

## **Coast Watchers: Specialized Eyes and Ears to Assist Law Enforcement**

**Jack M. King**, *Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, 5541 Bear Lane No. 232, Corpus Christi, TX 78405*

**Frank D. Dickerson**, *Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, 5541 Bear Lane No. 232, Corpus Christi, TX 78405*

---

*Abstract:* As a result of Fair Labor and Standards Act requirements, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) supervisors became concerned about time lost from game wardens responding to reports of violations from sportsmen in which no violation existed. From this concern a cooperative program was initiated with the Gulf Coast Conservation Association (GCCA) in which a select group of their membership was trained in how to recognize and report violations to game wardens. This program has drastically reduced time lost from game wardens responding to erroneous reports of violations and has significantly increased the ratio of apprehensions and seizures of illegal equipment.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 45:489-494

---

Law enforcement has always depended on public acceptance and participation in efforts to combat illegal activity. For many years assistance from the general public was extremely limited. This was primarily due to a lack of understanding of what conservation meant, a belief that wildlife resources were eternal, and an unwillingness to get involved.

In the last decade enforcement agencies have succeeded in educating the public on conservation issues and convincing them that our wildlife resources will not survive without strong enforcement of game and fish regulations. As the public became more aware of conservation and environmental issues, a willingness to participate in the enforcement effort started to grow.

In order to take advantage of the public's changing attitude towards enforcement of wildlife resource regulations, some state wildlife agencies created programs that encouraged the public to report possible violations. These programs established cash rewards for the apprehension and conviction of violators.

In Texas, a very successful program of this type, called Operation Game Thief, is designed to encourage the public to report any type of wildlife violation that occurs anywhere in the state. Operation Game Thief has resulted in the apprehension

and conviction of many violators and has paid many rewards even though 65% of all callers do not wish to collect a reward. Since the inception of Operation Game Thief in 1981 an average of approximately 9% to 10% of all reports of violations received have resulted in the apprehension of violators or seizure of illegal equipment (W. Chappell, pers. commun.)

With the public more willing to get involved and with Operation Game Thief available as an additional means of reporting possible violations, the number of calls reporting violations to game wardens and field offices started to increase. Game warden supervisors along the Texas coast, taking into consideration the constraints placed on time management by the Fair Labor and Standards Act, were becoming increasingly concerned over the amount of time spent by game wardens responding to reported violations which when investigated showed that no violation existed. It became apparent that although the public was willing to participate in the enforcement effort, the average person was not familiar with wildlife resource regulations and could not differentiate between legal and illegal activities. This was particularly evident in the area of commercial fishing activity.

During this same period of time, Gulf Coast Conservation Association (GCCA), a wildlife conservation-oriented organization which has a statewide membership of approximately 17,000 (B. Cartwright, pers. commun.), was expressing concern over the extent of the illegal commercial fishing activity along the Texas coast and the effect it was having on the aquatic resources. Based on this concern, GCCA was offering its assistance to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) in helping to combat the increasing illegal commercial fishing activity.

In 1987 TPWD law enforcement personnel and the GCCA executive committee discussed how GCCA might be of assistance to TPWD in combating the illegal commercial fishing activity on the Texas coast. It was determined that a program similar to the use of coast watchers in the south pacific during World War II should be developed to assist TPWD enforcement personnel by observing and reporting violations of regulations protecting coastal marine resources.

This program, named Coast Watchers, was developed so that selected members of GCCA chapters who are on the coastal waters of the state on a regular basis would be trained in how to recognize and report violations. These coast watchers would become knowledgeable of TPWD regulations and the requirements necessary for a game warden to be able to present a case in court. One of the goals of this program was to reduce the number of reports of violations that were proven unsubstantiated, thus reducing the time spent by game wardens responding to these types of reports. Another goal was to have a significantly higher rate of apprehension of violators and seizure of illegal equipment than experienced by Operation Game Thief.

The Coast Watchers program was organized to support and improve the enforcement efforts of the TPWD and to ensure the future availability of our coastal marine resources. The objective of this program was to educate the coast watcher concerning the fishery laws of the state of Texas and to promote ongoing communication between the Coast Watchers program and the TPWD (J. Sellers, unpubl. rep.).

We would like to thank Chester Burdett, Director of Law Enforcement, Texas

Parks and Wildlife Department for his assistance in organizing the Coast Watchers program and his continued support of the program. The authors would also like to thank the GCCA executive committee for their efforts and outstanding support of the Coast Watchers program. In particular we would like to thank J. Sellers who, though no longer on the staff of GCCA, was instrumental in the planning and organization of all coast watcher programs along the Texas coast.

## Methods

To implement the Coast Watchers program it was decided GCCA would devise and carry out the selection process which would be used to select persons from their membership which would participate in the program. As GCCA staff began carrying out the selection process, TPWD law enforcement personnel began the process of preparing a course curriculum.

From the beginning it was decided the primary aim of the Coast Watchers program would be to prepare the selected participants to be viable aids in the battle against illegal use of gill nets on the Texas coast. With this goal in mind, the curriculum was divided into the following areas:

1. Introduction
2. Code of criminal procedure
3. Judicial system
4. TPWD code
5. TPWD proclamations
6. Game warden responsibilities
7. Fair Labor and Standards Act
8. Procedures of game wardens to catch illegal netters
9. Coast watcher profile
10. How to help game wardens locate illegal nets
11. Reporting violations

Within the introduction portion of the curriculum the primary purposes and goals of the program were set out. A history of coastal law enforcement, beginning with the first law restricting coastal netting in 1874, was also included in the introduction. Learning the regulations in order to recognize violations, what information is needed for a successful apprehension and conviction, how and when to report a violation to a game warden, and how to prepare for a possible court appearance were the primary purposes and goals that were set out for the program.

In order for coast watchers to understand the legal constraints that game wardens, as peace officers, operate under, a section on the code of criminal procedure was included in the curriculum. Within this section, arrest without a warrant, probable cause, requisites of a complaint, venue and search warrants are discussed.

In the judicial system section of the course curriculum the jurisdiction of justice

courts and county courts is explained. The penalties for TPWD Class A, B, and C misdemeanors as well as TPWD felonies are also explained to the coast watchers in this section.

The regulations that TPWD game wardens enforce are divided into 2 categories. One type of regulations are those that are enacted into law by the Texas legislature and the other regulations are those that are established and adopted under regulatory authority by the TPWD Commission. In these 2 sections of the curriculum, TPWD code and TPWD regulations, those laws that establish the authority for game wardens to enforce the Parks and Wildlife Code, enter land, and search for unlawfully killed or taken game are explained to the coast watchers. In addition, so that coast watchers would readily and most importantly recognize violations, those regulations that apply to commercial fishing along the Texas coast were presented. An important criteria in selecting which regulations would be presented was that a violation of the regulations must be readily and easily recognized. The basis for the Coast Watchers program is for the coast watcher to be able to provide good accurate information to game wardens on violations that are observed. If the coast watcher is mired down in trying to determine whether or not a violation of a complicated regulation exists, then he is of no use to the game warden. For this reason, only those regulations with easily recognizable violations were presented.

Most people believe that all a game warden does is check hunting and fishing licenses. In the game warden responsibilities section of the curriculum it is explained to the coast watchers that Texas game wardens enforce wildlife resource regulations that generally fall into 1 of 24 different categories. Within 1 of these categories, licenses and permits, it is explained that there are 110 different licenses and permits issued in Texas that a game warden is familiar with. Although the Coast Watchers program centered on illegal commercial fishing activity, it is important that the coast watcher understand that the game warden has many other responsibilities.

It is equally important for the coast watcher to understand that the game warden must meet all of his responsibilities within the confines of an 8-hour day. The times when a game warden could work all the hours he wanted to or all the hours necessary are gone. With the budget constraints to be considered, financing for overtime is not available and with the manpower available it not good management to allow personnel to earn large quantities of compensatory time. It is stressed within this portion of the program that even though there are federal constraints on work hours, game wardens will be available to perform their duties.

In the next section of the program it is explained to the coast watchers the procedures game wardens use to catch illegal netters. The basic principles of learning your habitual violators are given within this section. It is explained how a game warden learns the outlaws within his area by sight, by name, where they live, the vehicles and boats they use, who they associate with, and where they like to conduct their illegal activity. Methods of surveillance from the land and from boats and types of equipment used for surveillance purposes are also covered in this section. In order that the coast watcher understand that the work is not over once a violator is

apprehended, a thorough discussion of all paperwork for equipment seizure, civil restitution, confiscated seafood revenue, violation enhancement, and the filing of the complaint is presented in this section.

One of the most important sections of the program is the one that discusses the coast watcher profile. Within this section it is explained and stressed many times that the role of the coast watcher is one of observe and report only. It is stressed that the coast watcher, while pursuing his normal recreational activity, should not wear any item of clothing or place any markings on his vessel that represents his association with the Coast Watcher program. The coast watcher is taught that he should remain as inconspicuous as possible and should always exercise restraint and never contact a suspected violator. The coast watcher is taught within this section that he should always have the materials necessary to record the facts of a violation that is witnessed and should report what he has witnessed as soon as possible.

Within the section of the program on how to help a game warden locate illegal nets, the coast watcher is reminded not to pick up or destroy any illegal devices he may find. It is explained to the coast watchers that once illegal devices are discovered, game wardens like to place them under surveillance in an effort to apprehend the violator. The coast watcher is instructed to take precise notes on the description of illegal devices and on the location of the devices so that the game warden will be able to locate the device from the information provided by the coast watcher.

The last discussion item in the program is how to report a violation. Once the coast watcher has learned the regulations and understands what information is necessary for a game warden to be able make an apprehension, it is important that he have a method to report the violation.

In order for the Coast Watchers to be successful, the people who participate must remain anonymous. In order to achieve this the participant in the program are assigned identification numbers. When a coast watcher reports a violation, he is instructed to use only his identification number. The names that correspond with the number are made available to the game wardens and all field offices in order for law enforcement to verify the validity of the report. Coast Watchers are provided with the names and phone numbers of all the game wardens and their supervisors along the Texas coast. This list of names and phone numbers also includes the bay systems that the individual wardens are assigned to work so that the coast watcher will know who to call when a violation is spotted in a specific bay system. Phone numbers for all field offices and 24-hour communication centers are also provided. A designated VHF marine radio frequency has been programmed into the boat radios of all game wardens on the Texas coast and for those coast watchers that have marine radios, this provides a quick method of contacting a game warden.

Once law enforcement personnel completed the course curriculum, a schedule was established for the program to be given. To this date, a total of 12 Coast Watcher programs have been presented to the selected membership of GCCA chapters along the Texas coast and to inland chapters whose members travel to the coast on a regular basis.

## Results

From the inception of Coast Watchers, there have been 2 major goals for the program. The first goal was to decrease the number of reports of violations which were based on misconceptions of what the regulations were, since these types of reports resulted in game wardens responding to situations where no violations existed. Since the group of people who had the most interest in coastal wildlife resource violations, the GCCA membership, was the same group who was primarily responsible for the reports of violations, the number of erroneous reports of violations has been greatly reduced because these people have now been through the Coast Watchers program.

The second major goal of the program was to increase the percentage of apprehensions or seizure of illegal fishing equipment resulting from reports of violations. The goal has been clearly accomplished as 75% of all reports received from coast watchers have resulted in either an apprehension of a violator or the seizure of illegal fishing gear.

The success of the Coast Watchers program is best judged not by how many reports of violations that are received, but by how many reports of possible violations that are not received. Reports that are received from the 211 coast watchers that have been trained to date, do result in a high rate of apprehension or seizure because they are based on knowledgeable and trained observations. However, the true signs of success of the program are the budgetary savings on vehicle and boat gas and the time savings to game wardens, who are now able to better manage their patrol time by not having to respond to as many erroneous and unfounded reports of violations.

## Discussion

The Coast Watchers was originally designed to concentrate on commercial fishing violations, in particular illegal netting activity. Each year the program curriculum is reviewed for possible changes and as commercial fishing activity has been reduced, the main area of concentration for the program has changed. After the first 2 years, the emphasis of the program was changed from commercial fishing violations to sport fishing violations. The curriculum is easily changed to reflect new areas of emphasis.

The Coast Watchers program is designed to address coastal wildlife resource violations, however the program could easily be changed to address problems on inland lakes, rivers, or areas of high incidents of hunting violations.

A program such as Coast Watchers would be beneficial in any area where a special interest group has a strong desire to be of assistance to a wildlife enforcement agency. Sometimes because of a lack of knowledge of regulations and understanding of how game wardens work, members of these groups cause enforcement problems rather than provide assistance. Specialized training of the type provided by a program such as Coast Watchers can turn these people into a valuable asset to an enforcement agency.