



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FEDERAL WILDLIFE AGENTS BAG ILLEGAL GUIDES IN 4-YEAR UNDERCOVER INVESTIGATION OF BIG GAME POACHING

A 4-year undercover investigation into violations of Federal and state laws protecting big game animals ended on February 24 with the expected arrest of at least 23 people and the serving of search warrants in 12 states, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Frank Dunkle announced today.

Almost 100 Federal and state wildlife agents participated in this morning's operations in Alaska, California, Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia, Dunkle said. Agents were expected to seize a number of wildlife trophy mounts as well as airplanes and vehicles involved in illegal activities.

The investigation initially focused on reports of airborne hunting and out-of-season taking of species such as caribou and brown bears in Alaska, but expanded to include the illegal killing of black bears and sale of bear parts. The suspected poaching of approximately 100 black bears in the southern Appalachians, including the area in and around Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, ultimately was revealed. Illegally acquired bear parts frequently were sold commercially, with hides bringing up to \$250 each, while gall bladders, valued for medicinal purposes in some Far East countries, sold for prices ranging up to \$300.

(over)

"I hope today's action warns those who wantonly disregard our Nation's game laws that they will be called to account," Dunkle said. "And I want to express my appreciation to the law-abiding hunters who provided information to our special agents throughout this investigation. Hunters have supported the restoration of many of the species involved in this case, and have every reason to be outraged by those who, for their own personal profit, essentially are stealing wildlife that belongs to all Americans. Illegal guides do a disservice both to sportsmen and to the many honest guides who abide by our laws and good hunting ethics."

Dunkle said the undercover operation initially was aimed at guides who assured "guaranteed hunts" and then violated Federal and state wildlife laws in order to provide their clients with the promised trophies. To gather more information on these operations, Fish and Wildlife Service special agents established "Abrams Creek Outfitters" in Purcellville, Va., about 50 miles from Washington, D.C. They advertised the bogus storefront office as a booking agency by which hunters could arrange big-game expeditions.

Among violations alleged to occur during the investigation in Alaska were the use of aircraft to herd big game animals to shooters and the transport of illegally taken wildlife across state lines -- both Federal violations. Agents also documented state violations, including the hunting of caribou and brown bear with the aid of unlicensed guides, and during closed seasons. One individual alleged to have conducted illegal guiding operations was reputed to have earned as much as \$50,000 in one week from clients willing to pay between \$5,000 and \$10,000 to take brown bears.

The investigation also turned up claims of illegal importation of foreign wildlife for tanning and mounting within the United States. In some cases, hides reportedly were shipped through improper ports of entry to avoid inspection by Service officers, while in others actual smuggling occurred.

(more)

Black bear once roamed 49 States but by the early 20th century their populations had been reduced severely by extensive timber harvesting, land clearing, and deliberate killing, including bounty hunting. Secure habitat provided by the establishment of national parks and forests and concerted State conservation efforts, supported by hunters through the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program, have succeeded in restoring the black bear to many parts of its former range. The species now is found in 30 states and strictly controlled hunting is permitted in many areas, including 32 Virginia counties. Last year, a total of 557 black bear were taken legally in the State. An estimated 40,000 black bears occur in the Appalachians from Alabama to Maine. Virginia's population is estimated at 2,200 to 2,500, with about 400 in and around Shenandoah National Park.

The 1971 Airborne Hunting Act makes it unlawful to shoot or harass wildlife from aircraft. The Lacey Act makes it a violation of Federal law to transport illegally taken wildlife across state lines. Under the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, increased penalties can range up to \$100,000 in fines or 1 year's imprisonment, or both, under the Airborne Hunting Act, and up to \$250,000 and 5 years' imprisonment, or both, under the Lacey Act.

U.S. Attorneys will prosecute Federal cases, assisted by lawyers from the Wildlife and Marine Resources Section of the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., who provided guidance during the investigation.

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Note to editors only: Limited sets of black and white photographs or color transparencies of evidence from this investigation are available by calling 202/343-5634.