



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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### ILLEGAL COMMERCE IN STRIPED BASS AND OTHER WILDLIFE REVEALED BY EASTERN UNDERCOVER OPERATION

After 2 years of undercover investigation, Federal and State wildlife agents this morning began serving arrest and search warrants and filing charges against approximately 130 people for illegal commerce in fish and wildlife, including declining Chesapeake Bay striped bass.

Robert Jantzen, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said this morning's action involved Service special agents and State conservation officers from Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Delaware, New York, Maryland, and Virginia. It capped two separate investigations that began in Pennsylvania and North Carolina, respectively, and ultimately spread to Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

"The arrests," Jantzen said, "are tangible demonstrations of the Department's commitment to enforce the laws protecting threatened fish and wildlife resources. Secretary Clark and the Administration place the highest priority on vigorous enforcement of these laws."

During the investigations, Federal and State agents uncovered a significant illegal market for striped bass from both the Chesapeake Bay and inland waters of North Carolina. The Chesapeake Bay fish included large fish important to reproduction of the bay's striped bass, which are also known as rockfish. The investigations also revealed evidence of many violations involving illegal taking and sale of deer, waterfowl, hawks, eagles, small game species, and song birds.

Jantzen noted that the illegal harvest of large striped bass has been documented at a time when Atlantic coastal States have been trying to reduce the catch of this important commercial and recreational fish.

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"Striped bass stocks in the Chesapeake Bay and elsewhere along the Atlantic coast have been declining for more than a decade," Jantzen said. "We believe that illegal harvest of these important spawning fish has contributed to that decline."

The Pennsylvania investigation began in the fall of 1982 after information indicated the existence of increasing illegal activity in several species of wildlife. The Service and the Pennsylvania Game Commission established an undercover operation in southeastern Pennsylvania, involving State and Federal officers. Early in 1983, the Service and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission set up an independent undercover operation in North Carolina.

The investigations revealed that "oversized" striped bass (larger than legal size limits) were being taken from Maryland and Virginia waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries and sold to fish markets and buyers in Philadelphia, New York, Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. To document the illegal activity, agents posing as fish dealers purchased some 6,700 pounds of oversized striped bass measuring between 35 and 45 inches and weighing 30 to 50 pounds each. Virginia law permits the taking of no more than two striped bass over 40 inches per day, while Maryland law at the time allowed the taking of only one striper more than 32 inches for personal use, except during a closed spring season. Sellers often filleted the large fish to disguise their illegal size. Whole fish sold for about \$3 a pound and fillets for about \$3.25. In addition to the striped bass, salmon and trout from Lake Erie were illegally sold to agents during the investigation.

The investigations also revealed extensive taking and illegal interstate commerce in "landlocked" striped bass from reservoirs and other inland waters of North Carolina. More than 4,500 pounds of striped bass were sold to officers there.

Among those implicated in the two striped bass investigations are commercial fishermen, fish retailers, transport companies, and large wholesale fish companies.

Agents also obtained evidence of illegal trafficking in waterfowl, birds of prey, and other wildlife. In Pennsylvania alone, subjects sold more than 275 deer and 1,800 pounds of cut and wrapped venison to undercover agents. A majority of the animals were taken illegally -- at night, during closed seasons, and without licenses. Venison from Pennsylvania also was illegally sold in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. In Delaware and Pennsylvania, an ongoing illegal market in birds for food, mounting, and plumage was discovered. Wildlife agents were sold over 500 Canada and snow geese and numerous other protected birds including wood ducks, mallards, old squaws, gadwalls, several species of hawks, ospreys, woodpeckers, great blue herons, owls, and song birds. Parts from two bald and two golden eagles were also bought and sold.

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Officials of the Service and State wildlife agencies said much of the fish and wildlife purchased during the investigations was promptly frozen and later distributed to public institutions and charitable organizations.

The taking of oversized striped bass from the Chesapeake Bay is of particular concern to Federal and State wildlife agencies because the Chesapeake Bay was historically the major spawning and nursery grounds for striped bass that migrate along the Atlantic Coast and support commercial and recreational fisheries from North Carolina to Maine.

Reported commercial landings of striped bass along the Atlantic Coast declined from a record high of 14.7 million pounds in 1973 to a record low of 1.7 million pounds in 1983. While part of the decline in the 1983 landings was the result of regulations imposed to protect the fish from overharvest, experts say the reduced catch indicates the severely depleted status of striped bass stocks.

Most of the decade-long decline in the striped bass can be attributed to a decline in the number of young fish produced in the tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. The causes of the decline are not fully understood, although studies have implicated both environmental contaminants and excessive fishing mortality. The declines are estimated to have cost the Northeast over 7,000 jobs and \$220 million in economic revenue in 1980, the most recent year for which figures are available.

As a result of the decline, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, representing 11 States, has been working to reduce the striped bass catch by 55 percent. On January 1 of this year, Maryland imposed a moratorium on striped bass fishing in all its waters.

Subjects in the investigations are being charged under a number of State and Federal wildlife laws. Among these is the Lacey Act that, among other things, makes it a violation of Federal law to transport in interstate or foreign commerce fish or wildlife taken in violation of State, Federal, tribal, or foreign law. Penalties are up to \$20,000 and 5 years' imprisonment. Waterfowl, hawks, eagles, song birds and other migratory bird species are Federally protected from illegal taking and commercial sale under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which carries maximum penalties of up to \$2,000 and 2 years' imprisonment for felony sale or taking with intent to sell. Bald and golden eagles are also protected under the Eagle Protection Act, with penalties of \$5,000 and 1 year imprisonment for first offenses and higher penalties for subsequent offenses.

U.S. Attorneys in Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Wilmington, Delaware; Baltimore, Maryland; New York, New York; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Richmond, Virginia, presented evidence that resulted in grand jury subpoenas and indictments as well as subsequent court-issued search and arrest warrants in these cases.