

How Do You Manage Your Resources if They are being Stolen and Sold at the Swap Meet?

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Most of us began our park careers hoping to work outdoors and, in the process, do something positive for the environment. As we progressed from seasonal to permanent employees, and from trainees to supervisors, we were given more administrative duties. Now, the everyday tasks making up the majority of our jobs, like staff meetings, report writing, and budgeting, leave us little time to actually protect resources.

While we balance budgets and attend meetings, fossils, insects, mining equipment, Native American artifacts, and reptiles located on the public lands are being plundered. Some of them are taken as “souvenirs,” but a sizeable percentage is taken by people possessing specialized knowledge and seeking specific resources. Many park resources, thus, are being commercially exploited, as Operation Indian Rocks and Operation VIPER show.

Operation Indian Rocks, a multi-agency criminal investigation into the theft and trafficking of cultural resources, began in Death Valley National Park. Ultimately, the operation recovered over 11,000 artifacts and resulted in the criminal convictions of eight individuals and one corporation for looting sites managed by a minimum of five different agencies in at least five states.¹

Operation VIPER, a covert investigation into the trafficking of bear parts and protected plants in the Appalachian Mountains, uncovered a thriving commercial trade in bear parts reaching as far away as Korea. The investigation succeeded in tying 103 defendants to nearly 700 criminal violations, almost 300 of them felonies.²

The commercial depredation of resources crosses land management boundaries. The Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and National Park Service³ each regularly document the commercial theft of “crooked wood,” galax, beargrass, burls, cacti, salal, mushrooms, and other resources in their weekly enforcement reports.

To stem the removal and degradation of park resources, land management agency personnel must use an interdisciplinary, consultative approach—they must act as a team. Otherwise, the law enforcement officer might apprehend an archeological looter but, without the archeologist, not be able to determine the “archeological value” of the resources involved in the offense, and thus hold the looter truly accountable for the violation. Similarly, the botanists might notice a certain plant species disappearing but, without the law enforcement officer, not be able to link the population reduction to commercial trafficking. Further, the maintenance employee might notice a car parked in the same area of the park each day but, without the biologist, not realize that an endangered species is living nearby.

A critical element of an interdisciplinary approach is information-sharing. Today, there are parks where resource staffs refuse to provide rangers with the locations of threatened resources. This practice must end if we are to effectively protect those resources. Archeological or endangered species locations need not be broadcast for all to hear in order that rangers, who typically are the eyes and ears of the park, have an awareness of these resources?

locations and the risk of their injury or loss. In turn, when rangers discover damage to park resources, they need to report it to resources management staff so that the damage may be assessed and quantified.

Public information officers (PIOs) and interpretive rangers are factors in the information-sharing matrix, too. They need to regularly brief the public about the special nature and quality of parklands. Also, as resource protection is an important message, we get the “biggest bang for our buck” when a looter or resource thief is successfully prosecuted and the PIO publicizes the case. Hopefully, in making the public aware of our protection efforts, press releases will deter others from engaging in similar illegal activities.

Effective resources protection requires proactive effort. One example of that effort is the program at Lake Mead National Recreation Area, in Nevada and Arizona, to mark cacti with microchips. This marking and monitoring program has been widely publicized in an effort to deter the theft of desert plants for landscaping or other purposes.⁴ A second example is the marking of ginseng plants in park areas along the Appalachians with dye, to identify the plants’ provenance if they are poached. Innovations such as these need to be encouraged and applauded.

Operation Indian Rocks and Operation VIPER have demonstrated the value of different agency personnel working together in identifying violators and holding them accountable for their conduct. Consequently, it is incumbent upon all park staff that they work closely with employees in other disciplines. Our job in the national park system is to protect park resources for future generations. We must do it as efficiently as possible—the public is counting on us.

Endnotes

1. Joseph Johns, presentation at 2007 George Wright Society Conference, April 20, 2007, and Tim Canaday and Todd Swain, “Operation Indian Rocks: Conducting Interagency ARPA Investigations,” *The SAA Archaeological Record* 5:4, 26–32 (2005).
2. Timothy Alley, presentation at 2007 George Wright Society Conference, April 20, 2007.
3. Each agency distributes a summary of significant events. The National Park Service issues a daily “Morning Report”; the other agencies issue a report on a weekly basis.
4. Alice C. Newton, presentation at 2007 George Wright Society Conference, April 20, 2007.