobbyists in Asia and Europe pay large sums for the insects, which they put in formicariums, or ant farms, to observe and study their colonies and behaviours.

One giant African harvester queen ant can fetch up to £235 in exotic pet markets in Europe, Asia and North America. That is 40 times the Kenyan price.

Messor cephalotes is a species of harvester ant that is native to east Africa. The ant has vibrant red and black colours. It is the largest known species of the harvester ant – workers can grow up to 19 mm and queens up to 25 mm. It exhibits complex behaviour in its foraging and nest building. All these features make it popular among collectors and hobbyists. “They’re like the tigers of the ant world – just rare and beautiful and interesting,” said Dino Martins, an entomologist.

A queen mates with males then goes on to start a colony of up to hundreds of thousands of her offspring, female workers and soldiers, while continuing to produce eggs her entire life. Colonies can last decades. The ants build and live in large, circular nests and store seeds underground.

Collectors prize them for their “large size, complex colony-building, impressive foraging trails, and polymorphic workers”.

Giant African harvester ants as a keystone species – one considered essential in holding the ecosystem together – in grasslands and savannahs, playing roles such as collecting the seeds of grasses and dispersing them. They’re like the farmers of the grassland, making sure that there’s a lot of diversity of grasses, which is really important for livestock and wildlife. Over-harvesting the ants could cause devastating effects.

The places where the ants are moved could be affected, too. The introduction of ants outside their native ranges could make them invasive with dire environmental and economic consequences.

As grain collectors, the giant African harvester ant could impact crop growth in large agricultural fields, such as those in southern Asia or northern US. In ecological terms, moving species out of their native habitat is almost always a bad idea.