

Continued Cultivation of Illegal Marijuana in U.S. Western National Parks

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Abstract

SINCE 1998, AT LEAST 10 WESTERN NATIONAL PARKS WERE USED AS ILLEGAL MARIJUANA CULTIVATION sites by Mexican-national drug traffic organizations. This paper documents the continued use of national park lands as illegal cultivation sites through 2011. During the grow season of 2010, the Drug traffic organizations began scouting the hills of Whiskeytown in mid-winter. Supplies and personnel to manage the sites were in place as early as March. Rangers detected six grow sites within Whiskeytown National Recreation Area boundary, and several sites immediately adjacent to the park. Rangers eventually removed 26,028 plants, which had a street value of \$78,840,000. Six foreign nationals were arrested, some with weapons, and all believed to be associated with the Mexican drug traffic organizations. Similar situations occur at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, Yosemite National Park, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Pt. Reyes National Seashore, Santa Monica National Recreation Area, Lake Mead National Recreation Area, and North Cascades National Park. The drug trafficking organizations are operating year round within the parks. Added to this problem is the increasing number of quasi-legal medical marijuana

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grow sites operating on remote private land surrounding the parks, often within the same watersheds.

Introduction

Rangers armed with long rifles, and fitted with battle fatigues and headset communications, are briefed to raid another marijuana cultivation site in the hills of Whiskeytown National Recreation Area (Whiskeytown). The rangers, a helicopter, contracted by Campaign Against Marijuana Planting, and highly trained sheriff's deputies are massed in a parking lot preparing to raid an illegal marijuana cultivation site at Whiskeytown.

This has been the scenario for the past 12 years at numerous western national parks and forests. What is playing out in the western national parks and national forests is a major threat to American conservation efforts, as public lands have become ground zero for illegal marijuana cultivation. National park and national forest lands offer isolated backcountry, clean water, and warm growing temperatures; the three necessary ingredients for growing marijuana.

Scope of activities. The following is a list of marijuana cultivation activities discovered during 2010 growing season on national park lands.

- Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks eradicated 41,414 plants; plants removed from a single complex comprised of 21 separate plots.
- Whiskeytown National Recreation Area eradicated 26,028 marijuana plants, 15 complexes investigated.
- Point Reyes National Seashore eradicated 13,316 plants.
- Yosemite National Park eradicated 3,657 plants, three complexes investigated, 2 confirmed active, 1 site not active.
- Santa Monica National Recreation Area eradicated 3,741 plants.
- Golden Gate National Recreation Area ran focused patrols in Marin and San Mateo park units.
- North Cascades National Park has investigation continuing from 2009 complex raid.
- Redwood National and State Parks arrested two people who were supplying a neighboring complex; established a long-term, focused patrol, which is believed to prevent new activity.
- Lake Mead National Recreation Area eradicated 3,300 plants and continued investigations.

Background

Prior to the 1990s, a significant amount of America's marijuana product came from Mexico. In the late 1990s, Mexican drug traffic organizations began cultivating marijuana in Southern California. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, America's borders became more secure, and drug traffic organizations realized growing and shipping the marijuana from within the United States was the new paradigm. Today, drug traffic organizations are increasing their range of network cultivation sites throughout the west. From coastal areas to well above 9,000 ft high in the eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains, law enforcement officials are discovering more and more marijuana complexes anywhere there are water, sunshine, and remote public lands with vehicle access. Driving this new level of drug cultivation is America's fondness for marijuana, and an extremely profitable business model. For every \$10 invested, approximately \$4,000 in revenue is generated from illegal marijuana cultivation sites on federal lands.

The drug trafficking organizations are running symmetrical, non-structured, insurgent-style operations that are extremely adaptable to changing situations and circumstances. Nearly all the

men who are associated with marijuana cultivation in California come from the Mexican State of Michoacan, an area just west of Mexico City.

While the focus of this paper is to describe current drug cultivation activities occurring on western national park lands, the drug trafficking organizations are establishing cultivation sites on any and all public lands, and tracts of remote private lands, where favorable growing conditions and access needs are met. The vast majority of marijuana cultivation in California is occurring on U.S. Forest Service lands, which do not have the law enforcement staffing levels the National Park Service (NPS) has developed over recent years. To put this into perspective, Yosemite National Park eradicated 3,657 plants in 2010, while in neighboring Tuolumne County, the Stanislaus National Forest eradicated over 440,000 plants. Just west and south of Kings Canyon National Park is the Sierra National Forest, which destroyed 84,053 marijuana plants in 2010. The Shasta Trinity National Forests near Whiskeytown National Recreation Area eradicated 340,700 marijuana plants in 2010.

Geographic distribution of cultivation sites within the parks

Beginning in 2005 the drug traffic organizations expanded their area of operation north of California, into Oregon, Washington, and along the Columbia River Basin. They also crossed over the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the White Mountain Range in Nevada, across the Basin and Range, to the Dixie National Forest in Utah, and the Wasatch Mountains. Drug traffic organization sites have been found in the Arapaho National Forests in the Rocky Mountains west of Denver, Colorado. They are also in the Appalachian Mountains in Blue Ridge Parkway and Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and as far north as the Upper Peninsula in Michigan.

The first marijuana cultivation site associated with the Mexican drug traffic organizations at Whiskeytown National Recreation Area was located in the Whiskey Creek drainage, at around 1,500 ft in elevation. The site has a dense cover of large manzanita shrubs, with a mixed conifer, oak-woodland overstory. The sites, like most cultivation sites found throughout Whiskeytown, are in steep, rugged country. Thick shrub cover, poison oak, and summer heat make moving through the area very difficult (Figures 1, 2). Small tributary streams high up in the drainages are tapped for irrigation. Thousands of feet of three-quarter-inch black plastic hose is laid to create a drip irrigation system, from plant to plant. The makeshift impoundments can be up to six feet deep and 20 feet across. The irrigation water is often heavily polluted by fertilizer. Within the park, irrigation hose has been found running over a half mile from the water source to the cultivation site. Usually, the irrigation hose is buried, to hide it from view.

Typically the native vegetation is pruned and trimmed back to allow filtered sunlight through to maximize plant production, but still partially camouflage the marijuana plants from aerial surveillance. Every cultivation site is constructed differently, but there are similarities among sites. For example, plants are usually set in the ground a few feet apart, similar to an orchard, so the plants are laid out in relatively straight lines to accommodate irrigation lines. Other times the rows of marijuana plants are laid out more like a vineyard, where rows are planted close together; the ground vegetation is cut at its base and laid in windrows. Such sites are easily visible from the air.

While some marijuana sites are like an orchard, covering a large opened area, most are made up of small, approximately one-quarter acre plots. Plots are connected by narrow trails through the brush. Law enforcement rangers will find a marijuana plot containing 25 to 800 or more plants, and may not discover the other plots growing in the same or neighboring drainages. Law enforcement rangers commonly find multiple sites peppering a hillside or drainage, which constitute a “complex,” managed by the same growers.

Rangers at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks report that drug trafficking organizations are planting at higher elevations than has been discovered in years past. Before 2008, culti-



Figure 1. An illegal marijuana encampment, Whiskeytown National Recreation Area.

vation sites were typically below 5,000 ft in elevation. Recent sites are between 5,000 and 6,000 ft, with growers accessing sites from higher elevations up to 7,200 ft.

Resource damage and site rehabilitation

Pristine natural resource values are altered from their natural conditions when streams are diverted for irrigation, highly concentrated fertilizers and pesticides are introduced, and wildlife poaching occurs. In addition, encampments have no sanitation other than pits, large amounts of trash accumulate, attracting wildlife, and landscape manipulation, such as building terraces, water impoundment structures, and digging plant holes, alters natural landscape contours and conditions.

Park rangers at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks believe the drug trafficking organizations are utilizing some of the park's more than 275 caves to hide and store supplies. Park management is concerned about the potential impacts such activities will have on extremely fragile cave resources (Figures 3, 4).

In Whiskeytown, law enforcement rangers have found three dead black bear carcasses in or adjacent to cultivation sites. Following a raid on a discovered marijuana cultivation site, rangers recovered a digital camera. In one photo several Mexican nationals are kneeling over a black bear that they had apparently just shot and killed. In 2009 at Whiskeytown, a historic mine shaft near



Figure 2. An illegal marijuana cultivation site at Whiskeytown National Recreation Area planted throughout a manzanita stand.

a marijuana site was discovered which contained 77 buried one-liter soda bottles, filled with fresh water.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon and Whiskeytown have been routinely conducting site reclamation (removal of garbage, irrigation hose, and hazardous waste) and, when possible, restoration (restoring natural contours, dismantling slash windrows, mitigating invasive plant introductions). However, these activities are very labor intensive and often require helicopter support, so are expensive to complete. Costs for reclamation and restoration of cultivation sites vary from \$8,000 to \$15,000 per acre, depending on the level of treatment.

Increasing law enforcement investigations

The discovery of large-scale organized crime operations being run in parks caught the NPS by surprise, and required new funding to implement counteractive operations. Back in 2001, the NPS was not able to adequately respond to the marijuana threat, but did all it could to understand its extent, and destroyed those cultivation sites which were discovered. Several years later, due to special regional funding and specific base funding at individual parks, additional rangers were hired and specifically trained to counter the marijuana threat. In fiscal year 2009 (October 2008 to September 2009), some \$3.3 million dollars were given to national park sites in the Pacific West Region that had marijuana cultivation threats. After 2001, the NPS strategy shifted to locat-



Figure 3. An image of an illegal marijuana encampment at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks following law enforcement raid.

ing and eradicating marijuana cultivation sites. Rangers often discovered sites after harvest, or in many situations found sites and removed the marijuana plants, only to discover the next season that additional cultivation sites were linked to the raided sites, but were not detected. This meant that while law enforcement operations were destroying marijuana plants, millions of dollars worth of marijuana was still being successfully harvested from national park lands by the drug trafficking organizations.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon had numerous sites along the road to Mineral King on the south fork of the Kaweah River. The pressure by law enforcement operations on the Mineral King drainage forced the drug traffickers to move to new areas. Unfortunately they re-located to other areas in the park, at higher elevation.

Societal trends

In 1996, the voters of California approved Proposition 215, entitled the “Compassionate Use Act of 1996.” This proposition created a limited exception from state criminal liability for seriously ill persons who are in need of medical marijuana to use it for specified medical purposes.

In 2009, California cities and towns witnessed an explosion of medicinal marijuana collectives. Many of these store-front facilities have subsequently been closed down, but others are legally permitted establishments, operating under approved ordinances from cities and counties.



Figure 4. An image of the same illegal marijuana encampment at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks following site restoration work by park work crews.

Elected officials in 2009 and 2010 struggled with developing rules and guidelines for legal medicinal marijuana dispensaries authorized by California Proposition 215. Medicinal marijuana is grown on private land, often grown in backyards of patient's private residences and for distribution at medicinal marijuana collectives. For example, at Whiskeytown, three known medicinal marijuana sites were established in 2010 that border the park, all within the park's watersheds that drain into Whiskeytown Lake. Often ranger staff conducting surveillance operations on drug traffic organizations were less than a mile away from entrepreneurs who are cultivating medicinal marijuana under the authority of California's Proposition 215.

While there are legitimate users of medicinal marijuana for serious medical ailments, almost anyone of age who desires to have a California 215 card can receive one for a fee through advertised doctors. Law enforcement investigators suggest links with some medicinal marijuana collectives having received marijuana from drug trafficking organizations. In November 2010, California's Proposition 19, to legalize the possession of marijuana for personal recreational use, did not pass, with 57% voting against it. While Proposition 19 failed in the polls, it raised the political discussion of whether or not to legalize marijuana for personal recreational use.

Conclusion

While law enforcement rangers try to intercept and prevent establishment of marijuana cultiva-

tion on national park lands, drug trafficking organizations are expanding their cultivation sites throughout the west. NPS law enforcement is becoming more effective in locating preliminary activities that lead to establishment of cultivation sites, and removing detected cultivation operations within the parks. Confiscated plant counts continue to rise, as both federal land managing agencies and local county sheriff offices become more efficient in detecting criminal activities linked to marijuana cultivation.

Further complicating the situation is an expansion of medicinal cultivation sites on private lands that share watersheds with national land management agencies. Although California voters defeated Proposition 19's proposal to legalize marijuana for personal recreational use, the legalization initiative is gaining momentum.

Marijuana cultivation in national parks is creating serious problems for both law enforcement and resource managers as park watersheds, resources, and wildlife are being harmed. The presence of illegal cultivation in national parks or national forest backcountry is curtailing scientific studies and routine long-term monitoring programs. Such disruption to normal research operations is preventing the NPS and other agencies from accomplishing their mission. Marijuana cultivation in parks, facilitated by organized crime, is a nightmare scenario for the NPS. Many people believe recreational marijuana use may eventually be legalized in western states; however, marijuana cultivation has to be stopped in national parks to protect employees, visitors, and park resources.

The daunting reality is that after ten years of continued raids on marijuana cultivation sites, law enforcement continues to see an increasing amount of activity returning year after year, driven by demand and profit. Collaborative efforts between federal, state, and local law enforcement efforts has proven to be the most effective tool in reducing the ability of drug trafficking organizations to operate successful cultivation sites on public lands. Successfully curbing these illegal activities on American public lands is an uphill battle, that will require vigilance and determination, through cooperative collaboration at all levels of government.