



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Agents Work with Indiana Department of Natural Resources to Stop Illegal Trade in Paddlefish Eggs

Most would not view the Hoosier homeland as the base of an illegal six-figure-per-year seafood operation but that's what U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Law Enforcement Agents and Indiana Conservation Officers found on the tributaries of the Ohio River, near Vevay, Ind.

Federal and state undercover officers posing as illegal fishermen for 1½ years infiltrated the ring, the members of which were illegally harvesting and selling "caviar" from the river's paddlefish.

On April 23, agents made 12 arrests on a combined 39 felony charges. A charge of "illegal sale of a wild animal" was included in each individual's list of charges. Officers also confiscated four boats, three vehicles, processing equipment, fishing equipment and records. Illicit drugs and large sums of cash were also taken from some of those arrested.

According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Midwest Region Special Agent in Charge Mary Jane Lavin, illegally catching these fish for interstate commercial sale is both a state and federal criminal offense. "These individuals illegally captured a public resource for private financial gain," said Lavin. "The state and federal agents who worked so hard on this case have sent a strong message to anyone who illegally takes fish or wildlife. You will be caught and you will be prosecuted."

Individuals charged included Albert Collins, Darrin Turner, Jerry Turner, Jonathon Turner, Keith Hodge, Larry "Pete" Barnes, Lou Rebholz, Lisa Mullins, Roger Kinman, Willard Napier, Gary McGinnis and Timothy Micah Sanger. All are southern Indiana residents.

Technically, caviar is sturgeon eggs; however, there is a shortage of sturgeon in the Caspian Sea, the main source for the culinary delicacy. That has created a lucrative worldwide market for paddlefish eggs, which have a similar taste, look and consistency to the real thing.

One paddlefish can yield \$600 to \$800 in eggs. Annual income for illegal harvesting is \$100,000 to \$400,000 per year per fisherman.

Paddlefish can be legally harvested by commercial fishermen in the main stream of the Ohio but all tributaries, where much of the fishing is taking place, is protected because of the heavy concentrations of spawning fish there.

Violators use snag hooks and nets to catch paddlefish, which are found mostly in the large river systems of the Mississippi River Basin. The fish are long-lived (males, 7-9 years; females, 10-12) and reach large sizes. The Indiana State Record weighed 106 pounds, 4 ounces.

Paddlefish are not believed to be endangered; however, due to their elusive nature, researching them is difficult. Paddlefish numbers are believed to be dropping, although the fish frequently occur in large groups, especially below dams, and are highly mobile. This gives the impression that they are abundant when in fact, they may not be, according to Bill James, Indiana state chief of fisheries.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million- acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American Tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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