



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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FEDERAL AGENTS CRACK DOWN ON WALRUS HEADHUNTERS, DRUGS-FOR-IVORY DEALERS

An 18-month undercover operation ended February 12 when Federal and State agents across Alaska arrested or charged 25 people for "headhunting" -- killing Alaska walrus for their ivory tusks and illegally trading the walrus heads and ivory for drugs or cash.

The investigation, code-named "Operation Whiteout," was conducted by special agents of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. According to U.S. Attorney Wevley W. Shea of Anchorage, the investigation is continuing and additional subjects are expected to be charged. Charges included unlawful sale and transport of marine mammal parts, wasteful killing of walrus, and distribution and conspiracy to distribute controlled substances.

"This Administration will not tolerate the wasteful slaughter of wildlife by a few individuals for their own personal gain," said Mike Hayden, Interior Department Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. "We recognize the right of Alaska Natives to follow a traditional subsistence lifestyle. It is our duty to conserve and manage these wildlife resources wisely for them and for all the American people."

Walrus are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. The Act generally prohibits the taking, transport, purchase, sale, and offer to purchase or sell marine mammals or their parts. Alaska Natives can take marine mammals for subsistence or to make traditional Native articles, but may not do so in a wasteful manner. The practice of "headhunting" -- killing a walrus simply for its ivory tusks -- has been ruled wasteful and is scorned by most Alaska Natives.

(more)

During a 1989 meeting, leaders of the Alaska Native walrus hunting community urged the Fish and Wildlife Service to investigate illegal walrus hunting. In 1990, agents of the Service's Branch of Special Operations set up a storefront business in Anchorage. Undercover agents bought and sold ivory wholesale. While in the business, undercover agents noted transactions in which suspects are alleged to have carried marijuana, cocaine, and cash to rural villages and traded them for walrus heads or ivory. Those charged in the case are alleged to have been involved with trading drugs for ivory between Anchorage and several rural Alaska villages, including Nome, Wales, and Gambell.

During the investigation, defendants illegally sold to undercover agents 693 pounds of raw ivory walrus tusks; 32 walrus heads; 6 polar bear hides; 9 sea otter hides; and 4 seal skins; as well as marijuana and cocaine.

Both walrus and polar bear populations are relatively stable and healthy, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director John Turner. Recent aerial surveys conducted jointly by U.S. and Soviet scientists estimated the walrus population at more than 200,000 in waters between the U.S. and Russia. From 3,000 to 5,000 polar bears are found in the pack ice off Alaska.

"To maintain healthy numbers and provide for the continued, legitimate use of these species, it is essential to curtail illegal harvest," Turner cautioned. "History provides us with many sad examples of what can happen even to abundant species when poaching is uncontrolled."

Charges against the defendants include violations of the Lacey Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act as well as drug charges. The Lacey Act and conspiracy charges carry a maximum penalty of 5 years in prison and/or a \$250,000 fine. The Marine Mammal Protection Act charges carry a maximum penalty of 1 year in prison and/or a \$100,000 fine.

The prosecution is being handled by the Department of Justice, Wildlife and Marine Resources Section, Land and Natural Resources Division, and the U.S. Attorney's office in Anchorage. Cooperators in the February 12 operation included the Alaska Department of Public Safety, the Alaska National Guard, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.