

Have More Babies, Cut More Trees

Four thirty in the morning seems to come earlier when you've been up until eleven drinking brandy. "It doesn't take too long to get through a night around here," wildlife enforcement agent Mike Mercer said as he emerged from his house into the blue-black cold of November 20th. Mike has worked in wildlife enforcement for the state of Washington for 20 years. On this day I had planned to ride along on a typical day in the life of an old government trapper. It was deer season within our destination, the area south and west of Mt. St. Helens. An unexpected phone call from Mike's sergeant the preceding night brought news of an elk poacher sting operation that was under way the next morning. Mike's participation was paramount and I was reluctant to go along at that point. It sounded like no place for a civilian to be if things got ugly. At that point I realized that things already were ugly and if I were to get up at 4:30, blood flow would snuff my hang-over by 9:30, where as, if I were to sleep in, I would be impaired for a good share of the waking day. We were to meet five other game agents near Cougar at 5:30.

Having no time to pack a lunch, we prepared a thermos of coffee. While still idling in the driveway, he tested the blue lights and siren on his state pickup. The length and intensity of the siren blast seemed excessive to me, but he explained that he wanted to be sure and awaken his long time friend and neighbor, Mollie Hands, so that she could get on with her morning yoga. We blasted north on interstate 5 at top speed. With over 100 thousand miles of logging road abuse, the truck sailed comfortably along past semi-conscious travelers and amphetamine laden truck drivers. After the turn off to Cougar at Woodland, the road narrowed and curved. The frost on the road was no deterrent to Mike's expeditiousness. "You must hit it high and dip down deep into the apex of the curve to maximize your velocity," Mike explained while demonstrating the theory. I can tell you that hot coffee does not soon dissipate from the crotch of wool pants, and my swearing failed to alter his method of maneuvering the vehicle.

Waiting just outside of Cougar were agents, Mark Hart, Sergeant Tim Ford, Bob "Buck" Powell, Albert Sutton, and Tim Meyers. Mark had put the operation together based on an informant's testimony and the investigative endeavors of an undercover wildlife agent. In the headlights of one of the state trucks, Tim outlined the situation to the others. A camp of heavy armed and unlearned men had poached and transported elk out of season. He had vehicle descriptions and the location of the camp. There was information of a second camp but no location was available. He suspected other numerous violations but had no confirmation of them. His goal was to obtain a confession or find evidence. The informant offered words of caution regarding the encampments arsenal. Handguns, huge "Rambo"-like knives, shotguns, body odor were prevalent. Two weeks worth of human excrement encircled the camp. I began to think about the little cafe in Cougar that served breakfast. "Maybe I should hike into town", I whispered to Mike, "This is no place for a nervous person with shaky bowels. There's that nice cafe with the 'this business supported by timber dollars' sign in the window, pick me up on your way out". At that moment, Mike interrupted the briefing to introduce me officially. "By the way, I'll have Ron Logan riding along today. He is with the Associated Press out of Seattle and he's writing about the impacts of wildlife budgets taking a back seat to most everything else at the state level." It is sometimes prudent to be gullible at this hour in the morning. It

appeared that the other agents instantly believed Mike and fully approved of my alleged cause and presence.

Pavement turned to dirt as we all headed up toward the camp. Light was just beginning and soon revealed a heavy frost. "What happens in the woods is indicative of the human degradation we are experiencing everywhere," Mike tells me. Years in the woods have turned him into a cynic; not the effect one would expect from a lifetime of woodsmanship. He became serious, "The wilderness experience is virtually gone in our part of the world. There isn't a foot of ground that hasn't been cut, dug, trampled or otherwise shit on in this entire region. I've seen it go from bad to worse". Indeed. I have spent a lot of time in these parts. The damage from the Mt. St. Helens eruption is but a minute fraction of the destruction caused from logging. Deer and Elk are the only animals that thrive in clear cuts and "re-prod" (a timber industry term for reproduction or small trees). The government agencies which oversee forest land for the public trust have done us all a horrible, irreversible disservice. This place is by-and-large a biological dessert.

To avoid startling the occupants, two agents went ahead into the camp in a single vehicle while the others waited just down the road. Not more than two minutes had passed before the message came over the radio, "Come on in guys, no problem, there's just a lot of them." The eyes of the camp dwellers were huge, their mouths hung open wide as the four other state trucks rolled into camp, blocking all vehicle related exit opportunities. "This festering pustule of humanity is about to come to a head," Mike assured me as we stopped abruptly. A large Weyerhaeuser Company sign next to the camp had an elk hide draped disrespectfully over it. The sign welcomed visitors to the "Weyerhaeuser Tree Farm". Stapled to the sign was a flyer outlining the road closure plans for the following year. Vandals and thieves were blamed for the policy change. The signage merged with the camp to create a discouraging backdrop to the hills of Marble Mountain.

The next two to three hours were filled with frustration. Every member denied every allegation. Their stories were weak and uninformative. Their egos had been badly abused and their heads hung downward throughout the morning. Two of the men had Sasquatch-like frames. Every move of every hunter had to be monitored. The weapons were gathered up and inventoried. As one entered the cab of his truck he suddenly looked at me and stopped. "May I get a cigarette?" he asked. I nodded and moved closer to the open cab of Mike's truck. The elk carcass was not in or around the camp but one of the suspect's trucks was smeared with elk hair and blood. This material, and the hide on the sign were claimed to have been from the previous week when elk season was open. These wardens are not idiots. Blood is no longer in its liquid form after one week in the back of a pickup truck. Alibis were obviously not prepared. These men were used to doing what they wanted and getting away with it. They were given countless opportunities to come clean but they did not.

Sergeant Ford decided enough time had been wasted. Three tow trucks were dispatched from Woodland to confiscate the suspect vehicles. The agents felt they had enough to make the case stick but had not given up on finding the elk carcass. An untagged deer carcass hanging behind one of the camp trailers provided more fuel for the fire.

The sight of five state game trucks, three wreckers, and a large stink infested elk camp all nestled in the

deep confines of this so-called wilderness must have provided great curiosity for the many that passed by. "We have a high presence here today, but its pretty damned concentrated" Al Sutton told me as we watched a bewildered hunter drive by. The suspects chain smoked and paced around the frozen ground. They did not look each other in the eye and appeared to be more angry then concerned. With most of their vehicles gone, they now faced the challenge of getting home and later appearing in court. The wardens faced a different challenge. They were determined to find the other camp where the elk carcass had allegedly been transferred.

In Cougar, while on our way to the Ape Caves area where the phantom camp was supposed to be, Mike swerved abruptly into a small market. "There are serious restrictions on our time, and I will try to impose as many of them as possible," he told me in a joking tone. As near as we could tell, the donuts we bought at the market expired in February, 1993. They were dry but tasted just like the fresh ones. The grocer offered to make us hot dogs in a microwave oven. "Just take a second" he claimed. We were not that brave.

All five units now spread out to check every hunting camp in the Ape Cave area. We suspected that the stranded hunters would try to find a way to the phantom camp before we did in an effort to conceal whatever might be there. With tensions temporarily eased, Mike returned to cynicism. "I used to maintain the glimmer that we could make a difference, but we catch only the idiots," he told me. "There are heinous crimes around every turn, you can fight it but its like wiping your butt with a hoop."

The hours that ensued were tedious. Running every plate on every trailer and vehicle we came across took time and often resulted in a reply such as "license suspended" or "that license is registered to a water vessel trailer and should not be on a camp trailer". By virtue of the law enforcement officers code of ethics, these violation, regardless of how seemingly small or irrelevant, cannot be overlooked. Mike was right, there really are crimes around every turn. "The laws, right or wrong, are what they are until changed by the processes in motion. I am obligated to enforce them so don't interfere or I'll cuff you to the bed of this truck," he barked after I suggested that he was wasting time with frivolous matters while our carcass might be finding its way into some nearby, concealing shallow grave. I realized that the decisions were best left to him. One such decision was when to stop the truck to go to the bathroom. "In this job, its always been a matter of great concern", he explained at my inquiry about toilet paper, "Whenever this happens I just can't seem to get far enough away in the woods to avoid people. They invariably have questions of you and when they see your truck they come looking for you. The sight of a warden walking out of the woods with a roll of documents is one that seems to erode our credibility. People don't necessarily believe that we are capable of performing normal biological activities when working."

The clear-cuts on Weyerhaeuser land near Marble Mountain are huge. Private land owner don't use the U.S. Forest Service "patchwork" method where small swatches of trees are left standing. There's really no difference between the two methods; over time all of the trees are cut. One road straddled a high ridge between these methods of tree extraction. Mike stopped the truck and rolled down the window. "Isn't it beautiful? If it wasn't for you bunny huggers we could get at the rest of those sticks over there", he said to me while staring at a tiny stand of old trees near a cliff. "Those trees aren't doing

anyone any good in the ground. God put 'em here for us to use. Dominion and all ya know." He likes to ridicule the very philosophy he embodies. Sarcasm is sometimes soothing. "Have more babies, cut more trees," he muttered as we drove on.

We came in and out of radio contact with the other wardens. There was chatter of failed leads, what areas had been covered, and other violations encountered. About 2:30, "Bingo" blurted out of the radio speaker. A Skamania County Sheriff deputy who had joined the search found a camp with a trailer registered to one of the suspect hunters. A closer look revealed the elk carcass we had been looking for. As Sergeant Ford and Mark Hart went back to camp #1 to transport the suspect, the rest of us met deputy Craig McCollom at the phantom camp. There we found evidence of a long season of carnage. Hides, bones, hooves and tattered flesh were scattered about in the surrounding woods. Garbage cluttered the camp closer to the trailer.

A tremendous amount of time and resources were used to apprehend just one wildlife villain. That is the way the system works. However, word of this day's activities will spread over the Marble Mountain region like wildfire. Its deterrent value is unmeasurable. "Loss of habitat is the real wildlife villain," Mike explains on the way home, "Timber corporations, agriculture and development have destroyed more wildlife than every hunter who has ever walked the earth." I get the impression that wildlife agents sometimes feel that they are nothing more than zoo keepers, mending the fences and mitigating the conflicts between caged animals on one side and a swelling crowd on the other. I can now fully appreciate their frustrations. Thirteen hour days do not always end as successfully as this one.

My questioning had forced Mike to ponder some of the questions he fears the most. The future of wildlife around the world gets a little darker every day, and few are more aware of it than he is. "The bright side is", he tells me, "you can still go fishing or hunting when the fish and animals are gone. Most fishing and hunting trips result in no catch anyway, so what would be the difference?" As someone who spends most of his free time in the same confines as when at work, he has as much to lose as anyone with this discouraging prospect.

I was encouraged by the ambition and concern that I examined that day. These wildlife agents understand not only the multitudes of fish, plants, and animals, but also the human and social conditions that they interact with. They work against all odds. They are like the crew of a sinking ship working feverishly to patch a gapping hole. Most of us have already jumped ship, others wait very close to the life boat.

Ron Logan



UPPER LEFT EDGE JANUARY 1994 11

