

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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MAJOR ALLIGATOR INVESTIGATION CONCLUDED

A landmark law enforcement case to protect endangered wildlife has wound up with sentencing of two men and fines totaling \$9,500. The Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service rates the case, involving the largest capture ever of contraband alligator hides, as one of the most unusual in its history.

Jacques Klapisch, 54, and his employer, Meg Import Corporation, both of Newark, New Jersey, pleaded guilty to criminal violations of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 for receiving and possessing illegally taken alligator skins shipped in interstate commerce. Klapisch was fined \$2,500 and placed on probation for 3 years. Meg Import Corporation was fined \$5,000.

John T. Kelly, 34, who was responsible for obtaining the skins in Louisiana, pleaded guilty to a charge of conspiracy to transport them to Meg Import. Kelly was sentenced to serve 6 months but sentence was suspended and he was placed on probation for 2 years and fined \$2,000. Kelley lives in Breezy Point, New York. Both men were sentenced in February by Judge Herbert J. Stern at the U.S. District Court in Newark.

When arrested, Klapisch and Kelley were grading and salting a total of 509 raw and untanned alligator hides worth more than \$30,000, in preparation for shipment to Europe.

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The skins were confiscated on September 17, 1974, at Meg Import Corporation after special agents of the Service had conducted a 3-day air and ground surveillance of an automobile thought to be loaded with alligator hides.

Agents began following the vehicle in New Orleans after they observed what they thought were bags of alligator hides being delivered to a suspect in a hotel parking lot. Agents followed the car as it left New Orleans, through the South, up the east coast and ultimately to Newark. In heavy traffic areas and on back country roads, light aircraft were used to keep track of the car to avoid being too conspicuous.

During the surveillance, one special agent posed as a Delaware Memorial Bridge toll booth operator so he could smell the distinct odor of freshly salted alligator hides when the driver rolled down his window. In Newark, another agent, who had been following the car for 3 days, posed, unshaven, as a derelict lying in a gutter to observe the hides being unloaded in front of the import company.

U.S. Attorney Jonathan L. Goldstein had high praise for the special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as well as the Louisiana State Wildlife and Fisheries Commission for their cooperation in the investigation and preparation of the case.

The investigation was part of a continuing effort by the Fish and Wildlife Service to halt the illegal commercialization of the nation's wildlife.

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