

# **Wildlife Crime Watch a Partnership for Wildlife, the Environment, Property and People**

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*Abstract:* Wildlife Crime Watch is a program based on the successful "Neighborhood Watch." The objective is to develop a close working partnership with citizens within their communities. This program is an agency-wide effort, not just law enforcement, to involve people in the protection and development of wildlife, the environment, property, and people. By utilizing traditional crime prevention strategies/training we attempt to involve individuals within a community who are not normally interested in wildlife and environmental issues. Hopefully, by giving something of value to these people we expect to be able to interest them in issues important to our agency.

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Wildlife Crime Watch (WCW) is a new program instituted by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) to form a close working relationship with citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia. It is a proactive program dedicated to improving the quality of life for the people and to promoting the mission of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF). Wildlife and the environment are the primary focus. It is a community-based program designed to be flexible so as to adapt to the needs of each individual community. Everyone within the community is invited and encouraged to participate and provide input. Each person is made to feel his or her interest/concerns are as important as anyone else's is. A partnership among the communities, VDGIF, sportsmen groups, other government agencies, civic groups, and businesses will be formed. Without the assistance and cooperation of the following individuals this program would not have been possible: Mr. William L. Woodfin, Jr., executive director, VDGIF; Colonel Jeffrey A. Uerz, chief, Law Enforcement Division VDGIF; Captain Donald Hinchey, regional manager, Law Enforcement Division VDGIF; and William T. (Troy) Phillips, game warden, Law Enforcement Division VDGIF.

Throughout law enforcement agencies in the United States, the effort has been made to change the paradigm of isolated patrols to community-based policing. Officers have been isolated from the public through the progress made by automobiles

and radio dispatching. Where once officers walked a beat, having close personal contact with citizens within that beat, they became rarely seen officers who stayed in their patrol vehicles and only showed up as a response to trouble. Both citizens and officers suffered as a result of this isolation. Citizens no longer were able to put a face to the officer in their area and they felt uncomfortable in approaching officers and holding meaningful conversations. Officers lost the ability to get to know the people within their patrol areas and to demonstrate they are familiar with and concerned with the personal issues the citizens have. In many areas this has developed into an "us versus them" attitude on both sides. The alienation which follows is detrimental to the mission of law enforcement agencies. Cooperation and trust can and does break down between citizens and agencies.

Research was conducted into what programs were available to strengthen ties between the community and our Department. Material on wildlife and environmental issues and crime prevention was very limited. A decision was made to model a new program after the successful "Neighborhood Watch" program. The Ohio Crime Prevention Association, the National Sheriff's Association, Missouri Department of Public Safety, Glendale Arizona Police Department, Mountain Empire Crime Prevention Association, and the National Crime Prevention Council provided material which formed the basis of WCW. A WCW manual was written and adopted along with a logo. The manual contains the mission statement of VDGIF along with the topics of Why Wildlife Crime Watch, Starting a Wildlife Crime Watch, The Wildlife Crime Watch Meeting, The Role of Members, Problem Solving, Organizational Structure, Phone Trees, The Role of Law Enforcement in Wildlife Crime Watch, Sponsors, Resources, References, and blank forms such as bylaws, etc. Included is a section on pro-active efforts. This is an area where additional emphasis will be placed in the future. There is a wealth of literature on traditional crime prevention techniques, but on wildlife and environmental issues information is very limited. One element included here is tips on how to control spotlighting by putting up barriers, whether they are by plantings or manmade obstructions, along road frontages. At this time 4 tri-fold brochures have been developed and placed into use. Titles of the brochures are: What Is a Wildlife Crime Watch?, Starting a Wildlife Crime Watch, Landowner Issues, and Suspicious Activities.

With wildlife law enforcement there appears to be an emphasis on the wildlife and environmental issues versus human issues. Of course this is not correct, but do we show it? As the culture of this nation changes and the hunting population diminishes, where do we stand? In Virginia, as in most states, we are looking at ways to expand our constituency base. By starting a WCW program we are looking at bringing our efforts back down to the "walking the beat" and communicating to the citizens that the VDGIF is concerned about them and is interested in them. WCW will serve as an instrument to work closely with individuals and communities to better serve them and to forward our mission.

We know citizens in Virginia are interested in wildlife issues. In a recent study titled "House Bill 38 Stakeholder Studies, Preliminary Executive Summary" by Steve L. McMullin of Virginia Tech and Mark Damian Duda of Responsive Management,

Dr. Bret A. Wright surveyed the following groups: general population, hunters, anglers, boaters, non-consumptive users, and landowners. This study is in reference to the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and House Bill 38, which will provide monies from the sales taxes on outdoor-related equipment to be shared with VDGIF.

With the general population group it was found that more than half of the Virginians surveyed are interested in information about viewing wildlife, what to do with injured wildlife, dealing with nuisance wildlife, and enjoying wildlife around their homes. Twenty percent of the respondents took a trip primarily to watch or photograph wildlife in Virginia during the last 2 years, 42% fished, 36% went boating or jet skiing, and 9% hunted.

The hunter survey found 35% of hunters felt access to private lands is poor and 53% felt access to private land has gotten worse over the past 5 years. Of those surveyed 64% stated they would be interested in receiving information on how to become involved with wildlife conservation.

The angler survey found 40% of those responding wanted VDGIF to encourage private landowners to open access to their waters and that most fishing occurs close to home with 84% traveling less than 2 hours from home.

The boater survey concluded that safety and access issues should be given a higher priority. Forty-three percent of those surveyed experienced interference from jet skiers (25% of anglers) during the past 2 years. In addition, a majority either strongly or somewhat supported mandatory boating safety classes.

The non-consumptive user survey indicated . . . "33% of Virginians went on a trip of at least 1 mile to observe, photograph, or feed wildlife within the last 2 years, and 66% stated they would consider taking such a trip. . . . People taking an interest in wildlife through closely observing, feeding or trying to identify species within 1 mile of their homes was 85%. . . . Also, 68% stated they would like information on how to get involved in wildlife conservation efforts and 67% wanted information on how to view wildlife" (McMullin et al., unpubl. data).

The landowner survey indicated . . . "97% thought it was very or somewhat important to know that people have the opportunity to view wildlife. They valued the opportunities to fish (96%), to hunt (95%), to have wildlife around their homes (94%), and to know they can participate in providing habitat for fish and wildlife (84%). Legal liability is more of a concern for Virginia landowners in regards to allowing outdoor recreation (81%) and hunting (75%) on their property than it is for wildlife viewing (56%) or fishing (49%). Prior to taking this survey, 83% of Virginia landowners were totally unaware of the Virginia law called 'recreational use statute'" (McMullin et al., unpubl. data). WCW can be a forum to address these issues and many others, which pertain to VDGIF and its mission.

By instilling in individuals the importance of wildlife and the environment and the role they can play in protecting, enhancing, and passing along a positive legacy to the next generation, VDGIF will be able to develop bonds with a larger constituency. WCW will provide traditional crime prevention training to interest the citizens who may not be interested in wildlife and the environment. It is important to recruit as

many people as possible from within a participating community. By showing these citizens they are important and by providing a service they can utilize, VDGIF will be able to present issues of importance to its mission—"Give in order to get."

WCW will not be delegated to just law enforcement issues, it is an agency-wide team effort. Game wardens will serve as liaison officers. WCW coordinators and captains will be utilized to be the active agents between the community and the game warden liaison. Through community meetings the people within the community will collectively discuss what they view as the problems which need to be addressed. These will be categorized by priority and the liaison officer will work with them to address the targeted issues. If the issues are within the scope of the mission of VDGIF, then the appropriate personnel will be brought in to work with the community on their concerns. If the issues are outside of the scope of the mission of VDGIF, then the liaison officers will make contact with the appropriate agency, organization, club or who ever might be the group to address the concerns. The liaison officers will maintain contact and assistance with the groups.

Each community will decide upon its own meeting schedule. It will take time for the citizens to become familiar with another and to develop rapport. We will emphasize everyone working together to protect, enhance the wildlife and environment and to protect private property as well as to protect human life. Community events such as cookouts, potluck dinners, etc., should be scheduled at least once a year. This is to help bring the community together.

The liaison officers will coordinate training sessions on how to report suspicious activities, what to look for, what information is needed and telephone trees will be utilized for the citizens within the community to pass along information and to learn more about the suspicious activity. Liaison officers will also have the opportunity to present programs which will further the mission of VDGIF. Programs on boating safety, hunting safety, and habitat enhancement are examples. The appropriate personnel within VDGIF will be utilized to present these programs. Issues of importance will be presented to these groups as well. These efforts are designed to open the communication channels between the citizens and the agency.

Emphasis will be placed on developing understanding between outdoor recreationalists and landowners. The forum of WCW having individuals from all sides involved should allow for the education of all parties as to what the needs and concerns of the other parties are. Most hunters, fisherman, etc., are not familiar with the problems landowners have encountered and view them as hoarding the land. Landowners, on the other hand, do not understand the problem of not having access to property on which to pursue their interests. The sharing of concerns and the education of both sides will provide an avenue to repair the rift between the groups. Landowners can receive information as to the protections afforded them by law, criminal and civil and that they can utilize the individuals who are seeking access to their lands to help with problems they might encounter. Landowners could utilize these individuals to help them patrol the property, help put up posted signs, help with fencing, help with putting up hay, picking up garbage, etc. The recreationalists will be exposed to the problems keeping them from accessing lands and learn how to overcome and correct

these problems. Recreationalists will be encouraged to behave in a responsible, thoughtful manner when dealing with landowners.

The liaison officer will target the inclusion of young people in the WCW. Programs of traditional crime prevention as well as outdoor-related programs will be given in order to interest the young people and to educate them as to what the benefits of wildlife (consumptive and non-consumptive) and protecting the environment is. Emphasis will be placed on the fact these young people can make a difference not only now but also in the future. The young people need to understand they will be the leaders of the future and by becoming involved now they will have made a great step forward for when they do become the leaders.

WCW will put emphasis on developing an understanding among citizens of the diverse uses of wildlife and of the importance of allowing individuals the opportunity to practice their chosen sport. Many hunters have a possessive attitude towards wildlife. They seem to think they are the caretakers of wildlife and should be able to make use of their sport over someone else's sport or hobby. Most citizens do not hunt but derive great satisfaction from wildlife viewing, photography, art, or just knowing the good Lord put them here and they still are here. Non-hunters on the other hand do not see the benefits hunters are able to provide not only to the huntable species but also to all species and to the local economy.

Once a crime has been committed the damage is done, whether it be a crime against property, people, or wildlife and the environment. Most law enforcement efforts are geared towards responding to the report of a crime, then trying to solve who committed the crime and to apprehend the offender. This of course is after the fact; after the damage is done. Once a deer has been poached it is gone. With the WCW, the emphasis is to stop the crimes before they occur.

Poachers know there are not enough game wardens to provide adequate patrols and the likelihood of getting caught is very slim. When these poachers begin poaching and are successful, what is there to prevent them from continuing? Once they are caught the penalties are usually not severe enough to be a deterrent to committing another crime. If the citizens of a community allow a poacher or other criminal to get away with their crimes through non-reporting, then they are sending the signal to these people to continue.

However, when a community takes action to immediately report crimes or suspicious activities then they are sending a completely opposite signal to the would-be offender. The potential offender realizes he is no longer just concerned about a game warden but about anyone and everyone. This will definitely have an impact. The offender will either stop his activities, or else will at least move on to a community which will allow him to operate. One of our goals is to take away criminal opportunities. WCW can do this through banding together to take proactive efforts. The posting of WCW area signs, bumper stickers, billboards, the announcement of meetings, and media coverage will provide a deterrent.

In October 1999, Buchanan County, Virginia, was opened to deer hunting for the first time since the early 1970s. VDGIF and citizens within the county worked long and hard to reintroduce deer and protect them to the point where we could

once again offer the opportunity to the citizens to hunt for deer within their own county.

As a result of the opening of the season many citizens within the county became concerned about hunting with rifles and took their concerns to the Buchanan County Board of Supervisors who entertained the idea of eliminating the hunting with rifles for deer within the county.

Officials from VDGIF appeared before sportsman groups and the Board of Supervisors and presented information concerning the use of rifles for deer hunting and accidents related to them. The Board took no action and hunters were able to hunt with muzzleloaders and conventional rifles. There were no deer hunting accidents within Buchanan County. With the opening of the deer season and the concerns over hunting with rifles the opportunity was ripe for the implementing of the first Wildlife Crime Watch Chapter in Virginia. Game Warden Troy Phillips was able to interest Ralph McGlothlin of the Fletchers Ridge section of Buchanan County in forming a Wildlife Crime Watch group. Mr. McGlothlin took the idea to his neighbors and a meeting was conducted to gauge the interest. As a result of Phillips and McGlothlin, 38 people from the community signed on and selected Ralph McGlothlin as their Wildlife Crime Watch Captain.

Warden Phillips then took the idea of the Wildlife Crime Watch program to the Buchanan County Board of Supervisors and they agreed to help fund the program. A decision had been made early on in the planning stages to seek outside funding for this program. We did not want to place a burden on the communities to come up with money, and we wanted to build and stress developing a partnership with VDGIF, other agencies, citizens, merchants, etc. With the money appropriated by the Buchanan County Board of Supervisors, signs designating the area as a Wildlife Crime Watch area was purchased along with ball caps and other items.

Media were contacted—the Bristol Herald newspaper, outdoor columnist Bill Anderson, and WCYB-TV 5—and they provided coverage of the installation of the Wildlife Crime Watch.

Additional funding has been obtained from the Virginia State Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation, the Virginia Deer Hunters Association, and First Bank and Trust. Signs have been ordered which will contain the Virginia State Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation logo along with the VDGIF logo. We intend to place the name and/or logo of any organization or group which provides enough funding to purchase the needed items, i. e., signs, caps, bumper stickers, tee shirts, etc.

The signs have a logo for WCW, which consists of the State of Virginia, a deer, a trout, and an eagle. In large black bold letters are “Warning Wildlife Crime Watch Area,” then in green lettering is the following: “Report wildlife violations to the Virginia Wildlife Crime Line: 1-800-237-5712.” “Contact your sheriff’s office for any other suspicious activities,” and “Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries” is at the bottom. These signs are 2 × 3 feet and were ordered through Voss Signs in New York.

Currently we are seeking additional funding and are looking at setting up new chapters in Buchanan County and other counties in Virginia.