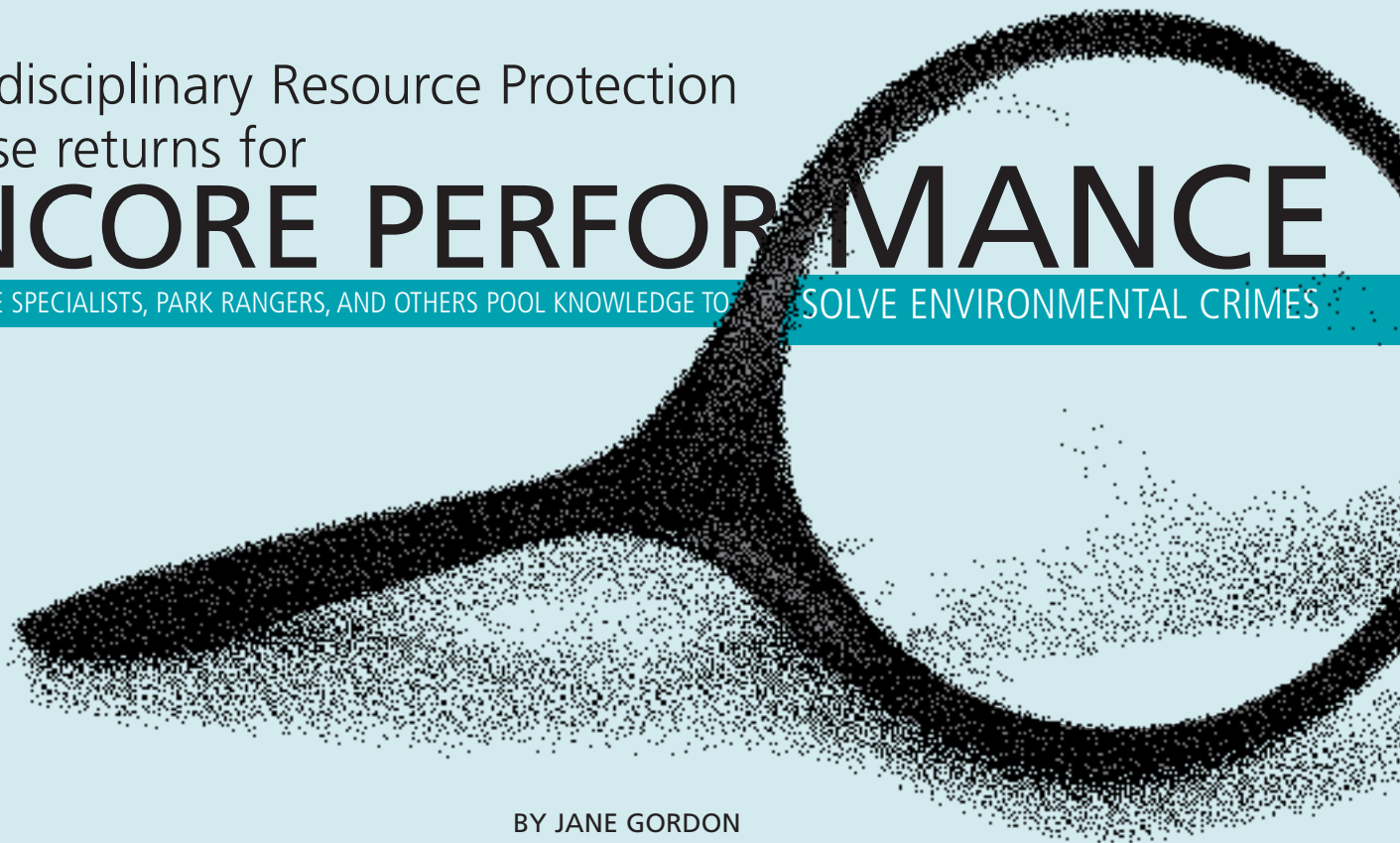


Interdisciplinary Resource Protection  
course returns for

# ENCORE PERFORMANCE

RESOURCE SPECIALISTS, PARK RANGERS, AND OTHERS POOL KNOWLEDGE TO SOLVE ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES



BY JANE GORDON  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD SWAIN

In October 2000 individuals from a variety of jobs within the National Park Service convened for the second annual Interdisciplinary Resource Protection Training. This innovative class focuses on the way different divisions in the Park Service can work together to investigate and prosecute resource crime. Included among the diverse group of participants were archeologists, botanists, wildlife biologists, law enforcement officers, hazardous materials specialists, and public information officers. At a time when specialization is increasingly common and necessary in the Park Service, this type of training fills a void. It offers Park Service staff the opportunity to come together and profit from the collective skills of the Service as a whole, rather than to work in isolation from one another. Beware, however, lest this description sound too rosy. This 50-hour class is not for the faint-hearted; work is intense with seldom an idle moment.

Botanists,  
wildlife biologists,  
archeologists,  
law enforcement officers,  
hazardous materials specialists,  
and  
public information officers  
[participated in the course.]

## The setting

The course is hosted at Camp San Luis Obispo, a former military base that is transformed into “San Luis Obispo National Historic Site” for the purposes of the training. Upon arrival, participants are briefed about the course: they will spend a day with federal legal experts pursuing case reviews and environmental law, followed by three intensive days of crime investigation scenarios. Groups are expected to function autonomously, electing their own leaders, choosing their own timelines, and pursuing their own investigations. The scenarios stimulate the bulk of learning, and the stage is set for complex and unpredictable investigations. San Luis Obispo National Historic Site has its own set of rules and regulations, military history, evidence of early cultures, wildlife, and recreational opportunities. Actors from a local university drama club people the site in a variety of functions and roles, playing villains, tricksters, salespersons, and jilted lovers. Villages replete with food stands, rock shops, condominiums, and crack houses emerge from the old





*Figure 1. The annual interdisciplinary training course combines the skills and creativity of various park positions, including natural resource management, law enforcement, archeology, and public affairs.*



*Figure 2. In three days of intensive crime investigation scenarios that involve forensics, chemistry, botany, biology, and other disciplines, course participants put together a case to prosecute a natural resource crime in a national park. Part of the process involves documenting evidence and clues of a natural resource crime.*



*Figure 3. Course participants get an opportunity to fill various roles in the investigation. Here a public information officer relays news about the crime.*

army base, while realistic props such as frozen bobcats appear in suspect freezers. Federal attorneys from Los Angeles staff a mock courtroom where participant cases culminate in trial.

During the daylong scenarios participants find that they must expand their concept of what the investigation process may involve. Problem solving and creative thinking are keys to success in this type of work. Participants scour the scenes for physical evidence, explore telephone records, and visit restaurants frequented by looters. They experiment with various materials and technologies, such as dental stone for fine print casting and video cameras for crime scene surveillance. They discover a variety of resources available to them, including a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service forensics lab, on-call U.S. attorneys, local ornithologists, marine mammal specialists, entomologists, and hazardous waste cleanup specialists.

## Practical scenarios

Inasmuch as resource crime runs the gamut from wildlife poaching to hazardous waste disposal to vandalism, the scenarios offer a variety of possible case studies. Each challenges participants to use the full range of their group's skills, including expertise in the natural, cultural, and forensic sciences (figs. 1–3). A day-long scenario might unfold as follows: the group's public information officer receives an anonymous tip about illegal waste dumping along the shore of Camp San Luis Obispo's protected river. Upon walking the riverbank, the group notices an unusually high number of dead fish along the shore. The fisheries and wildlife specialist identifies these fish as native steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), a species whose local population is already endangered. Under the guidance of the resource specialist, the group samples water quality, but is frustrated when they are unable to determine the cause of the fish kill.

The group decides to take a closer look along the shore.

A botanist notes an area of disturbed vegetation upstream of the fish kill.

While two members collect additional water samples, the team's archeologist finds tire marks 300 yards from the shoreline. A quick check of the simulated historic site's rules and regulations reveals that this area is closed to vehicles. Realizing that

the site may be a crime scene, one of the group's law enforcement rangers cordons off the area, protecting crucial evidence. Her efforts pay off when, upon closer inspection, the group discovers footprints and a pile of empty plastic containers nearby.

Clues at the scene lead the group to send two of its members to interview people in the local commercial district. Those remaining on-scene scour the area and subsequently make an important discovery that leads the group's hazardous materials specialist to suspect perchloroethylene as the chemical responsible for the fish kill. They send samples of their find to a local lab for identification. Meanwhile, investigation in town turns up new possibilities. Additional group members arrive to follow up on leads and conduct further interviews. An employee at a paint factory points investigators to a subcontractor whose job is to clean out chemical tanks in the area. While locating the subcontractor proves unsuccessful, interviews reveal that his girlfriend works at the local hamburger stand. Angry with her wayward boyfriend, or perhaps simply feeling the call for justice, she shares helpful information with the plain-clothes investigator.

Group members convene to share details. The sum of the clues and evidence is the basis for "probable cause" to search the premises of the suspected subcontractor. With the aid of an on-call assistant U.S. attorney, the group develops and executes a search warrant on his trailer on the south end of the historic site. The search is comprehensive and provides the links that ultimately bring the case to court.

The outcome of the investigation? That is never predictable. But if your interest is sparked, consider attending a future course to discover it for yourself.

The team's archeologist finds tire marks 300 yards from the shoreline.

## Aftermath

After negotiating the three diverse, day-long scenarios, course participants commented that they had used materials and techniques that they never before would have considered using. All agreed, however, that the most valuable resource was the collective skills of the group members. The opportunity to witness colleagues at work is rare for many participants. Many admitted that they were previously unaware of the scope of certain positions outside of their own. With this new familiarity comes a host of new collaborative opportunities available at the park level.

The recognition of each other's talents is complemented by the participants' discovery of their own strengths and specialties. Many were surprised to see how important their skills are to the investigation. One botanist was shocked when her knowledge of local plant species led team members to elect her as group leader for the following day's investigation. As she directed the final day's activities, however, it became clear how well the group had profited from its shared knowledge. Without hesitation, team members collected evidence, conducted interviews, and documented the investigation at her command. And while the team leader handily oversaw the scientific aspects of the investigation, she demonstrated the same ease as she off-handedly referred to such new legal concerns as probable cause and consent searches.

The opportunity to take advantage of this training arises annually, usually in the fall. Course lodging, meals, and tuition are funded by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles, which leaves only the cost of transportation and per diem to be borne by individual parks. As advertised, the training will help parks improve in the investigation and prosecution of resource crimes. Equally important, the integration of technically skilled and creative staffs—park rangers, resource specialists, scientists, legal experts, and others—facilitates synergism and teamwork in this important, shared aspect of park preservation. 

## About the Author

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