

## **Operation Game Thief Program**

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*Abstract:* To address Missouri sportsmen's concerns regarding poaching and to generate ideas and methods to enable citizens of the state to work with and assist Missouri conservation agents in helping curb illegal activities involving wildlife, the Conservation Federation of Missouri created an ad hoc violations committee from which originated the Missouri Department of Conservation, Operation Game Thief program.

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The development of Missouri's Operation Game Thief program was not a complex undertaking. The program proposed was very similar in structure to the pioneer New Mexico program, with certain adaptations to provide overall improvement and more timely and sophisticated functional capabilities. The program was to employ a statewide radio communications system.

One important improvement over existing programs of this type in other states is the provision for a toll free telephone line to be monitored 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This toll free line (inbound WATTS) is a well-publicized number that affords any concerned individual the opportunity to call at no expense, and under comfortable conditions, to report any wildlife violations.

A commercial answering service is used to accept calls after office hours. Violation reports are completed on each call, which are then forwarded by the agency for field investigation on the next working day. Reports of major violations or violations-in-progress are forwarded by the answering service to agency staff with telephone pagers on an established rotating basis. This monitoring system allows for prompt notification of serious violations and reduces calls to agents when insufficient information for action is available. There are many reasons why the Operation Game Thief program was established in Missouri:

(1) A well-run program would result in a substantial increase in apprehensions of wildlife violators.

(2) An Operation Game Thief program would enhance conservation violation deterrence efforts.

(3) Reduction of violations would increase wildlife populations.

(4) The Missouri Department of Conservation would develop improved cooperation with expanded resource protection.

(5) The program would establish a closer relationship between the Missouri Department of Conservation and its constituents, hunters and non-hunters alike.

(6) Operation Game Thief would provide for more efficient use of agents' time.

Missouri's Operation Game Thief program, 3 years old as of October 1985, is a very successful and important program. Operation Game Thief is funded by private contributions and sponsored by the Conservation Federation of Missouri and the Missouri Department of Conservation.

The program is governed by a 10-member Citizens Advisory Board plus a non-voting Conservation Department member with the title of Operation Game Thief Coordinator, who serves as an adviser to the board. The board elects a treasurer who is responsible for contributions, disbursements, and balancing records. While this Citizens Advisory Board reviews all reward recommendations, it has authorized approval by the agency's Operation Game Thief coordinator of minimum reward payments. All recommendations for rewards over \$200 must receive board approval.

A minimum reward of \$200 is paid for information leading to an arrest involving deer, turkey, and rare or endangered species violations. A minimum of \$100 is paid for information leading to an arrest involving other wildlife violations. Rewards of up to \$1,000 may be paid, depending on the seriousness and magnitude of the offense. Payment of rewards over \$200 require the concurrence between the investigating officer, the Operation Game Thief coordinator, and the Citizens Advisory Board.

In one instance, an informer was paid \$1,000 for information leading to the arrest of 2 individuals who were charged with more than 50 state and federal violations. All rewards are paid at the time of arrest; the informant is not required to wait weeks or months for court action before receiving his reward.

All reward funding is obtained from private or corporate contributions to the Conservation Federation Operation Game Thief fund. Sportsmen groups and individuals are responsible for most contributions, although some corporate and federation funding has been provided. Additional funding sources are currently under consideration by the Conservation Federation in association with the department. Approximately \$60,000 has been made available for Operation Game Thief reward payments.

The Missouri Conservation Department budgets funds for the toll free WATTS telephone line and the non-business hours answering service. It also provides about \$3,000 annually for the purchase of bumper stickers and in-house printing of leaflets, posters and cards.

Through June 1985, approximately 1,800 calls reporting poaching were re-

ceived. Conservation agents have made over 500 arrests from information received through the telephone hotline. Thirty-eight thousand dollars has been paid to 204 informants. Fifty-one informants have refused any rewards. This indicates an average of more than 1 arrest for each 4 phone calls.

It was felt that for the program to be successful 4 main objectives had to be met:

1. There must be a toll free method of reporting violations. This phone should be manned 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
2. The program must be prepared to provide complete anonymity, because a high percentage of callers are friends, relatives, neighbors, or associates of the perpetrator.
3. Because of the informant's closeness to the violator, in many instances he/she must make some financial gain.
4. The agency must have well trained officers in the field to conduct investigations.

Although 60% of informants using the hotline say that they do not want a reward, of the informants with enough factual information to cause an arrest, only 16% do not request a reward.

When informants give information on their initial call, code numbers are assigned to them. In the event they wish to remain anonymous, other information is obtained (i.e. birth date, favorite color, and favorite number). This is to prevent another individual from calling back and claiming the reward. The informants are advised to call back in 10 days to 2 weeks, thus giving law enforcement officers time to investigate and report back.

The reward portion of this violation reporting program is regarded as a significant attraction in obtaining current and accurate violation information. The agency is pleased with the citizen response provided on the toll free telephone reporting line. Both phases of Operation Game Thief violation reporting are now recognized as an important part of the Department's wildlife law enforcement program.