

New Jersey's Marine Conservation Officers Using Progressive Techniques to Protect Wildlife

By Capt. Joe Meyer

There's a saying among long-time sportsmen: Just because you don't see the game wardens doesn't mean they aren't watching. That bit of wisdom is even truer today.

Undercover law enforcement is an integral part of managing New Jersey's natural resources, particularly along the state's ocean and bays. The guy clad in jeans and fishing gear aboard your party boat might look like just another angler, but he could be a state conservation officer in plainclothes. Now more than ever, members of Bureau of Law Enforcement's Marine Region with New Jersey's Division of Fish and Wildlife are using non-traditional surveillance methods to net serious offenders who often go to great lengths to break laws and regulations that protect the state's fish and wildlife.

Two landmark cases best illustrate lawmen's determination, skill and success in cracking down on the illegal harvest and unlawful sale of marine species.

In one case, the owner of a Middletown tavern was charged with selling large quantities of undersized lobsters. State marine lawmen learned from several reliable sources that the tavern was being used as a clearinghouse for undersized American lobsters. Acting on the information, officers went undercover, frequenting the establishment and gathering and documenting evidence during a 12-month investigation that included purchases of more than 1,400 undersized lobster tails.

Harvesting undersized lobsters removes them from the ocean before they have a chance to reproduce. The case represented the first time the Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Fish and Wildlife and the state Attorney General's Criminal Justice division prosecuted a New Jersey business owner for knowingly selling undersized lobsters.

The tavern owner, indicted on charges of unlawfully selling

wildlife, pleaded guilty and agreed to pay a \$50,000 penalty.

In the second case, officers issued more than 100 summonses in connection with a party-boat operation illegally harvesting and commercializing tautog, a variety of fish popular in sushi restaurants. In all, 22 defendants, including the vessel's captain and the corporation that owns the party boat, either pleaded guilty or were found guilty on charges stemming from the 18-month undercover investigation. The defendants faced penalties totaling more than \$40,000.

More recently, savvy conservation officers demonstrated their mastery of other innovative techniques to thwart some of the most deliberate violators.

To catch thieves intent on raiding lobster and crab pots, marine conservation officers strategically placed veterinary identification markers inside the crustacean. Lawmen later apprehended a lobsterman found in possession of the marked lobsters, and charged crabbers — caught holding marked blue crabs — with tending other crabbers' pot gear. One such case recently settled resulted in \$45,000 in penalties and the suspension of the crab thief's commercial license.

Marine conservation officers also regularly keep a close eye on established fish markets, where some dealers are only too anxious to give law-breaking anglers a place to peddle their illegal catch. Lawmen conducting inspections at fish markets in Jersey City and Newark, for example, have issued written warnings and summonses for illegal sales of blue crabs and striped bass, and other violations.

New Jersey's law-abiding anglers can assist conservation officers in their efforts to protect fish and wildlife resources by reporting marine fish and shellfish violations to (609) 748-2050. Or, call the 24-hour, DEP hotline at 877-WARNDEP.

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