

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S

POACH & PAY PROJECT

RAISING THE STAKES ON POACHING: THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S POACH & PAY PROJECT

It seems these days we are seeing an increasing number of stories about illegally killed game being abandoned in fields or by the side of the highway, deer and elk found rotting with just their heads removed, and dishonest outfitters breaking numerous game laws to get their clients the trophy they seek. When did poaching become okay? The answer is never—at least not over the last century when we sportsmen and women embraced a conservation ethic and recognized that game laws and personal integrity were essential to ensuring the sustainability of wildlife populations.

Certainly, none of us were alive at the time when game populations were decimated in the early 1900s, and perhaps that failure to remember our history leads

some to think of poaching as a victimless crime—but it's not. Wildlife killed illegally robs ethical hunters of their opportunity for a fair chase hunt, undermines the state fish and wildlife agencies' ability to manage wildlife populations, and, perhaps worst of all, casts a black mark on hunting in the eye of the general public. This is something we can ill afford in a time when hunters are a shrinking percentage of the population.

"Poaching goes against all that we hold sacred as law-abiding sportsmen and women and undermines the entire foundation of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. However, the media often uses the terms hunting and poaching interchangeably, dragging all hunters down with the crimes of poachers," notes Boone and Crockett Club Past President,

Timothy C. Brady. "In addition, with little consistency among states in terms of fines and restitution, poachers often get away with little penalty. This emboldens them and other poachers to steal our public trust resources—and potentially the future of hunting."

Furthermore, there is little wildlife crime data in the U.S., despite billions of dollars in known illegal economic activity globally. Since wildlife crime data is often assumed, state wildlife agencies can make imprecise scientific wildlife management decisions. In addition, the detection and conviction rates are so low in some states that tens of millions of dollars are left on the table from uncollected restitution and fines that could have been used for wildlife conservation. Perhaps even more of an issue is the so-called

"dark figure" of poaching—the amount of wildlife crime that goes undetected by conservation agencies.

CHANGING THE GAME ON POACHING

To fight this battle that has the potential to end our legal hunting opportunities, we must understand the true detection rates and the conservation and financial costs of wildlife crimes.

It is with this in mind that the Boone and Crockett Club in December 2020 announced plans to lead a long-term Poach & Pay anti-poaching campaign. The project was launched in a presentation during the National Assembly of Sportsmen's Caucuses virtual annual meeting on December 8.

Through Poach & Pay, the Club will work with state wildlife agencies, legislators,



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and the judicial system to improve the detection and conviction of poachers and to ensure that the fines being assessed for this illegal killing are in line with the value our society places on wildlife. Poach & Pay, which received initial financial support through the Bass Pro Shops and Cabela’s Outdoor Fund, will include detailed research, a public outreach campaign to actively engage the sportsmen’s community against poaching, and the development of template legislation that could be carried in state houses to help state agencies fight wildlife crime.

“As responsible sportsmen and women, we must collectively do all we can to prevent wildlife crime and preserve the integrity of hunting,” said Bob Ziehmer, senior director of conservation at Bass Pro Shops and Cabela’s. “We thank our customers who, by rounding up purchases in our stores and online in support of the Outdoor Fund, are directly contributing to the fight against poachers through the Boone and Crockett Club’s Poach & Pay project.”

The Poach & Pay project will arm U.S. sportsmen and women with real poaching data that clearly separates poaching from hunting, and the Club plans to work with the outdoor industry to promote the positive image of hunting and the importance to the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. With that in mind, the Club is actively seeking additional sponsorship from the outdoor industry and other organizations to help fund Poach & Pay research and outreach in the coming years.

GETTING TO THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

Phase I of the Poach & Pay project began in 2016, when the Boone and Crockett Club initiated research on the state restitution systems for illegal take of big game species. This review found that 42 states currently have restitution programs, and many include trophy restitution. However, there is little apparent standardization of restitution costs, either within or among states. While surveyed state conservation officers believed that poaching penalties

accurately reflect the crime and current values of illegally taken animals, the survey found that the judicial system often was the primary obstacle in convicting and punishing poachers. In fact, wildlife cases are disproportionately dismissed, and penalties are often applied inconsistently. This suggests that there is a lack of understanding of wildlife laws and the perception that poaching is a victimless crime. The Phase I findings led to a recognition that the problem is likely much greater than we even realize, and it’s a problem that affects every one of us.

For the next phase of the Poach & Pay research, the Club has contracted with Dr. Kristie Blevins, a criminologist and Professor in the School of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University, and Dr. Jonathan Gasset, who served as commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources until 2013 and now works for the Wildlife Management Institute.

“The Poach & Pay research will be the most extensive study on poaching that has

ever been done in North America,” commented Gasset. “The first component of the research will focus on trying to get a handle on the ‘dark figure’ of wildlife crime—the amount of poaching that occurs that goes undetected.”

For Phase II of Poach & Pay, the team will start by focusing on a representative group of eight states for detailed surveys and wildlife crime research to help understand this “dark figure.” Previous analysis the team conducted in 2018 suggests this could be significant. Using wildlife crime citation and court data in Kentucky from 2006 to 2017, Blevins and Gasset attempted to assess the real cost of illegal take violations to the Commonwealth. Using only the minimum amount for fines and restitution, the study estimated the annual fiscal impact for all detected fish and wildlife violations for the state was approximately \$1.1 million, with almost 80% (\$864,778) of the total impact tied to poaching. Unfortunately, the state wildlife agency recovered an average of only 12.5% (\$94,981 in fines; \$13,634 in restitution)

of those costs annually. In addition, while little empirical data on detection rates of wildlife crimes currently exist, it is believed that only a small portion of wildlife crimes are detected, with estimates ranging from 0.67 to 3.33%. In the Kentucky example, using the midpoint of these estimates (2% detection rate) leaves a “dark figure” of 98% of wildlife crimes in Kentucky that go undetected. Assuming this rate is accurate, the real cost of illegal take violations in Kentucky is approximately \$43.2 million!

When COVID-19 restrictions loosen, Poach & Pay research will include face-to-face interviews with convicted poachers to try to understand their motivations and evaluate the penalties that could deter the crimes. Dr. Blevins has experience in these types of

interviews and hopes to get to the crux of why some people choose to willfully violate fish and wildlife laws while others do not. This will also be critical for establishing sufficient penalties and implementing other controls that will ultimately help to reduce or deter wildlife crime. Legal consequences, the risk of detection, the speed of adjudication, morality, an accurate understanding of conservation impacts, and other factors may act as specific deterrents that reduce the willingness to commit wildlife crimes.

LEADING THE CHANGE

The research conducted through Poach & Pay will be the first of its kind to use a modern statistical, scientific, and sociological methodology to describe the complex issue of poaching and other wildlife

crimes in North America. With their history as a conservation leader, the Boone and Crockett Club sees it as essential to take on this challenge.

“We feel it is our duty as the organization that led the way on fair chase and hunting ethics for well more than a century to raise the stakes against wildlife crime,” noted Brady. “The Boone and Crockett Club’s Poach & Pay project will show poachers for the thieves they are and hold them accountable for their crimes.”

Working together, Poach & Pay will show that poaching is not a victimless crime, and that the future of wildlife conservation and our hunting heritage depends on raising the stakes on poachers. ■

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MEET THE POACH & PAY RESEARCH TEAM

JONATHAN GASSETT, PH.D.
WMI Southeastern Field Representative

Jon Gasset is the Southeastern Field Representative for WMI. Jon has more than 20 years’ experience as a biologist, planner, supervisor, and administrator. Prior to joining WMI in 2013, he served as the Commissioner, Wildlife Division Director, and Big Game Coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. Jon has served as President of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and the Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and has chaired numerous committees in all three Associations. Jon serves on the Board of Directors of the National Conservation Leadership Institute. Jon is a graduate of the inaugural class of the National Conservation Leadership Institute and holds Ph.D. and M.S. Degrees in Forest Resources from the University of Georgia and a B.S. Degree in Biology from Kennesaw State University.

Over the last four decades, he has hunted extensively throughout North America, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. He is married to Kristie Blevins who shares a lifelong appreciation for the outdoors and who, as a new hunter, has already taken big game in North America and Africa.

KRISTIE R. BLEVINS, PH.D.
Survey and Statistical Consultant

Kristie Blevins is a Professor in the School of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University. She received her Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from the University of Cincinnati. Her research interests include wildlife crime, crime prevention, the occupational reactions of criminal justice employees, and corrections. Her work can be found in outlets such as the Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, Criminal Justice Policy Review, American Journal of Criminal Justice, Deviant Behavior, and International Journal of Police Science and Management. She teaches upper division and graduate level classes in data analysis, research methodology, and statistics.



If your company is interested in supporting Poach & Pay, contact Danny Noonan, Sales & Corporate Relations Manager with the Boone and Crockett Club at danny@boone-crockett.org or 406-542-1888 ext. 205.