

Enforcing Federal Wildlife Laws on the US-Mexico Border

By Al Barrus, Public Affairs Specialist

Sounds of fans

What is up everyone?

This is Al Barrus with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southwest Region.

For this episode of Shop Talk, we are at the international border crossing in Nogales Az and you can hear those giant fans and portable coolers that accompany the customs officers under that sweltering borderland sun.

Today's episode is a day in the life with federal wildlife inspector Jeff Moore.

Jeff begins to narrate....

If there are snakes on a plane, it's a federal wildlife inspector's job to find them to ensure they enter or exit the country legally. At a seaport, wildlife inspectors need to catch anything fishy that might represent illegal trade in wildlife.

On our southern border with Mexico, the wildlife inspector's work takes on a different dynamic. Why did the desert tortoise cross the border? The reasons can vary, but if it's being carried by a human, it's a wildlife inspector's job to know.

Federal Wildlife Inspector [WI] Jeff Moore is the only person with that title in Arizona, where no work day is the same as the next. As a law enforcement officer with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS] Southwest Region, he finds himself as involved with national security as he is in wildlife conservation. Moore is tasked with overseeing all the legal and illegal wildlife items crossing via ports of entry in Arizona and New Mexico. This means he has to cover a total of 11 ports spread over two states with a combined size equal to Texas. He's the sole wildlife inspector for 28 percent of the southern border.

Inspection areas are often just a stone's throw from the international border line.

“Up on that ridge you can sometimes see the human traffickers and drug smugglers watching the border patrol. People will climb the fence and sneak across,” said Moore. “I've been here when U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP] officers caught a big money seizure going south, and from up there they actually fired down onto us from that hill, so we were taking rounds. There are shootings here every two or three years. Usually it's the drug cartels, or vehicles fleeing to Mexico.”

Although there is the threat of violence, Arizona border ports are pretty safe. Officers at the border do need to pay attention to what's going on. While WI Moore is checking a group of hunters with their hunting trophies, CBP officers just a few meters away are discovering cars loaded with drugs. What makes it precarious is its vast openness. Along the border in Arizona there's often no more than an imaginary line on a map that separates Mexico from the U.S.

While protecting our borders from drug smugglers, human traffickers, and gun runners is in the purview of Customs and Border Protection [CBP], WI Moore is right there on the border with them, defending our nation from those same criminals. The difference is which laws and treaties he enforces. CBP is looking for drugs, guns, and money. Wildlife officers are checking for illegal wildlife: think live birds and reptiles, or elephant skin boots or saddles.

They're both at the border checking the same people. Wildlife inspectors have very specialized training, and they're on the lookout for wildlife, as well as products made from wildlife, whether as hunting trophies, animals for the pet trade, or perhaps boots made from exotic hide, coming through ports of entry from Mexico.

A big part of Jeff's day-to-day is inspecting hunting trophies: hunted by American sportsman, transported by Mexican guides and ranchers who coordinate everything for hunters. Some of the American sportsmen cross the border with their fresh trophies, many others pay Mexican guides and ranchers to do the trophy preparation and importation.

This tends to be big source of income for Mexican landowners as they can make a up to \$10,000 or more for a large mule deer, and over \$50,000 for a bighorn sheep. So they do their best to communicate with wildlife inspectors in order to stay in business, and make sure their clients trophies are legally imported with all the required paperwork.

And these guided hunts are good for conservation as well. The money Mexican ranchers earn from offering these hunts gives them reason to protect and enhance the species and habitats. The cash from a hunt may be used to build a new water catchment that may benefit many different species.

It's at the cargo port where the importers declare what they have. The customs officers have the commercial items unloaded, then they call Jeff to come check it out. One importer has mule deer, big horn sheep, and javelina trophies he's bringing in for his customers.

"Bighorn sheep are protected under CITES as Appendix II species, so they require additional paperwork that deer and javelina don't. Deer and javelina just require a hunting tag and a hunting license," said Jeff.

CITES stands for Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. While CITES is an international treaty, it is enforced under the Endangered Species Act. That's one of the many laws that Jeff's charged with enforcing.

"Hunters in Mexico can often take as many animals as they can pay for. For example with bighorn sheep, some states like Arizona offer one sheep per lifetime per hunter. Alternatively, a sportsman can travel to Mexico and take a sheep every year.

"Mexico follows the European game management model, where the animals belong to the landowner who can sell the right to hunt the animals, while in the U.S. we follow the North American model where the animals belong to the public. Thus, states like Arizona and New Mexico have game departments that regulate the hunting of wildlife.

"On the other hand, in Mexico all the hunting takes place on private land. The Mexican government works with the landowners on the number of wildlife that can be taken."

CITES aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. With some the more threatened the species is, the more it's regulated. The CITES treaty effectively prohibits the sale of many species that people want to buy as exotic pets, so smugglers often use inhumane measures to get those animals to the pet trade. Larger, commercial seizures are often discovered by wildlife inspectors, but later turned over to a USFWS special agent for criminal investigation. Jeff conducts more day to day inspections with U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers at the ports of entry.

"I've seen people put birds in toilet paper tubes, socks, hair curlers. I've seen birds in bags. One year there was a parrot in a wrapped Christmas present they claimed was for a family member and they didn't want to unwrap it. When we x-rayed it, we saw the cage and the bird.

In these cases USFWS needs to work with the CBP agriculture specialist to determine the best course of action. Many of the birds are protected and the cost of quarantining these birds is not cheap, with the bill running up to \$1,000 dollars or more. USFWS will often issue the importer a ticket for the act to help discourage the attempts.

When smuggled birds or other wildlife are discovered, the perpetrator may face criminal smuggling charges. For most of the seizures we can work with local zoos to care for the animals while the case is handled. However with birds there are often disease risks that require all birds are tested and shipped off to U.S. Department of Agriculture's quarantine center on the east coast.

This means increased cost that USFWS has to pay for. Often the importers will be issued a violation notice for the act, while others can face criminal charges.

Other violators are simply pet owners who are unaware of laws, and are traveling with exotic pets. In many of those cases, Jeff has to take in the animal. His office is a temporary home to multiple animals brought in as pets, lacking permits. It's also a warehouse for seized animals products.

“This chameleon is from the Arabian Peninsula. The owner's from Mexico and brought him in without the permit. He declared him, he just doesn't have the permit. We don't have any place that will take him, so we have some options: do we seize him, and keep him from the owner and then provide for his care long-term? Or do we give him back to the owner, refuse him entry, and have the owner take them back to Mexico, then put the owner in the system and warn the owner if he ever brings them in again he'll face further penalties?

“We just have limited space,” said Jeff.

A lot of live animals are transported without permits, and Jeff's office already has two Gila monsters, a Mexican mud turtle, and the chameleon. Recently they had three rattlesnakes, which they were able to donate to a local zoo.

The Gila monsters are used in public outreach programs, which is a great way to educate people who may be unaware of the laws. And kids enjoy seeing live wildlife in the classroom.

Perhaps the most common, and the most problematic, live wildlife Jeff encounters are desert tortoises, which are restricted in Arizona. It's illegal under Arizona state law to import them without a permit. This is to curtail the spread of upper respiratory disease common among captive desert tortoises, which can have a negative impact on the wildlife population if an infected pet tortoise gets loose.

Desert tortoises are long-lived animals, and it's not good for them or the environment to be released back into the wild. Even if tortoise species native to the area are released, they could be a genetically distinct subspecies, and this could harm the local gene pools. That's why Arizona prohibits the release of them into the wild.

While Jeff's job is to enforce laws, a big part of his work is educating. He encourages people to adopt them.

“Tortoises are the main live animals we get here. It’s difficult placing them in a permanent home. People may see or hear about friends that have them by legal means as pets. In Arizona it’s a very strict process to adopt a desert tortoise. Some folks when on vacation in Mexico may come across a tortoise in the wild and remove it. This is often not only a violation of Mexico law, but also of U.S. law under the Lacey Act and the Endangered Species Act, as well as a violation of state law.

“If you want to have a pet tortoise, you can adopt them from local government agencies. They have a lot of seized animals from people who are collecting and breeding them illegally and trying to sell them.

“As long as you don’t spray for weeds, you can let them loose in your backyard, build them a burrow or two, they will weed your backyard. They are pretty much maintenance free,” said Jeff.

The way undeclared wildlife is discovered is through random inspection. Jeff does this alongside the federal CBP agriculture specialist and officers. In fact, that’s what he did before he became a wildlife inspector.

When he’s doing inspections, the difference between him and customs officers is his uniform, and the questions he asks the travelers. He attended seven weeks of instruction at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, where he learned federal wildlife laws and how to enforce them.

“No iguanas, no deer meat, no octopus, squid, cowboy boots with exotic skins, anything like that?” he asks a family coming through the Port of Entry from central Mexico. “Often if you ask folks if they have any wildlife or wildlife products they will say no, but if you start asking for common encountered items they tend to be more forthcoming.”

All vehicles crossing drive by the agriculture and wildlife inspection station, but most aren’t stopped. The majority have local plates from either Arizona or Sonora, and often they are commuting between work and home.

When they have plates from other places, that sends off a red flag. This vehicle stands out with its California plates, and is loaded with luggage. The family spent part of their school-aged kids’ vacation visiting family in Mexico.

“OK, agricultural will be over here in a little bit. They’ll ask you if you have any fruits, vegetables, plants, animals, make sure you tell them to avoid any penalties, alright?” said Jeff.

During the inspection by CBP agriculture officers, the family hands over a bag of fresh guava leaves they carried in the car. The leaves are for tea: a traditional home remedy. However, uncooked plants can carry harmful insects, especially if they come from farther south into Latin America. So these leaves are denied entry and go into a special garbage bin.

Jeff takes no pleasure in tossing the belongings of working people, or telling kids they can't keep that new pet turtle. More often, his work involves educating people face to face on the laws and regulations, rather than pressing charges or writing citations. This isn't easy work, but it serves a noble cause.

Officer Moore started his federal career as an enlisted infantryman for the U.S. Marine Corps. During his time as a Marine grunt, he was stationed in southern Spain, guarding a naval communication site. In his free time he learned to SCUBA dive. He stopped diving when he came back to his landlocked home state of Arizona.

"I got out, started working for Boeing, building F-18s, Minuteman missiles, C-17s. Then I started going to school. I got my science degree in applied wildlife management. I planned to work for the state government, and I was actually an intern there around the time I graduated in 2007.

"That's when the economy took a downturn, and budgets got tight, so I came on here with U.S. Customs and Border Protection as an agricultural specialist. That's when I first found out about the wildlife inspector field.

"In 2015, the wildlife inspector here transferred, then I applied for this job. I even took a cut in pay," said Jeff.

The change in mission was well worth the reduced pay-grade for Jeff. It was also at that time he got back into SCUBA diving in his free time. Now he goes on multiple trips each year, traveling to see the various tropical coral reefs around the world. Conservation is an important part of his personal life, as the eco-systems he enjoys are enhanced by his work as a wildlife inspector.

"I mostly go to see the coral reefs, the marine life, the sea turtles. The coral is almost destroyed every where. Even some sun tan lotions are toxic to the corals. Hawaii recently banned those to protect their coral. Some resort cities will build hotels right on top of the reefs, and I won't spend my money there.

"Even while on vacation, I find myself checking out vendors, checking for wildlife products being offered for sale to tourist, be it elephant skin boots in Mexico, or sea turtle jewelry and

bracelets in the Maldives. I even catch myself scanning my fellow passengers, looking for signs of restrictive and prohibitive wildlife being brought back to the U.S.”

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Video - Sniffing Out Illegal Wildlife Shipments

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awx5Z1hiwDE>

Other reading - <https://medium.com/@USFWS/wildlife-detector-dogs-at-work-dd84c7ae394b>

Link - For Arizona residents interested in adopting a desert tortoise -

<https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/nongamemanagement/tortoise/captivecare/>

Photos -



Wildlife Inspector Jeff Moore inspects the paperwork for a bighorn sheep hunting trophy at the commercial port in Nogales, Arizona. Credit Al Barrus/USFWS



The differences between the U.S. and Mexico at the border are easy to see. While Nogales, Mexico has a population of over 200,000; Nogales, Arizona has a population of just 20,000, and is the busiest port in Arizona. While the contrasts are easy to see, wildlife inspectors on both sides of the border work hard toward a shared goal of wildlife conservation. Credit Al Barrus/USFWS



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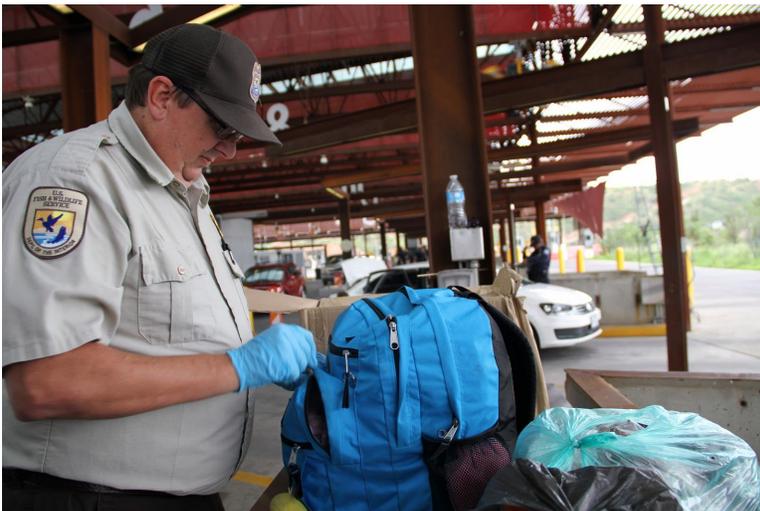
Wildlife Inspector Jeff Moore checks the identification of a vehicle at the Nogales, Arizona, border. He asks them if they have any wildlife products, such as exotic animal skin boots or a pet tortoise. Credit Al Barrus/USFWS



Wildlife Inspector Jeff Moore (left) waits as a Customs and Border Protection Agriculture Specialist Michelle Leonardi asks about fresh fruits, vegetables, and other items of concern for the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Agriculture. While they wear different uniforms, their work is similar. What differs is the laws they enforce. Credit Al Barrus/USFWS



Wildlife Inspector Jeff Moore (left) waits as a Customs and Border Protection Agriculture Specialist Michelle Leonardi asks about fresh fruits, vegetables, and other items of concern for the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Agriculture. While they wear different uniforms, their work is similar. What differs is the laws they enforce. Credit AI Barrus/USFWS



Wildlife Inspector Jeff Moore inspects a backpack from a vehicle of concern. Many Families will travel during school breaks to visit relatives in Mexico. This tend to lead to a increase in Vehicle traffic and a increase in wildlife items being found. Credit AI Barrus/USFWS.



Wildlife Inspector Jeff Moore (right) and Customs and Border Protection Agriculture Specialist Michelle Leonardi discuss the legality of the bottled white fluid asks about fresh fruits, vegetables, and other items of concern for the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Agriculture. While they wear different uniforms, their work is similar. What differs is the laws they enforce. Credit Al Barrus/USFWS



This Motorist was refused entry to Mexico when he was unable to prove the animal was legally taken under U.S. Laws. Wildlife Inspector Jeff Moore worked with the local Arizona Game and Fish Game Warden to seize the deer carcass and educate the Motorist on game laws. This is an example of how the U.S. and Mexico work together to enforce wildlife laws. Credit Jeff Moore / USFWS



Jeff Moore as a Marine infantryman.