

A thorny whodunit . . .

Cactus cops wage war on rustlers

NOT LONG AGO, Arizona agent Richard Countryman spent the better part of a day pursuing a poacher across miles of windblown desert. In the end, he lost his man. On another recent occasion, the 50-year-old sleuth endured three chilly hours in a snowstorm, waiting for a heist that never came off. Such vexing incidents have become all too commonplace for Countryman ever since he was appointed to head up a five-man task force charged with combating one of the Southwest's newest crime waves: cactus rustling.

Although it has been going on for a long time, cactus rustling didn't really begin to boom until a few years ago, when drought-stricken home developers turned to cactus plants for landscaping. By now, the plants have become so popular that demand far exceeds supply. The result is a huge black market serviced, in Arizona, by some 20 large-scale poaching operations. According to Countryman, the rustlers steal cacti, Joshua trees, yucca trees — "whatever the market demands." In only a few minutes, a gang can make off with a plant that took more than a century to grow.

The stakes in such thievery are high. A 20-foot saguaro cactus may bring up to \$1,000 in a lucrative market like San Francisco. A three-foot red barrel cactus often sells for \$150. But more than cactus is involved.

In the desert, cactus and other

plants provide food and shelter for a wide range of wildlife. The cactus wren, for instance, nests in the stems of the cholla or other thorny plants, while wood rats and ground squirrels raise their young in the decaying vegetation at the base of Joshua trees. The pronuba moth subsists on the fruit of the yucca tree, while the tree depends on the moth for pollination.

To deter poachers, Arizona has one of the toughest protection laws in the nation. A special permit is required to harvest any of the state's 200 or so desert plants. The law prohibits taking any cactus from public lands. Violations can bring up to \$1,000 in fines and a year in jail.

Unfortunately, the permits are easy to get and the law is difficult to enforce. Worse, the courts often let convicted poachers off easy. "Few judges care anything at all about cactus," Countryman notes.

In recent years, the problem has spilled over into other western states, most notably California. There, cactus harvesting was unregulated until last year, when legislation modeled after Arizona's law was passed. Brian Booher, a ranger with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in California's Mojave Desert, says the new law may be working — but it's hard to tell. "It may just have made the poachers more cautious," he concedes. Booher is the only ranger patrolling five million acres in the eastern Mojave.

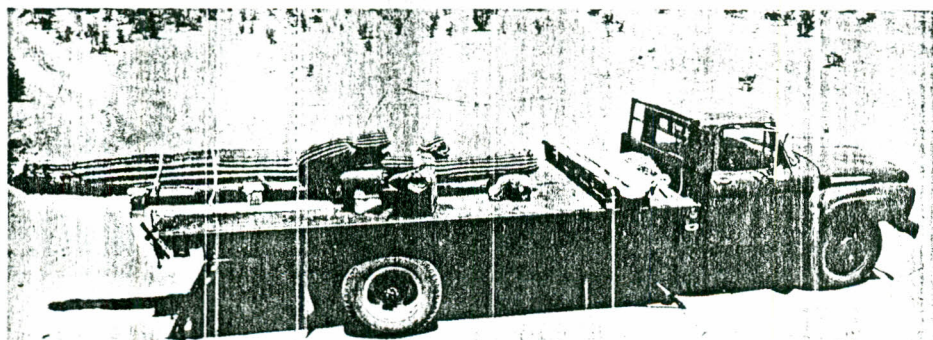


Cactus agent Countryman with stolen plant: "There's just no way to stop it."

In some parts of the Mojave, entire hillsides of cactus have vanished — a fact not discernible to most desert visitors. "People misunderstand the desert," says Chuck Bell, an environmental analyst for San Bernardino County, which encompasses much of the affected area in California. "They think it's supposed to be barren. The fact is that much of the eastern Mojave was covered with grass before people began grazing cattle there. Now, they're depleting the cactus, as well."

The situation is critical in some areas. More than 60,000 cactus plants were harvested legally in Arizona last year, while an additional 20,000 or more were pulled out by poachers. The number taken in California is still unknown, and many conservationists warn that if soil damage in the eastern Mojave is not checked soon, there may be severe dust storms in the next 50 years.

"It's a complex issue," says Countryman, who received more than 100 threats on his life last year from poachers. "These people are dangerous. Cactus stealing has become as lucrative today as cattle rustling was years ago. There's just no way to stop it." — Timothy Branning



Twenty-foot saguaro cactus for sale on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona: In only a few minutes, a gang can make off with a plant that took more than a century to grow.