

Plant-Poaching Study at Smokies

Plant-poaching in the National Parks and the efforts of two NPS scientists to combat it in the Great Smoky Mountains NP are described in detail in the Fall 1982 issue of *Earthwatch* by Susan P. Bratton, research biologist with the NPS Cooperative Research Unit at University of Georgia's Institute of Ecology. In the "Field Notes" section, Bratton tells of a park naturalist showing visitors an exceptionally fine stand of blooming pink ladyslippers — more than 200 plants — and then returning to find later every plant gone.

According to Bratton, "poachers come in all varieties, from ignorant tourists who dig up a few wildflowers for their home gardens to big-time thieves who clean out hundreds of high-priced cacti in one

night."

Bratton and Peter White, research botanist from the Uplands Field Research Laboratory (where Bratton was stationed prior to her Georgia assignment) organized volunteer Earthwatch members for a 10-week investigation (from early April to mid-June). They covered nearly 50 sampling routes and the orchid populations along these routes, then computerized the summaries. The study documented the fact that human activity is depleting the number of showy flowers that casual park visitors can see from moderately easy routes.

Bratton and White will use their results to justify better enforcement, but they believe that education of the public is the real key to reducing plant poaching.