

## Operation Alliance

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*Abstract:* During 1996 and 1997, local wildlife officers reported illegal activity indicating the need for a covert operation to be conducted in and around the Everglades City area of Collier County, Florida. Information indicated individuals in the area were taking large amounts of wildlife and fish including deer, white ibis, snook, and possibly marine sea turtles. As a result, in May 1998, Operation Alliance was born. The operation consisted of 1 covert investigator taking up permanent residence in the Everglades City area. His task was to establish himself as an outlet for illegally taken wildlife and fish. Another investigator was assigned as case agent to handle evidence, non-covert investigations, and officer safety. After 2 years of investigation, Operation Alliance closed with the arrest of 13 individuals on 101 charges. This included 53 second degree misdemeanors, 3 first degree misdemeanors and 45 third degree felonies.

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The area in and around the Everglades City area of Collier County, Florida, has a vast history of illegal activity ranging from the well-publicized drug operations of the 1980s to documented poaching activity by some local residents on deer, alligators, white ibis, and marine sea turtles. In July 1998, a covert investigator with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission established a permanent residence in Everglades City, Florida. His mission was to become a "local" and either confirm or disprove the intelligence being supplied by local officers. During the initial stage of the investigation, the undercover investigator began trying to "fit in" and gather as much intelligence as possible. During this time, he overheard and sometimes participated in numerous conversations concerning the illegal taking of game fish and possible sale to local restaurants. He was also establishing his cover as a chef and would attempt to purchase both legal and illegal fish and wildlife for his business.

By late September 1998, he was beginning to win the trust of some of the local residents. They talked about illegal activities, such as the sale of snook and redfish, but the investigator had not yet gained enough of their confidence to make any buys.

Toward the end of October 1998, the investigator was able to make his first purchase of contraband, cannabis. It seems the "locals" were more willing to deal in illegal

narcotics than illegal fish and wildlife, and without reservation, offered marijuana for sale. It took 2 more drug buys before the investigator was able to make his first purchase of illegal fish. In the early part of February 1999, the investigator was offered for sale and purchased 3 snook from a local commercial fisherman.

From this point, the investigator gained more of their confidence and was able to purchase large quantities of illegal fish and wildlife, including approximately 300 pounds of snook filets, 3 whole snook, 228 pounds of jewfish filets, 1 whole redfish, 140 pounds of alligator meat, 200 pounds of illegally taken mullet, approximately 6.5 pounds of loggerhead sea turtle meat, approximately 13 pounds of undersize gag grouper filets, 36 pounds of stone crab claws taken during closed season, and 502 pounds of undersized stone crabs claws. During this time, the investigator continued to gather valuable intelligence on additional illegal activity in the area.

He eventually learned that, at least in the Everglades City area, there was a main individual, or "kingpin," and either he or members of his family were responsible for a vast majority of the illegal fish and wildlife violations that occurred in this area. It was determined that once you were accepted by this individual or his family, you were accepted by almost everyone.

In establishing this connection with the kingpin and his family, the investigator was able to learn about a lucrative market in the illegal taking and sale of live alligators. This family had a connection that would take all the alligators that could be provided.

In late August 1999, the kingpin entered into an agreement with the investigator to supply him with illegal alligators, which he would broker for a 50/50 split on the profits from the sales. However, it took until the middle of April 2000 before the first alligator transaction would come about. In the interim, the case agent developed and implemented a plan for the use of GPS surveillance equipment. He utilized a shadow unit and had it covertly installed on the investigator's vehicle. The case agent also made plans for the use of bar code chips used by the Florida Panther Research Unit in Collier County. These chips are injected under the skin of newborn panther kittens and allow for future positive identification by using a hand-held scanner, which, when placed over the chip, will read a predetermined number.

In mid-April 2000, bar code chips were injected into 4 alligators that had been obtained from nuisance alligator complaints in an area outside of Collier County. These alligators were loaded into the investigator's truck, equipped with the GPS tracking device, and delivered to Everglades City. As anticipated, the suspects were unwilling to let the investigator make the delivery to the main buyer. The kingpin had made arrangements for his brother and son to make the delivery instead. Fortunately, the investigator convinced everyone that it would be easier if his truck was used to make the delivery as the alligators were already loaded. The delivery was made.

The next day the investigator and case agent met and downloaded the information stored in the shadow unit into a lap-top computer. The downloaded information contained the time the truck left and returned to Everglades City, the route traveled, the speed of the truck, and the final destination where the alligators were

delivered. This type of transaction was repeated on 2 more occasions. In all, 14 alligators were delivered with 5 different individuals being identified and involved in the illegal activity.

## Results

In the predawn hours of 23 August 2000, 27 months after the investigation began, the takedown phase of Operation Alliance commenced.

The logistics of the arrests, interviews of the suspects, and service of a search warrant required the use of 91 officers and support staff. It also required the assistance of officers from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries who were able to arrest 3 of the primary suspects that had relocated to Louisiana. In all, 13 suspects were arrested on 101 charges and 1 search warrant was executed without incident.

The search warrant revealed 5 of the 9 bar code chips which had been placed in alligators that were illegally delivered to the alligator farm northwest of Labelle, Florida. By finding these chips, along with information obtained by interviewing one of the suspects, officers were able to arrest the husband of the registered owner of the farm on 5 felonies. Records and paperwork relating to the farm were seized and are being reviewed for discrepancies. The review of the records and follow-up investigations may lead to the closure of the farm.

## Discussion

It was apparent by the results of this investigation that the illegal taking and selling of wildlife and fish was not only a lucrative business, but a way of life for some people in the Everglades City area. It was also evident that, left unchecked, the illegal harvest and sale of protected marine life, such as snook, jewfish, and stone crabs, would have had a definite effect on the overall population of the species. This, in turn, could have a pronounced negative effect on the local economy as many individuals in this area, such as charter boat captains and commercial fisherman, rely on the abundance of this resource to make a living. In addition, the illegal harvest and sale of protected fish, such as jewfish, which takes years to reach sexual maturity, could have a disastrous effect on the future of the species.

The success of this operation was the direct result of excellent intelligence being supplied by field officers and the ability of the covert investigator and case agent to work well together toward a common goal. Also contributing to the success of this operation was the unquestioning support from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the University of Florida, and the Florida Marine Research Institute. The technical and forensic assistance from each played a vital role during all phases of the investigation.