

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S

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POACH AND PAY PROJECT

PHASE ONE

RESEARCH UNDERWAY INVESTIGATES THE "DARK FIGURE" OF WILDLIFE CRIME IN AMERICA

Wildlife crime can often have significant harmful impacts on wildlife populations. While there is a large body of research concerning the impact of wildlife crimes globally—which generates billions of dollars in illegal income for offenders each year—only in the last two decades have scholars taken a serious interest in issues related to domestic wildlife crime. Most publications on domestic wildlife crime have focused on typologies or motivations of violators or occupational reactions and responsibilities of conservation officers. Few studies have directly examined the impacts to conservation and the financial consequences resulting from violations of state fish and wildlife laws. Through our partnership with the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI), we are well-positioned to develop the first comprehensive estimate of the types and rates of undetected wildlife crimes in this country and to determine the true impacts to natural resource agencies.

DETERMINING THE DARK FIGURE

The only known estimates of the undetected levels (the dark figure) of wildlife crimes are minimal, dated, based on small sample sizes, or have problematic methodological issues. As with any "victimless" crime, accurately estimating the number of undetected violators is an arduous process. However, this information is critical to fully understand the fiscal and conservation impacts that wildlife crimes have on conservation, hunters, state fish and wildlife agencies, and resources held in the public trust.

Phase 1 of the Poach & Pay Project will attempt to quantify the degree to which wildlife violations go undetected by surveying and interviewing representative samples of hunters, landowners, conservation officers, and persons convicted of wildlife crimes. Additionally, we will calculate the fiscal costs associated with the true levels of undetected wildlife crimes. To perform this work, the Boone and Crockett Club and WMI plan to work with a minimum of eight state fish

and wildlife agencies, including: Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. These states were selected to maximize variability in location, urban/rural makeup, percent of public vs. private lands, species composition, and accessibility and quality of data.

SURVEYS START THIS SUMMER

Proving a negative (i.e., the non-detected crime rate) is a difficult task. To gather the relevant data needed to calculate the true levels of illegal take, WMI will survey people from the sample states who have self-identified as landowners and indicated that they are willing to respond to surveys. In July 2021, approximately 80,000 surveys will be sent to landowners in the eight sample states. The

selected state agencies have also agreed to either direct or indirect access to their licensing data to provide similar-sized populations of hunters to be surveyed.

The questions for these two groups will focus on wildlife crimes that they have personally witnessed or been made aware of, but that were not detected by law enforcement. A more comprehensive survey will be administered to the law enforcement officers of the eight subject states to investigate their thoughts, opinions, and attitudes on the levels of illegal take of wildlife, as well as their experiences with their associated judicial processes.

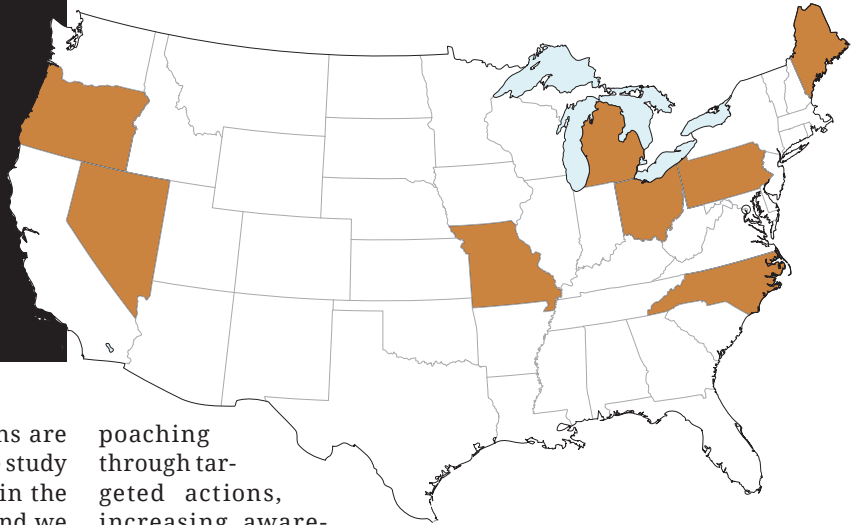
The data will be examined and categorized into four categories: 1) crimes detected and successfully prosecuted; 2) crimes detected but not

The Public Trust Doctrine is the foundation of North American wildlife law that establishes a trustee relationship where the government holds and manages wildlife for the benefit of the resources and the public. The Doctrine is also the basis of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and is viewed as an important construct of law, policy, program framework, and scientific investigation that has led to the conservation and restoration of wildlife populations across the U.S. and Canada.

Boone and Crockett Club's Poach & Pay Project is the first research effort that we are aware of that is designed to comprehensively understand the level of illegal take of wildlife in our country. It will accomplish this by:

- assessing the levels of detection and conservation impacts associated with wildlife crime;
- describing the motivational factors and potential deterrents that influence poachers;
- determining the judicial and prosecutorial barriers to enforcing wildlife laws; and
- providing solutions to improving prosecution and conviction rates of poachers, including an objective, defensible, and proportional framework for poaching penalties and restitution.

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successfully prosecuted, 3) crimes detected but not prosecuted, and 4) crimes not detected. Collectively the summation of these four categories should provide more insight into an accurate rate of “loss” or “theft” of our public resources.

The critical last piece of this phase of the research will be interviews and/or surveys with known convicted poachers from the eight sample states where we will attempt to determine their relative “success rates”—which is defined as the percent of time they successfully poached but avoided detection. While conducting these interviews, researchers will also be gathering information regarding what motivates poachers to poach. By determining types and rates of specific motivating factors (e.g., subsistence, trophy, convenience, money, opportunistic, etc.), we hope to develop a tool for agencies and the public to “reverse engineer” those motivations in some cases.

Our expectations are high. A comprehensive study on wildlife poaching in the U.S. is long overdue, and we hope to rectify that deficiency. Ultimately, success will be determined by providing the trust agencies with accurate information to better perform their jobs and by reducing the levels of wildlife

poaching through targeted actions, increasing awareness of the true costs, and lowering the level of social acceptance of these crimes. ■

Antlers were among items seized after a two-year investigation yielded dozens of charges against three Oregon men and one woman by the state wildlife agency. (PHOTO: OREGON STATE POLICE/F&W)



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