

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

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## INTERIOR SECRETARY HICKEL OPENS DRIVE AGAINST ALLIGATOR POACHERS

Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel today announced that he was opening an immediate drive to end the slaughter of alligators in the Everglades National Park in Florida.

The Secretary will fly to the Everglades on Thursday, March 13, to investigate the situation first-hand.

"The danger of extinction of the alligator is so critical that I am assigning 10 additional Park Rangers to the Everglades to work exclusively on law enforcement," Secretary Hickel said. "We're declaring war on the poachers."

The Secretary also announced that the Department of Justice has agreed to prosecute poachers to the fullest extent possible under the law and to provide whatever additional legal support is necessary.

"Senator Edward Gurney and Representatives William Cramer, J. Herbert Burke and Louis Frey, Jr. of Florida have expressed their deep concern," the Secretary said. "They have made recommendations which I am including in this action."

In addition to increasing the number of Rangers assigned to Everglades Park, the National Park Service has begun recruiting long-time residents of the area to be trained as a "Conservation Posse" to reinforce the Rangers.

"We are looking for men who know the 'Clades like they know themselves," the Secretary said. "We want men who have lived in the swamps, who love wild-life, and who will dedicate themselves to preserving the alligator."

The reassignment of Rangers and transfer from other National Parks has begun. Four Rangers in Everglades Park are being relieved of all other duties and assigned specifically to alligator protection. Their former duties will be handled by personnel transferred from Shenandoah National Park, Blue Ridge Parkway and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Three former Everglades Rangers are being returned from Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Natchez Trace Parkway, and Vicksburg National Military Park.

"A million alligators once abounded in the Park, and now only about 20,000 remain," Secretary Hickel revealed. "Because of the limited manpower and equipment available to the National Park Service, poachers have been able to butcher the alligators by the thousands and sell the illicit hides at fancy prices.

"Bills now pending before Congress will help end this slaughter by prohibiting interstate commerce in alligators and their hides, and of course we are pushing their enactment."

Current penalties for poaching and for other violations related to the killing of alligators can result in fines up to \$10,000 and imprisonment up to 10 years, or both.

Secretary Hickel said the drive against poaching will cost approximately \$100,000 this year.

"I want to point out that this money will have to come out of other essential activities throughout the National Park system," the Secretary said.

"Lack of funds already is causing a deep cut in Park services throughout the country, and this additional drain will hurt badly. But our nation will be hurt even more if we do not act now to save irreplaceable wildlife."

The campaign in the Everglades will be directed by Park Superintendent John Raftery.

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