



no place for
poaching

New partnerships with state wildlife agencies put illegal hunters on notice

by ANDY MACALPINE

Whenever Lyle Smith hears about someone in his state poaching a wild animal, the Grants Pass, Ore., resident can't shake his guilt.

It's a feeling he'll probably endure for the rest of his life, a penance for the years he went out drinking on the weekends and helping his buddies take shots at unsuspecting animals in the middle of the night.

"We'd use a .22-caliber rifle and a spotlight," says the 64-year-old Smith, who often took home the deer the group illegally shot out of season and after hours to have them butchered. "There's this back road that runs parallel to the North Umpqua River, and there are a lot of flat fields back there where we'd see groups of deer. We'd shine a spotlight on one, and the guy in the backseat would do the shooting. Most of the time, we'd get one."

Smith, who also hunted legally for 18 years, says his poaching exploits were fueled by the thrill of killing and staying a step ahead of the Oregon State Police. But one day, he had an epiphany and stopped as suddenly as he'd started. "It was put into my mind and heart that it was the wrong thing to do. It was made crystal clear to me, and I never hunted again." In the years that followed, Smith served on the board of directors of the Rogue Valley Humane Society, where he continues to volunteer.

Today, he encourages citizens—even those who never set foot into the woods—to alert police if they see or hear anything that might lead to a poacher's arrest.

"These guys all talk," says Smith. "We did. Everyone at the mill [where we worked] and all our friends all knew we were doing it. These guys are all working a job somewhere or have a business and they're talking about it, too. I'm sure their friends and neighbors know what they're doing; they're just not telling."

Help from the public is essential to identifying poachers; with scarce wildlife enforcement resources and countless acres of open land, only a small percentage of perpetrators are ever caught and punished. But that may soon change. Through groundbreaking partnerships with state wildlife agencies that involve a reward pro-

gram for tipsters as well as the use of decoys to catch illegal hunters in the act, The HSUS is working to close the gap.

"In past years, animal protection organizations and state wildlife agencies found limited opportunities to work together," says Andrew Page, senior director of The HSUS's Wildlife Abuse Campaign. "But poaching is one area where we can put our differences aside and do something positive."

SENSELESS CRUELTY

U.S. wildlife officials estimate that for every one of the tens of millions of wild animals killed legally, another is killed illegally, without permits or in violation of laws pertaining to species and numbers of animals who can be killed, seasons in which they can be hunted, and weapons used. Motivations for poaching vary: Some video games, movies, and specialty magazines glorify images of the bloodshed, encouraging those already receptive to peer pressure or notions of family tradition to follow suit.

Whatever the reasons, it's rarely just for the meat. And in many cases, the crime goes beyond the kill. Lured by exorbitant black market prices on certain animal parts—a bear's gallbladder, prized for its use in traditional Asian medicine, is "worth more than gold," says Page—some hunters can become violent to protect their profits. Smith once knew of a particularly aggressive band of elk poachers who weren't afraid to pull a gun on other poachers trying to claim their prey. "You did not want to cross them," he says.

Some poachers inflict excessive suffering on animals. In January, three Wisconsin men were charged with multiple felony counts of killing animals by mistreatment after they allegedly chased and ran over five deer with snowmobiles. One deer's stomach was gutted; another deer who'd been dragged behind a snowmobile choked to death after being tied to a tree. One of the poachers, who had allegedly stolen the snowmobile he was driving, went out again

later that night, killed another deer, and took the animal home to be butchered, says Capt. Don Conat, a Waupaca County Sheriff's Department detective.

The brutality of the crimes galvanized the community, says Randy Stark, chief conservation warden for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. A reward fund with contributions from The HSUS and two local snowmobile clubs swelled to \$12,500 and attracted several tips that led police to the suspects. "The more egregious [the act], the more the public gets involved," says Stark, whose office has investigated 17 "thrill killing" cases over the past five years. "It's difficult to understand why these crimes happen. ... But [they] are clearly senseless acts; it's important that we create a significant deterrent effect so we get people to think twice before they engage in this behavior."

The HSUS works with prosecutors to reinforce that notion. A letter written

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by Danielle Thompson, deputy manager of The HSUS's Wildlife Abuse Campaign, outlined to the 13th Judicial District Attorney's office in New Mexico the impact of wildlife crimes committed in the state by a Colorado man. "When it came time for sentencing, that letter was one more voice out there letting the court know that that these crimes are important, that people do care," says Sgt. Chris Chadwick, Albuquerque district supervisor for the state's Game and Fish Department.

PATCHWORK OF PUNISHMENT

Under New Mexico's poaching law, defendant Kirt Darner was sentenced to \$10,000 in fines and 4,500 hours of community service for illegally transporting elk and receiving stolen bighorn sheep heads. Thompson helped identify a wildlife group where he could fulfill his service obligations. Darner also had to pay restitution and surrender his hunting and fishing rights.

The law is just one in a hodgepodge of state legislation on the issue. In Pennsylvania, one of the nation's largest hunting states,



The black market trade in bear gallbladders fuels poaching of American black bears.

poachers don't face jail time other than in misdemeanor cases involving threatened or endangered species (though an updated anti-poaching bill calling for increased penalties may be reintroduced this year in the state legislature). In contrast, a third offense for illegally hunting bears in West Virginia is a felony, and a conviction brings a \$5,000 to \$10,000 fine, up to five years in prison, and a lifetime hunting license revocation.

The Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact rises above these state-by-state disparities, aiming to catch poachers wherever they roam. An alliance of 31 member states, the compact stipulates that anyone who's had a hunting, fishing, or trapping license suspended or revoked for violating the relevant laws of one state is subject to lose those rights in the other states as well.

However strict poaching laws are, they're meaningless if not enforced. Wildlife agencies are funded in part by sales of hunting, fishing, and trapping licenses, but with participation in these activities on the decline for decades, "hunters can't even afford to police themselves anymore," Page says. When faced with these severe budget shortfalls, the already strapped agencies are forced to cut law enforcement activity even further.

The resultant animal suffering—and the sway that hunters hold over the state agencies—has The HSUS urging that agency funding come from additional sources, giving nonhunters a stake in the

management of the departments. In New Hampshire, as in some other states, efforts are under way to restructure the board that oversees the wildlife agency; decreased participation in hunting means that agencies too dependent on revenue from hunting fees "just don't have the money or resources to fund even the most essential programs," says Page.

In Texas, about 450 wardens must patrol 262,017 square miles—meaning each warden is responsible for more than 582 square miles. It's even worse in Minnesota, where 205 licensed officers must each patrol about 650 square miles. "Even if we're fully staffed—which we're not—that's a pretty big chunk of turf," says Capt. Ken Soring of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, who worked with The HSUS to offer a reward after a bear was shot but not killed last July. "And when you've got hunting, fishing, and trapping all occurring at the same time, that's a lot of activity for an officer to cover in a 650-square-mile area."



FIGHTING BACK

To create a perception of increased presence, agencies are making creative use of tools such as aircraft, photography and video, GPS, and decoys. They also reach out to their most effective allies: members of the public and law-abiding hunters, who can report poaching to tip hotlines or websites in 46 states. In Texas, authorities are loud and clear about the need for help; the Parks & Wildlife Department is planning a statewide billboard promotion of its Operation Game Thief hotline, with its logo displayed next to that of The HSUS, which sponsored part of the campaign.

To motivate people to report information that might help police, The HSUS's reward program, operated in conjunction with The HSUS Wildlife Land Trust, gives up to \$2,500 for a tip that leads to the conviction of a poacher. Of the 32 rewards offered in the first year of the program, totaling more than \$75,000, two were paid out. "It shows the scope of the problem—most of the time, they aren't caught," Page says.

One of the rewards generated the tip police needed to arrest a suspect for illegally killing a beloved American crocodile named Donna on the University of Miami campus; she was dismembered after being lured to shore with a bag of fish parts. If convicted of the third-degree felony, the suspect faces up to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine. The crime prevention group CrimeStoppers presented The HSUS with its 2008 Director's Award for its work on the case.

"The biggest tool—and many times it is overlooked—is the public," says Michigan Department of Natural Resources conservation officer Lt. Creig Grey, who collaborated with The HSUS on a reward case for an eagle killed in March 2008. "We have to have the public engaged in this [and] get everyone of the mindset that they're not taking an eagle or they're not taking a deer; it's that they're taking *your* eagle or they're taking *your* deer." ■

➤ **LOOK UP** states' hunting regulations and poaching tip line phone numbers at humansociety.org/poaching.

On the Hunt for Wildlife Abusers

An unusual bait catches
poachers in the act



The appearance of an elk grazing in the distance is probably a sight to behold for many people cruising down the road at Christmastime. But for four men on an aimless journey in northern Arizona, it was a sight to destroy.

Carrying guns but no hunting licenses, the men spotted the animal, pulled over, and quietly got out. They took one shot, then another.

But the elk didn't go down. Instead, officers emerged from the trees with shouts of "Stop shooting! Game and Fish!"

The entire sequence—caught on video—led to charges of hunting without licenses and tags, among others. And all for firing at a decoy.

"These guys ... were just shooting [at the elk] just to shoot at it," says Larry Phoenix, Arizona Game and Fish Department Region II field supervisor. "They all went to jail."

As state wildlife agencies cope with declining budgets and staff, officers are using decoys and other tactics to bring the poachers to them. Arizona's collection of decoys spans a broad range of the animal kingdom, from desert tortoises and gila monsters to turkeys, mule deer, and elk. And though they're usually made from dead animals confiscated from poachers or claimed from the side of the road, the specimens look like they could walk away at any time. Many are equipped with moving heads or tails. Ranging in price from a \$500 coyote to a \$5,000 bear, the decoys must be sophisticated enough to fool a seasoned poacher into taking a shot from a reasonable distance.

A typical operation starts with finding a location visible from the road and situated against a safe backdrop to ensure that hunters do not damage anything else. At least four officers are deployed: one to operate the remote-controlled decoy, one to film the incident, and at least two more to approach the shooter and issue citations.

"It is considered the same as shooting at an animal," Phoenix says. "The justice court in Arizona—and in most states—[has] determined that if a person would shoot a decoy, they would shoot if it were a live animal. So the charges are the same."

While many poaching cases sit for months without resolution, decoy programs in Arizona and other states have led to more convictions. The strategy also works for The HSUS Wildlife Land Trust, which runs a robotic decoy program on some of the 1.8 million acres of wildlife habitat it helps protect in 36 states and seven foreign countries.

The Trust donated its first decoy to a New York conservation officer in 2004 and has since donated eight more in seven other states, with several donations scheduled for early 2009. "We would like to be able to donate a decoy to every game warden who oversees one of our properties," says Jim Reed, the Trust's director of stewardship. "The biggest success of the program has been the goodwill it has created between the game wardens and Land Trust staff in looking out for wildlife."

Expansion of the program could bring not just more convictions but stricter penalties. Distribution of decoys to law enforcement and release of video of illegal hunters to the media would help encourage outraged citizens to lobby for stronger laws. The groundwork for such programs has been laid in some states, says Andrew Page, senior director of The HSUS's Wildlife Abuse Campaign.

"Before, we worked with law enforcement to protect animals on our own properties," he says. "Now we're working to make this a national effort."

➤ **TO DONATE** to The HSUS Wildlife Land Trust's decoy program, call 1-800-729-SAVE or visit wlt.org.