

Taxidermy of Illegal Florida Wildlife— Taxidermy by Fred

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Abstract: In June 2002, investigators of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission confirmed a black market distributor of illegally obtained and protected wildlife species in South Florida. The suspect operated a black market taxidermist business in which he received money to mount the illegally obtained wildlife. Some of the animals were then sold to other customers in South Florida. A covert investigator infiltrated this enterprise called Taxidermy by Fred and identified the suppliers of the wildlife. The investigator became so trusted by the suspect that he accompanied the suspect on an illegal alligator hunt in South Florida. After four months of investigation, the take down phase of Taxidermy by Fred yielded arrests of seven suspects on 26 charges: 14 felonies and 12 misdemeanors. Intelligence gathered after interviewing showed this market had dealt in illegal saltwater fish, alligators, protected birds, illegal deer, and black bear. The operation depended upon the cooperation of numerous state and county agencies and coordination of investigative techniques with prosecuting authorities to provide the most efficient apprehension of suspects of wildlife violations.

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In May 2002, investigators received information from an anonymous source of an individual doing taxidermy work in the Hendry County area of South Florida on illegally obtained wildlife and fish. According to the source, the suspect, a native of Florida, was receiving various species of wildlife and deposits for the taxidermy work. Some of the wildlife brought in was illegally obtained and some were protected species. An operational plan was developed for a covert investigation to confirm the validity of the information and determine the extent of the market. An undercover investigator was introduced as a fellow taxidermist interested in buying mounts to resell. The investigator met the suspect and received a pre-printed price list that showed the prices for legal mounts.

Within an hour of the first meeting the suspect began offering transactions in illegally obtained alligators. At the suspect's business the investigator witnessed several illegal species of fish and wildlife in various stages of the taxidermy process. The investigator began purchasing some of the illegal wildlife and gave the suspect his phone number. The operation quickly expanded to migratory birds when the suspect called an offered to sell the investigator a bald eagle and a red-tailed hawk 10 days after the first meeting. Surveillance was immediately set up on the suspect's business to identify the source of the illegal raptors. During the established meeting the suspect

produced only a wild turkey and pheasant instead of the agreed upon raptors. The suspect promised to get the correct birds after the investigator gave a deposit for them.

During the aforementioned meeting the suspect supplied the investigator with a handwritten price list detailing the prices at which he would sell various other species of fish and wildlife. The list contained prices for illegal whitetail deer, alligator, and saltwater fish. Investigators used the list to expand the operation to the suppliers of the various illegal species. The suspect assisted investigators by calling and offering the undercover agent an opportunity to purchase a Florida black bear on 18 June 2002.

The investigators proceeded to the suspect's business to purchase the black bear and expand the investigation to target the originating source of the black bear. Tissue sample of the black bear was sent to U.S. Fish and Wildlife's National Fish and Wildlife Forensic Lab for genetic testing. The suspect later revealed that the black bear was from the South Florida population. The skull was also x-rayed and found to contain the projectile from a .44-caliber pistol. Black bear hunting has been illegal in South Florida for many years.

After two attempts the suspect convinced the undercover agent to accompany him on an illegal alligator hunt in an orange grove in South Florida for the day. The investigator joined the suspect a couple of days later for the alligator hunt. During this hunt the investigator witnessed the suspect kill two 5- to 6-foot alligators and cut the tails off, and catch three small alligators. The suspect called the investigator and offered a second black bear. Once the investigator arrived at the suspect's business he was presented with the opportunity to hold the suspect's freezer and various partial taxidermy mounts while the suspect relocated. The investigators used this opportunity to search the freezer for illegal fish and wildlife. Illegal fish and wildlife from this transaction included a goliath grouper, tarpon, snook, and a velvet antlered white-tailed deer. The suspect even presented the investigator with a handwritten receipt stating that he owed the investigator an eagle, black bear, snook, and owls.

Investigators proceeded from the original tip and expanded the case to cover various forms of illegal take and possession of numerous fish and wildlife species. Investigators were presented with the opportunity to purchase illegal harvested wildlife and fish, which included white-tailed deer, black bear, eagles, owls, goliath group, and alligators. Rarely has an investigator been presented with the sheer volume of illegal species in a 30-day investigation.

Results

Investigators spent July and August acquiring warrants and locating the suspect. The suspect had moved approximately 80 miles North to Okeechobee County. Investigators began the take down phase on 12 September 2002. Early on Friday, 13 September 2002, eight Fish and Wildlife officers combined forces with four Okeechobee County sheriff's deputies to execute 11 warrants on the primary suspect. The judge in Okeechobee gave permission for Fish and Wildlife investigators to extradite the sus-

pect back to Hendry County for interrogation. The State Attorney investigator assisted investigators with the interrogation. During the interrogation, investigators received information leading to the arrest of six individuals on 15 charges.

The primary suspect led investigators to two secondary suspects that admitted to illegally killing and possessing alligators. The two suspects allowed a voluntary search of their residences, producing six firearms. Both suspects were charged as convicted felons in possession of firearms. The primary suspect also supplied information that produced the source of the illegal saltwater fish products. This suspect was charged with four misdemeanor charges ranging from possession of a goliath grouper to fleeing and attempting to elude.

Once investigators completed processing the three suspects, the investigators began working on locating the suppliers of the black bear. The primary suspect phoned two of the three suspects that supplied the black bear and advised that the black bear mount was completed and ready for them to pick up. Investigators accompanied the primary suspect to an agreed upon location at which contact was made with the two suspects. During the initial contact both suspects admitted to the killing of the black bear and implicated a third suspect. One of the suspects also admitted to providing a velvet antlered deer that he killed out of season. Investigators executed voluntary inspections of both suspects residence. In one residence a gun that was used to kill the illegal deer and deer meat was recovered. In the other residence several pictures of the three suspects with the black bear were recovered. The third suspect involved in the black bear killing was alleged to be in Michigan.

Investigators contacted Michigan Game and Fish and solicited their help in locating the suspect. The suspect was located and interviewed by officers from Michigan Game and Fish. The third suspect denied all allegations to the Michigan officer. The State Attorney's office issued felony warrants on all the suspects from sworn statements and photographs.

Discussion

During the past 50 years over-harvesting of illegal saltwater fish and poaching of wildlife has led to near extinction of numerous species on the land and waters of the State of Florida. Commercialization of natural resources is not limited just to the take but as this investigation shows commercialization extends to the proceeding and redistribution of the resource. The sport fishing industry in Florida depends not only on being able to catch fish species capable of being harvested but also catching trophy size fish of various species. The unintentional catch and release of a 400-pound goliath grouper is the moment of a lifetime for many anglers, the sport fishing contributes millions of dollars into Florida's economy.

In addition to the saltwater economy Florida depends upon revenues generated from hunting license sales and landowners depend heavily on revenues generated from hunting leases. The economic impact from poaching can extend into the millions of dollars. The harvesting of a black bear in a limited population such as South Florida can have dramatic effects on the species when coupled with losses due to ve-

hicle accidents and nuisance bear elimination. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission spends thousands of dollars annually protecting and enhancing habitat for the Florida black bears.

The success of this operation resulted from effective intelligence gathering techniques and a coordinated investigative team. The coordinated teamwork depended upon extensive information exchanged between the undercover agent, investigators and the prosecuting officials. Case agents were responsible for connecting suspects and violations while protecting other investigators by providing pertinent background information on suspects. The success of any case ultimately depends on evidence collection and management by the case agents. When investigators combined sound investigative techniques, cohesive teamwork and proper evidence management wildlife violators can be brought to justice efficiently and quickly.