



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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34 CHARGED WITH VIOLATING WILDLIFE LAWS AS FEDERAL UNDERCOVER OPERATION COMES TO AN END

The Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced October 4 that 34 people from 9 States have been charged in Montana and Colorado with violating State and Federal wildlife laws. These actions conclude a 3-year undercover investigation of illegal poaching and smuggling of native and exotic wildlife.

Nearly 200 Federal and State law enforcement agents participated in the arrests and served 20 search warrants. States involved include Montana, Colorado, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Alaska, Arizona, Oklahoma, Texas, Oregon, and California. These actions are a result of intensive investigation and strong coordination between the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Justice, and the U.S. Attorneys for Colorado and Montana.

Fish and Wildlife Service agents covertly ran a tanning and taxidermy business in Colorado, where they detected smuggling of endangered wildlife skins into the United States and illegal trade in protected species of big game and rare birds. Further charges involve illegal guided hunts around Yellowstone National Park and in Mexico. Some indictments allege illicit trade to the Orient of wildlife parts and products supposed to have medicinal and aphrodisiacal properties.

Other charges include smuggling skins from species protected by the Endangered Species Act -- especially the cheetah, jaguar, ocelot, leopard, margay, and American crocodile -- into the United States through the mail, in containerized cargo ships, and in hidden compartments of vehicles; violations of the Lacey Act for interstate transportation of illegally-taken North American wildlife, including bighorn sheep, mountain goats, elk, mule deer, black bear, antelope, mountain lions, bobcat, and lynx; Eagle Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act violations regarding the killing and selling of eagles, hawks, owls, flamingo, scarlet ibis, and songbirds; and conspiracy.

(over)

Commenting on the investigation, Fish and Wildlife Service Director Robert Jantzen said, "Public support for laws such as the Endangered Species Act has helped reduce the commercial success of illegal trade in spotted cats in this country. It is clear, however, that an underground market for many species has continued to make poaching a profitable, if risky, activity. We hope that our action today will put potential violators on notice of our determination to stop commercial exploitation of our wildlife."

The investigation found that bighorn sheep skulls might sell on the black market for as much as \$5,000. Finished and tanned tiger and jaguar skins can sell for \$3,000-\$4,000. Bear gall bladders -- prized in the Far East for their supposed medicinal and aphrodisiacal values -- can bring \$3,000 a pound when properly ground, while other bear parts are used in bear-paw soup, which is considered a delicacy.

-- FWS-50 --

Note to news media: Black and white photos and video cassettes of evidence taken in this investigation are available on loan from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Audio-Visual Office, 343-8770.