

Interpreters Urged To Tell Story Of Illegal Trade in Plants, Animals

"Some interpretive thoughts and information on the international trade in plants and animals" is the modest, low key title to a broadside challenge leveled at NPS interpreters by Western Region Chief of Interpretation Dick Cunningham.

The barrage is fully loaded – 19 pages packed with case incidents, grim statistics, ecological ramifications, and implications for the National Park System. It cites chapter and verse about the international trade in mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, and plants. It covers major U.S. species in demand internationally and lists retail prices (from USFWS information) for selected U.S. reptiles and amphibians.

It also acquaints the reader with diseases spread and ecosystem havoc wrought by alien plants and animals. And it describes CITES – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species an agreement that has been ratified by 90 nations since its inception in 1973.

How the international trade in plants and animals affects the National Park System "should be obvious," Cunningham says. "To put it simply, we **have** what the collectors and the poachers **want**." Cunningham asks NPS interpreters to be alert to poaching and collection. "Into our trust," he says, "the American people have put the management responsibility for the protection and preservation of the very basic resources of the National Parks – their plants and animals."

Examples of possible "collectibles" are given (viz. Big Bend mud turtles, Mission Blue butterfly, San Francisco garter snake, Channel Islands slender salamander, etc.), and a "case in point," Shenandoah NP is cited:

"Black Bear and White-Tailed Deer are under constant poaching pressure. Commercial hunting involves the selling of whole animals to restaurants and to other individuals and such animal parts as bear teeth, gall bladders, bear and deer hides, and deer antlers. Bear gall bladders have been traced to the Oriental market. The situation is serious enough for the park to have established an Anti-Hunting Strike Team. A recent undercover operation resulted in the arrest of 23 people across the U.S. who were involved in illegal poaching activities. Eleven of the arrests were associated with bear poaching in and around Shenandoah NP."

Noting that the National Parks are a microcosm of what is going on worldwide, Cunningham urges interpreters to incorporate wild animal and plant trade themes into their programs – especially in parks that contain species that could enter the illegal markets if collected or poached. He challenges interpreters with five specific responsibilities:

1. We interpreters need to know what species of plants and animals occur in our parks – better comprehension of the biotic composition of our parks, especially rare, threatened, or endangered species.

2. We interpreters need close cooperation and

communication with park scientists, outside scientists, and park resource management specialists.

3. We interpreters need to develop creative, factual, and honest interpretation program activities about the international trade in animals and plants.

4. We interpreters need to have close cooperation and communication with commissioned park rangers and others with law enforcement responsibilities for protection of park wildlife and plants.

5. Park staff needs to have local community support and assistance in curtailing collecting and poaching of park plants and animals. Interpretation is a means of soliciting visitor participation in a park-sponsored Wildlife Watch program – information about whom to call if one observes someone collecting or poaching in a park.

Cunningham then lists sources of help, such as the Wildlife Trade Education Kit, produced by TRAFFIC (U.S.A.), a branch of the World Wildlife Fund. Contact for this kit is Lynne C. Hardie, Public Information and Education Specialist, TRAFFIC (U.S.A.), World Wildlife Fund, 1250 24th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20037 (202) 778-9503.

In addition, Cunningham's paper lists 37 selected references for additional interpretive fodder. His paper may be had by writing the NPS Western Region Office, 450 Golden Gate Ave., Box 36063, San Francisco, CA 94102, or by calling Cunningham at FTS 8-556-3184 or (415) 556-3184.