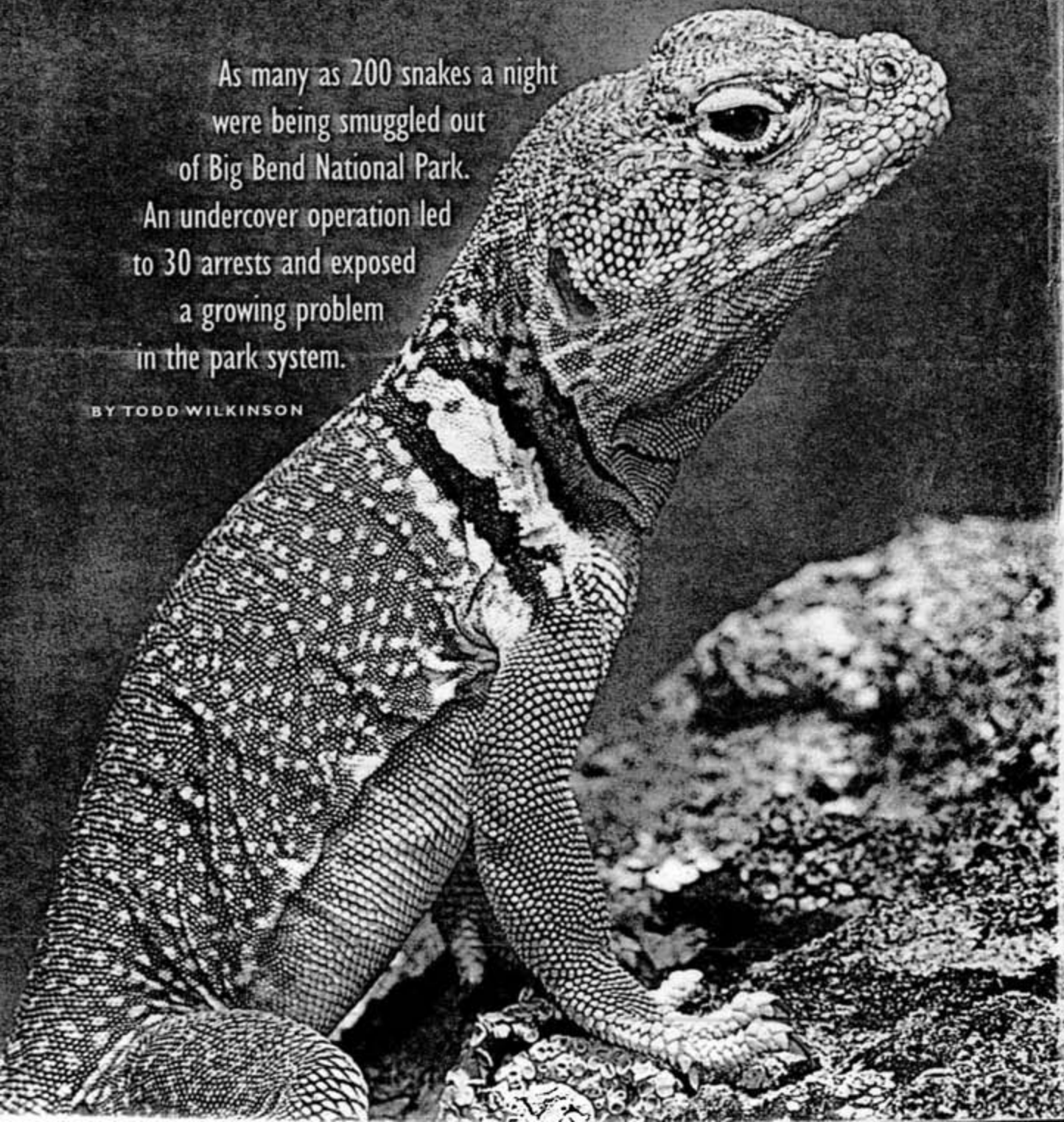


REPTILE RUSTLERS

As many as 200 snakes a night were being smuggled out of Big Bend National Park. An undercover operation led to 30 arrests and exposed a growing problem in the park system.

BY TODD WILKINSON



FOR YEARS, RANGERS working the late, late shift in Big Bend National Park thought nothing of the automobile headlights that seemed to flash like fireflies across the Texas desert. They shrugged off the nocturnal activity as local tourists on joyrides. Then in 1994, an anonymous tip crossed the desk of park law enforcement officials. Some residents of the Big Bend gateway community of Lajitas, Texas, near the U.S.-Mexico border were openly boasting about entering the park and stealing reptiles, spiders, and rare insects, using nothing more than walking sticks, flashlights, pillowcases, and coolers.

They were telling their friends how much money they were making by poaching the animals and selling them on the black market to private collectors, says Jim Northrup, Big Bend's former chief ranger who has since been promoted to the same position in Grand Canyon National Park. "Some of the snakes taken from Big Bend were winding up in pet stores as far away as Europe," he says. "We decided to launch an undercover investigation, but we honestly had no idea where it would take us."

To initiate the investigation—known as Operation Rockcut—the National Park Service (NPS) called in its crack strike force headed by law enforcement specialist Bill Tanner in Santa Fe. He had overseen a number of missions aimed at organized crime in the national parks, including the looting of Indian artifacts, fossils, and cacti. (Despite an impressive record, the strike force disbanded in 1995 because of budget cuts.)

Operation Rockcut cost comparatively little at \$15,000, and, by the time it was completed, the National Park Service had executed the largest roundup of wildlife poachers in its history. Undercover agents collected enough evidence to arrest 30 suspects in eight states on 290 federal and state charges, including 80 violations of the Lacey Act, a law prohibiting interstate commerce involving wildlife killed or otherwise "taken" in violation of state law.

The operation netted, among others, police officers, two preachers, a former president of the Arizona Herpetological Association, and the president of the International Reptile and Amphibian Association—all of whom have pleaded guilty to lesser state charges. This fall, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Austin, Texas, still was preparing federal cases against a few of the defendants. (In related but separate incidents, a California judge was convicted and still another man arrested for poaching in a national park in California.) With the arrests came death threats. The Park Service received an anonymous warning that its next undercover agent would be

found floating face down in the Rio Grande.

Operation Rockcut shocked the environmental community, says undercover agent and national authority on herpetological fauna Chris Scott, because both of the associations implicated are respected organizations known for promoting the conservation of desert animals. The bust adds credence to what conservationist John Muir declared prophetically a century ago: "Nothing dollarable is safe" from human greed.

"I estimate, based on what I saw during the height of the poaching [in Big Bend] that as many as 200 snakes a night were being captured and smuggled out of the park," says Scott, author of *Snake Lovers' Lifestyl and Journal*.

As a result of the investigation, Scott, who posed as a buyer, discovered that sometimes three or four different groups of poachers would enter Big Bend at a time and fill their pillowcases and coolers with snakes. Undercover agent Al DeLaCruz, who worked with Scott, says poachers flooded park roads with automobile headlights and then waited for snakes to cross the asphalt. Other poachers scoured the arroyos and seasonal washes out of sight of park rangers.

"Reptile poaching isn't confined to Big Bend," Scott says. "The same thing is happening any place that has reptiles. Unfortunately, Operation Rockcut was not the end to a problem, but the realization [that] we had just hit the tip of an iceberg."

Although poaching often is portrayed as a foreign plague afflicting icon animals such as elephants and rhinoceroses, the news from Big Bend shows that no species is immune.

"For far too long, investigative efforts have been geared to protecting the critical environmental resources that are warm, fuzzy, and cuddly,

because it has been assumed there isn't much public interest in protecting the other animals," says Phil Young, the regional agent in charge of law enforcement for the Park Service. "The first assistant U.S. attorney we approached on Operation Rockcut had a similar reaction to a lot of folks. It's like the line that Indiana Jones [an adventuresome movie character] utters: 'Ugh, snakes! Why did it have to be snakes!'"

Young says the next government attorney assigned to the case approached prosecution with vigor because he understood that reptile poachers are pilfering America's wild heritage. "In our view," Young says, "what they were doing was no different than someone walking into the Smithsonian Institution and shoplifting priceless artifacts."

In an era when law enforcement dollars are stretched thin and the worldwide appetite for rare species continues to grow, wildlife—whether it has antlers, fur, feathers, or scales—is falling prey to greed.



AT LEFT: Yellow-headed collared lizard. ABOVE: Black widow spider. Both creatures are targeted by poachers.

Federal officials believe the raiding of parks for reptiles has turned into a multimillion-dollar industry, buoyed by demand from collectors worldwide for rare, threatened, and endangered species. Currently, eight species of rattlesnakes, once thought stable, qualify for legal protection because poaching and habitat destruction have diminished their numbers.

TEN YEARS AGO, the United States legally imported 160,000 live snakes and exported a mere fraction of that amount, but exports are on the rise. In Europe and Asia, American rattlesnakes are a coveted commodity among collectors.

"Every year, customs officials must oversee international trade in hundreds of thousands of live snakes, millions of snakeskins, and tens of millions of shoes, belts, and purses fashioned from all manner of snake hides," writes Sarah Fitzgerald in her investigative book *Whose Wildlife Is It?* published by World Wildlife Fund.

Experts with TRAFFIC, an ancillary arm of World Wildlife Fund that tracks the impact of poaching around the globe, say the trade in common and exotic species of all kinds is an estimated \$20 billion a year, second only to the illicit drug trade.

"There's no question this is going to be an ongoing problem, because there's too much money to be made," says undercover agent DeLaCruz. "The demand is there, the suppliers are there, but all too often the available law enforcement is not."

A case in point, he says, is Arizona, where the poaching season coincides with the "monsoons" of June, July, and August. Host to the most extensive rattlesnake diversity in North America, Arizona boasts tough state laws forbidding the sale of native species. And yet, the national parks there are besieged. Chiricahua and Organ Pipe Cactus national monuments, Saguaro National Park, and Coronado National Memorial have been especially vulnerable. Dozens of arrests have been made, but under-

cover specialists say that for every person caught, five escape detection.

"Poaching has been going on a long time, and I wouldn't say it's happening just in the remote parks. We're seeing it in places such as Saguaro," where Tucson developments come close to the park, says Paula Nasiatka, the chief ranger at Saguaro, who credits her assistant ranger Robert Stinson with helping to devise ways to stretch scarce law-enforcement dollars. Under Stinson's leadership, Saguaro has pooled its resources with other federal and state agencies to form a special anti-poaching unit to identify trouble spots.

It is not just poaching that causes problems and pressures for reptiles. Lucinda Schroeder, a veteran special agent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in New Mexico, suggests that the legal, albeit questionable, harvesting of wild snakes has spun off a thriving black market that recognizes no scruples or legal boundaries.

On any day, would-be collectors can peruse catalogs, contact mail-order houses, or use the Internet to shop for species. "Rattlesnakes delivered to your doorstep for \$500!" reads one advertisement. "Get your rare Gila monster now! Only \$1,500," says another.

Anyone with the money and the inclination can buy a pregnant Everglades rat snake for \$29; a Grand Canyon rattlesnake for \$3,000; an imperiled Florida Indigo snake (the largest snake in North America, which can sell for up to \$200 a foot); and hundreds of other species, including spiders, lizards, and amphibians.

The difficulty in trying to identify what is legitimate and what is not, Schroeder says, is that while many dealers of snakes and lizards insist that they have documentation proving that their animals were bred in captivity, no procedures exist to prove them wrong.

Recently, when one prominent wholesale supplier of snakes was asked to identify the origin of his inventory, he told investigators that his records had been destroyed in a fire. Schroeder has little doubt that wildlife in the national parks, where in most instances removing animals is illegal, is suffering.

A troubling downward spiral applies to several varieties of reptiles and am-

phibians in the United States: the greater the pressure applied by poachers and collectors to local wildlife populations, the more scarce those animals become, and the greater the demand on the open market. And both poaching as well as legal activities, such as "snake roundups," take a toll.

AT ANNUAL snake roundups in Texas, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Georgia, hundreds of rattlesnakes are captured and slaughtered for sport. The roundups are held under the guise of generating money for local civic causes.

In 1996 TRAFFIC finished a report that questioned the ethics of snake roundups. "In addition to the lack of state control over the take of rattlesnakes, ecologically destructive collection methods are used by some collectors," the report states. "It is common among collectors to spray vaporized gasoline deep into rattlesnake dens to force snakes to emerge."

Pouring gasoline down gopher tortoise burrows to drive out snakes has been known to harm up to 360 different vertebrate and invertebrate species that rely upon the burrows for shelter.

"Upon capture," the TRAFFIC report continues, rattlesnakes are often subjected to other inhumane practices that include being: "packed tightly into containers for the transport and display at roundups, [during which] many are crushed to death, dehydrated, or starved. Snakes are publicly butchered at roundups by decapitation."

Lennie Jones, a special agent with USFWS, said recently that rattlesnake roundups in the Southeastern United States could "spell doom" for eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, whose populations have declined over much of their biological range. The world's heaviest venomous snake, the adult diamondback rattler is becoming more and more difficult to find with each passing year.

Poaching and roundups are damaging enough, but the destruction that happens when smugglers focus their attention on crucial habitat, such as where animals den during the winter, where they lay eggs, and where they

congregate in large numbers, is much worse.

Often snakes, lizards, and other reptiles are drawn to what biologists call "microhabitats." Microhabitats are essentially biological islands where certain species congregate year after year. Chris Scott has witnessed the aftermath of attempts by poachers to pry snakes from subterranean dens by using dynamite and crow bars. "Some of the habitats will take thousands of years to recover," says Scott. "If left alone, populations of snakes can bounce back over time, but by obliterating their habitat, you've created the right conditions for extinction."

Stealing snakes from parks also can have consequences that ripple across ecosystems. Not only does the removal and destruction of habitat diminish biological diversity among species that have inhabited the national parks for eons, but it upsets the delicate balance that keeps other wildlife populations in check.

In Texas, following several years of rattlesnake roundups, farmers complained of an explosion in rodent populations that were destroying crops. The suspected cause was the elimination of rattlesnakes, the chief predators of mice and rats.

POACHING, and the resulting destruction of habitat, remains the largest problem facing law-enforcement officials and wildlife authorities. Inconsistent laws allow poachers to evade fines and prison time by stealing reptiles from states where tough laws exist and selling them in states where collecting wild specimens is allowed. Many state courts, too, refuse to treat reptile poachers as serious criminals.

"For instance, the bog turtle, a small, rare, Eastern aquatic turtle, is protected in each of the states where it is known to occur," says Scott. "They sell for about \$1,000 each on the black market. However, once removed from the state of origin and illegally transported,

a bog turtle can be taken to, say, Arizona, and sold without threat of prosecution. It's a violation of the Lacey Act, yes, but you have to prove where it came from, and the collector isn't likely to tell you the truth. This is happening every day with dozens of species."

Scott says that Operation Rockcut exposed what had long been a secret within the circle of reptile collectors. As a boy in Maryland, he regularly attend-



DAVID M. DENNISTON STACK & ASSOC.

A resting California king snake in its striped phase.

ed reptile expositions in Baltimore put on by local herpetological societies. National parks, he says, were routinely identified as cornucopias of snakes, there for the taking. "The real tragedy, in my opinion, is that the illegal collecting has gone on for decades in national parks, but those with the National Park Service were the last people to know," he says. "Most people don't believe it's happening unless they see it with their own two eyes."

For the past three years, Scott has toured the country delivering seminars to more than 50 different federal and state agencies—coming in contact with thousands of officers—about the telltale signs of reptile poachers.

"If you confront them at night, they will claim to be photographers," he says. "If you approach them during the day, they tell you they are birders. Their alibi is always rehearsed. They are very clever at how they go about their business. If they are arrested in one park, they won't hesitate to drive to another one. The money they can make is far

greater than the fines, and few ever receive jail time. We need to treat poachers as the criminals they are."

A residual benefit of Scott's work as part of Operation Rockcut was the commencement of a comprehensive computer database on convicted and suspected poachers. But he also believes that changing cultural misconceptions about reptiles is as important in the ongoing struggle to protect species as enacting tough laws and beefing up law enforcement.

Reptiles, especially snakes, are viewed by some, including powerful agricultural interests, as vermin. When those attitudes combine with a reduction in a law-enforcement presence, inconsistent laws that allow collectors to raid federal lands virtually with impunity, and attempts by Congress to weaken such vanguard shields of protection as the Endangered Species Act, the result is a welcome mat for outlaws laid at the doorstep of parks.

The challenge ahead is a formidable one, says Ray

Kohls, law enforcement supervisor with the Arizona Game and Fish Department. "We need harsher penalties and more uniform laws that are consistent from state to state," he says. The crooks "are boldly going right into Phoenix and stealing reptiles out of our small parks."

Until the states pass tougher, uniform codes and governments make a concerted effort to crack down on poachers, even the best undercover efforts such as Operation Rockcut will be for naught.

"The real life and blood of our operations is Congress," says USFWS Lucinda Schroeder. "Without its support we can't do what we need to do. If [members of Congress] chop up the Endangered Species Act, then we can only enforce the law to the extent the law exists—and that may not be enough for many species."

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