

Conservation Agents Work to Stop Wildlife Trafficking

The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are working together to stop wildlife trafficking. Wildlife trafficking consists of poaching or taking of a protected or managed species to sell for profit. This includes buying or selling living or dead animal parts such as bones, skins, meat, and other products in violation of state or federal laws.

From the United States and Canada to Eastern Europe, China, and Africa, wildlife trafficking is a worldwide problem with some cases having roots in Missouri. It has been noted that wildlife trafficking once was predominately a crime of opportunity committed by individuals or small groups. Currently that has changed to international criminal cartels that are well structured, highly organized, and capable of illegally moving large commercial volumes of wildlife and products.

Thousands of wildlife species are threatened every year by illegal wildlife trafficking globally. From killing elephants in Africa for their tusks to poaching rhinos for their horns, these represent just a few of the targeted species for international wildlife traffickers.

In response to this crisis, Presidential Executive Order 13648 was created to establish a task force and implement a plan to combat wildlife trafficking. The plan centers on three objectives: strengthening enforcement, reducing demand, and expanding international cooperation. This cooperation includes several wildlife trafficking investigations taking place in Missouri.

What MDC is doing

Conservation agents have had a big role in working to stop wildlife trafficking both locally and globally. Missouri conservation agents have been fighting illegal caviar trafficking from paddlefish poachers on Lake of the Ozarks, Truman Lake, and Table Rock Lake for years.

Caviar is a delicacy created by preserving fish roe in special salts. According to MDC, about 20 pounds of eggs or more can be harvested from a large, pregnant paddlefish.

“Caviar prices in illegal or black markets vary,” MDC Protection Division Chief Larry Yamnitz said. “A common black-market price is about \$13 an ounce. Therefore a single large female paddlefish with about 20 pounds of eggs is carrying about \$4,000 worth of potential caviar for black market sales.”

MDC agents, USFWS, and other state wildlife agencies have successfully stopped more than 100 people from Missouri and eight other states, from trafficking paddlefish eggs from Warsaw (Missouri) in order to sell them as caviar. Currently, 240 out of 256 state charges have been completed through the court system with more than \$61,000 in fines and court costs collected. Some federal cases are still on going.

“It’s important that our conservation agents were a part of this because this is just one example of Missouri’s wildlife being exploited for commercial gain,” Yamnitz said. “If MDC didn’t put a stop to this, it could have wiped out Missouri’s paddlefish.”

Missouri also played a role in another large, nationwide criminal investigation. The investigation continues, but so far it has led to 41 arrests, 30 convictions and the seizure of

smuggled elephant tusks and rhino horns with street value of more than \$75 million. Some of the rhino horns seized in the investigation were trafficked through a Macon (Missouri) resident.

“Wildlife trafficking also includes the illegal transportation of captive cervids, such as whitetail deer, across the U.S. This illegal movement of animals significantly increases the risk of spreading wildlife diseases such as Chronic Wasting Disease,” Yamnitz said. “Our agents are actively involved in several investigations involving this around the state.”

The Show-Me-State also has a healthy ginseng, turtle, and snake populations. The international demand for such species makes Missouri a prime location for illegal wildlife trafficking for those also.

Yamnitz added that illegal wildlife trafficking investigations are complicated and often take months to even years to complete. From conservation agents going undercover and dealing with intense situations to filling out paper work and using hi-tech video surveillance, agents have to be prepared for anything when dealing with illegal wildlife trafficking.

How the public can help

MDC encourages the public to report any wildlife violation or concerns of wildlife trafficking to a local conservation agent or by calling MDC’s Operation Game Thief hotline at 1-800-392-1111. If an individual provides information to MDC and it results in an arrest, that individual may receive a reward. The Conservation Federation of Missouri assigns the reward based on the severity of the violation involved. Rewards range from \$50 to \$1,000 or more.

If an individual would like to help more, MDC encourages them apply to become a conservation agent. MDC is accepting online applications through Aug. 29 for its next class of conservation agent trainees. Selected candidates will undergo 26 weeks of intense training in all facets of law enforcement and resource management. Learn more about becoming an agent on MDC’s website at <http://on.mo.gov/2aKSu7d>.