

Case at a Glance:
Operation Spotted Cat

- Special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service documented the smuggling of leopard hides and skulls from animals unlawfully hunted in South Africa. This investigation, dubbed Operation Spotted Cat, secured eight successful prosecutions in the United States.
- Agents showed that two outfitters in South Africa took five U.S. hunters on unlawful leopard hunts in that country. Together, outfitters and hunters conspired to smuggle five leopard hides and three leopard skulls into Zimbabwe, where an official was bribed to furnish fraudulent permits for shipping the trophies to a taxidermist in the United States.
- Operation Spotted Cat began when this shipment of leopard trophies arrived at Denver International Airport from Zimbabwe on November 5, 2004. The intended recipient was a taxidermist in Denver.
- A Service wildlife inspector examined the shipment and discovered irregularities with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) permits accompanying the shipment and problems with other documentation. Agents interviewed the taxidermist, who admitted at that time that at least one of the hides had been smuggled into Zimbabwe from South Africa.
- Additional interviews with potential defendants yielded sufficient evidence to secure a grand jury indictment against two South African outfitters. The pair traveled to the United States in February 2007 to promote their services at a sportsman's show in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where they were arrested by Service special agents.
- Those charged in the case ultimately included five U.S. hunters and the Denver taxidermist in addition to the two South African nationals.
- When interviewed by Service investigators, the outfitters not only admitted helping the U.S. hunters smuggle illegally acquired leopard trophies out of South Africa, they also revealed that their business practices included capturing live leopards, drugging them so that they would be lethargic and less mobile, and releasing them at specific locations where they could bring hunters for an easy kill.
- Seven of the eight individuals charged in the case pleaded guilty to Federal charges – three to felony smuggling or Lacey Act violations and four to Lacey Act misdemeanors. (The Lacey Act prohibits the importation of wildlife unlawfully taken in violation of another Federal law or in violation of the laws of another country.)

- An outfitter who pleaded guilty to felony smuggling served an 18-month sentence in Federal prison and was then deported to South Africa.
- Monetary penalties for the six other individuals who entered guilty pleas totaled \$65,000. This amount includes \$45,000 in criminal fines and payment of \$20,000 to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for use in conservation work.
- The 8th defendant – Wayne Breitag of Aberdeen, South Dakota – was found guilty of one felony smuggling count and two felony Lacey Act violations by a Federal jury on October 30, 2009, after a four-day trial in U.S. District Court in Aberdeen.
- Breitag faces a sentence of up to 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for the smuggling conviction; the maximum penalty for each Lacey Act violation is five years in prison plus a \$250,000 fine. Maximum sentences on all three charges would total 30 years in prison and a fine of \$750,000.
- Leopards are protected under the CITES treaty as an Appendix I species. Valid export permits from the country of origin must be presented on import into the United States along with import permits issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- In addition, leopards in countries in southern Africa are listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (populations in north and central Africa are considered endangered). The Service allows individuals to import lawfully sport-hunted trophies from threatened populations with appropriate U.S. and foreign permits.
- Legal take of a leopard in South Africa requires a valid government-issued hunting permit. CITES authorities in South Africa set a yearly quota on the number of export permits issued by the country for CITES Appendix I species, such as leopards. Such permits are only issued for leopards killed under valid hunting permits.

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