

# LAW ENFORCEMENT SESSION

## FLORIDA'S WILDLIFE INSPECTIONS UNIT: A SPECIALIZED SOLUTION TO EXPANDING LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

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*Abstract:* The increasing need for a "specialized" Wildlife Officer to insure compliance with the multitude of complex State and Federal laws governing the exhibition, importation, exportation, propagation, and sale of wildlife and fresh water fish has prompted the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission to establish the Wildlife Inspections Section. The regulation of these activities continues to pose obstacles to most state conservation agencies; therefore, this paper will identify Florida's methodology toward resolution of these issues through personnel and program specialization.

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Concern for the establishment of a section to deal with wildlife exhibition and importation first began in this agency in 1969. Florida's landmark legislation giving the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission power to regulate wildlife exhibits and laying down guidelines for the humane confinement of wild animals became law in 1970. In 1972, this Division presented a paper during the Southeastern meeting in Knoxville, TN documenting the need for a specialized enforcement program to handle the expanding wildlife trade. There was also considerable concern expressed at this meeting by various state law enforcement directors over the absence of uniform laws and regulations governing the exhibition, importation, exportation, and sale of wildlife. As a result of this interest, the president of the Southeastern Association appointed a committee to study this problem. The subsequent recommendations of the committee included the establishment of a specialized "Inspectors" program to monitor the commercial wildlife industry. In addition, it was recommended that states seek consistency in promulgating regulations relating to the exhibition, sale, and importation of wildlife.

It is apparent that the growing trend, first exhibited in the 70's, toward establishment of federal guidelines for states to "follow" in these matters is continuing. Considering the proposed Injurious Wildlife Amendment, the Zoo Accreditation Bill, and similar legislation, it is obvious that states must take a "lead role" in these "nongame" enforcement areas if we are to retain the responsiveness and flexibility necessary to properly conserve *all* of our wildlife resources.

Most state conservation agencies, as well as the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have faced situations wherein the expertise of a zoologist coupled with the law enforcement authority of a Wildlife Officer, were *both* needed in order to perform certain duties. This is especially true in situations involving non-native wildlife and fish violations and "endangered" and "threatened" species cases. In these instances, the capability of accurate "on-site" wildlife identification by enforcement officers would be of decided advantage.

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's need for such a "hybrid" officer is magnified by our tremendous volume of wildlife and fish importations and our vast array of wildlife tourist attractions. Wildlife commercialization is a "multi-million dollar" business in Florida and the revenue generated by our 300 wildlife attractions, 300 fish farms, and the resale of 35 million specimens of foreign wildlife and ornamental fish imported annually contributes substantially to Florida's economy.

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission is charged with the regulation of all wildlife and fresh water fish in Florida whether indigenous to the state or not. As such, we must control exotic wildlife and fish importation and possession, as well as manage our own native game and nongame species.

In 1969, it became evident that the Division was rapidly losing ground in its efforts to meet the expanding responsibilities of our agency in regard to the regulation of these nonhunting, nonfishing, and nonrecreational activities. In order to meet these specialized enforcement needs, a special law enforcement section was conceived to cope with

our expanding wildlife industry. This section, called "Wildlife Inspections," was to be a radical departure from the "norm" of most wildlife enforcement projects in concept, design, and operation.

## METHODS

### Section Operation

In order for this section to function in a consistent and singular fashion, it was established as a multi-regional, "statewide" enforcement project administered by a Wildlife Inspections Supervisor. The Inspections Supervisor is headquartered at the central office of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, which also serves as an operational base for Inspectors. The central office receives and issues all permits for licenses for wildlife and fresh water fish. The Inspections Supervisor is charged with reviewing and evaluating all permit related requests and complaints and directing Wildlife Inspectors by telephone, speed letter, and personal contact to investigate these matters. He also coordinates the general activities of the Inspectors and disseminates information concerning illegal wildlife commercialization for their investigation. The Wildlife Inspections Supervisor reports directly to the Deputy Director of Law Enforcement. The Wildlife Inspectors are allowed to operate in a highly independent manner, planning their own priorities, activities, working hours, and travel schedules. Since each Wildlife Inspector is stationed at a strategic area of the state, and due to the fact that the section presently consists of only 7 individuals, each officer may have as many as 13 counties to cover. Due to this large coverage area, overnight travel is a necessity and it is incumbent on each Inspector to plan his schedule in the most productive manner.

This "centralized" enforcement approach has been chosen over the "regional" operation concept for several reasons. We feel that greater efficiency is achieved through this system due to the following:

- (1) The Division's main office serves as a "central clearinghouse" for receiving pertinent complaints and disseminating critical information directly to Wildlife Inspectors.
- (2) Wildlife Inspectors can be immediately dispatched individually or en masse to any trouble spot in the state requiring their special skills.
- (3) A more consistent level of technical decision making governing Inspections' philosophy, permitting policies, procedures, and activities is possible through this system.

Field inspections generate the necessity of paperwork; however, each Inspector uses his home as headquarters and none are presently assigned space in local (regional) offices.

### Selection of Personnel

Although until 1973 all Commission revenue was obtained through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, the Florida Legislature appropriated special funds in the amount of \$12,000 to facilitate establishment of this new program for 1 year.

The qualifications for Wildlife Inspector positions are set necessarily high; namely, a 4-year degree in a biological science plus 1 year's experience in administration of fish and wildlife related projects. These strict requirements are necessary to insure that only qualified applicants *already possessing* substantial biological knowledge are selected for training as wildlife enforcement officers. After training, they are capable of performing enforcement tasks that once required a biologist and a Wildlife Officer.

A specialized written examination has been devised to aid in the selection of personnel. This examination shows an applicant's aptitude in general zoology, his skill at native and exotic wildlife and fish identification, and his knowledge of scientific names, zookeeping principles, zoogeography, and other wildlife subjects. In addition, the standard Wildlife Officer examination is administered and oral interviews given to all applicants.

This careful screening is designed to eliminate both "academicians" and individuals with limited zoological knowledge from consideration. Wildlife Inspectors must

be adaptable enough to perform any function of a Wildlife Officer, as well as their own specialized duties. In concept, they are designed to provide a support function to the Wildlife Officer; therefore, the overriding philosophy in selection is "if the candidate would not make a darn good Wildlife Officer, he is not Wildlife Inspector material."

Pay grades for the Wildlife Inspectors are established at the Sergeant level in order to attract and maintain qualified personnel. This designation as supervisor is also due to the great amount of responsibility inherent in this unique position. This supervisory designation exempts them from a mandatory 40 hr. work week presently affecting Wildlife Officers. The original Wildlife Inspectors were hired in September, 1973. One position, that of Inspections Supervisor, had previously been established and had begun laying a foundation for the program in 1970.

### Inspections Workload

Although the Inspection Unit's original purpose was primarily aimed at regulating wildlife exhibits, controlling and monitoring the importation of animals, and enforcing laws relating to the exportation and exploitation of unique native wildlife, it soon became apparent that it had substantial potential for expansion into other specialized areas. The passage of state laws relating to the possession of potentially dangerous wildlife as personal pets, the new federal falconry regulations, and the growing Florida aquaculture industry, have added dramatically to the scope of an Inspector's duties. Their present responsibilities consist primarily of the following:

- (1) Inspection of all wildlife exhibit attractions, including traveling zoos and circuses to insure that state requirements relating to the humane treatment of wildlife and regulations regarding public safety are adhered to.
- (2) Inspection of all wildlife pets held in captivity by private individuals to assure public safety and humane treatment, as well as adherence to permit regulations.
- (3) Inspection of major seaports, airports, and common carriers to detect violations of state and federal laws relating to the importation, transportation, and exportation of wildlife and fresh water aquatic life.
- (4) Inspection of individuals selling, possessing, and exhibiting venomous reptiles to insure compliance with safety and permit regulations.
- (5) Inspection of all commercial wildlife and fish establishments, including fish farms, game farms, hunting preserves, fish dealers, alligator farms, pet shops, taxidermists, wildlife importers, and fur and hide dealers to detect violations of state and federal laws.
- (6) Investigate and make recommendations concerning permit requests for the sale, exhibition, importation, exportation, transportation, propagation, and possession of wildlife and fresh water aquatic life (this category includes falconry inspections).
- (7) Conduct investigations of illegal wildlife commercialization or exploitation of "endangered" and "threatened" wildlife.
- (8) Seize illegally possessed or imported wildlife or fresh water fish, serve search warrants, arrest warrants, issue citations, apprehend violators, and testify in court.
- (9) Prepare inspection reports on importers, zoos, falconers, wildlife rehabilitation centers, personal wildlife possessors, and other specialized reports which may become necessary.

This description is by no means complete but it gives an idea of the versatility of this section.

### In-Service Training and Specialized Equipment

The knowledge of the animal kingdom necessary for personnel to carry on this array of complex functions cannot be overemphasized. An Inspector must be familiar of with the identification and behavior characteristics of wildlife and fish from all over the world. He must be acquainted with the basic principles of zookeeping and animal exhibition. He must have knowledge of aquarium management and pond culture and must be able to handle a wide range of enforcement situations ranging from the delicate

Inservice training is also necessary in order to keep abreast of the skills and knowledge required to enforce new state and federal laws and regulations and to maintain consistency of operations. In the last 4 years, 6 schools and seminars on the following subjects have been held in order to increase Inspector's expertise in specialized areas:

- (1) Exotic fish identification,
- (2) Exotic and native aquatic plant identification,
- (3) Falconry seminars and workshops (2),
- (4) Wildlife exhibit inspection techniques,
- (5) Exotic bird and animal techniques,
- (6) Blood and meat identification (Ouchterlony Analysis).

Although training is essential for this special unit, equipment plays an important part in the success of any law enforcement endeavor. To this end, Inspectors have been provided with a reference library on a wide variety of subjects ranging from zookeeping and fish and wildlife identification to falconry and aquarium management. At present, each Inspector is provided with a set of 18 books and numerous other reference identification keys and materials.

Each Inspector is equipped with a tranquilizer gun and necessary ancillary equipment to control most types of wildlife — from monkeys to lions. Although Inspectors are not routinely in the business of tranquilizing wildlife, it often becomes necessary in emergency situations, such as exhibit escapes or wildlife seizures, when it is required to safeguard the public.

Other equipment includes small reptile and animal cages, snake hooks, pillstrom tongs, animal catch sticks, and snake bags to handle confiscated animals and reptiles. Falconry gloves are also provided.

We have recently provided Canon AE-1 35mm cameras and strobe attachments for all Inspectors. Cameras are a necessity for photographing exhibit conditions for use in prosecutions, as well as providing a means to gain reference slides for wildlife identification.

## RESULTS

Although our Wildlife Inspections Program is a relatively new concept, in the last 5 years its' unique function has filled a unique "niche," closing a substantial gap in our agency's operations. It has been highly successful in providing our Division with additional enforcement "depth."

The nature of the Wildlife Inspectors' involvement with laws affording humane treatment to captive animals has, by association, brought this program into close contact with the entire "humane movement." As such, Inspectors have become valuable liaisons between this agency and humane groups, as well as other special interest clubs, such as the Audubon Society. Wildlife Inspectors are looked upon as "professionals" by these groups and are often called upon to speak at special meetings of herpetologists, ornithologists, and other wildlife gatherings.

The overriding philosophy of Inspections is to cooperate with those commercial wildlife operations that are willing to work with us. Therefore, Wildlife Inspectors strive to initiate good rapport with commercial wildlife exhibits whom they regulate by fair, firm, and consistent treatment. Through this cooperation, a better understanding of the others' goals can be realized, and both gain from the joint effort.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to recognize that every state represented here essentially faces the same dilemmas with regard to the enforcement of specialized wildlife regulations to some degree. It should also be evident that these problems will likely become more acute in the future as interstate movement of wildlife continues to increase and "endangered" and "threatened" species enforcement becomes of greater concern to all conservation agencies.

I hope this presentation has illustrated the flexibility of specialized enforcement personnel in handling "nongame" wildlife problems. As wildlife law enforcement

practitioners, it is our duty to initiate specialized projects to deal with these issues if we are to properly preserve, protect, and manage our natural resources for present and future generations.

I believe that it is essential for states to progressively expand their involvement and control of programs affecting wildlife within their borders. An example of what states can initiate is represented by the new Joint State/Federal Falconry Regulations. This unprecedented program illustrates the "right formula" for the maintenance of balanced responsiveness, credibility, and effectiveness. A unified state approach toward a similar joint permitting and enforcement program for the Injurious Wildlife Amendment and similar regulations is the next obvious step to extend our span of control and to retain the responsiveness to citizenry which is often lost through the bureaucratic rigors of federal legislation.