

Poaching of Wildlife

The poaching of all wildlife species, from reptiles and fish to bear and deer has increased dramatically over the last decade. A study conducted in the mid 1990s estimated an approximate \$100 million worth of California's native wildlife is being poached annually for profit or personal gain making poaching second only to the illegal drug trade in black market profitability. Most of California's fish and wildlife is poached from remote areas then transported to major cities for sale and export. Department of Fish and Game (DFG) wardens are the primary, and often sole, law enforcement officers to protect against and investigate the theft of wildlife.

One of California's more sought after species for both personal and commercial consumption is abalone. In 1997, California was forced to suspend the commercial and recreational take of abalone south of San Francisco due to a significant decline in the fishery's population. Poaching played a major role in this decline for it has been estimated approximately 250,000 abalone, which typically net \$100 a piece, are illegally taken each year. Today, a limited area north of San Francisco is open to the recreational take of abalone for personal consumption making California's North Coast home to one of the last viable red abalone populations in the world.

The California black bear is another species that is highly valued for its commercial marketability. Black market sales of bear gall bladders range from \$500 to \$5,000 each when exported, which serves as an inducement for poaching and the grievous waste of the rest of the animal. Personal use of bear hide for rugs and clothing also has encouraged the illegal take and waste of this species.

Most Californians are unaware of the extent of natural resource theft. Environmental, conservation and other stakeholder groups recognize the significance of wildlife poaching, and support increasing DFG's warden force to investigate and prosecute poachers. Recreational anglers and hunters also support increased protection of wildlife to ensure recreational opportunities will exist now and into the future. Small populations of the abalone commercial fishing community resisted the closures in the state's abalone fishery and have, subsequently, asserted the populations are not over-taxed from legitimate fishing operations or even poaching.

The game warden force is at a level consistent with the 1970s when there were 36 percent fewer Californians, but it is employing all of its resources to protect California's wildlife. Undercover operations have allowed game wardens to successfully penetrate and prosecute poaching rings and operations. Advanced investigative and surveillance skills are continually honed by DFG wardens to identify sophisticated and less intricate poaching operations, and efforts to enhance court fines and penalties are under way to help deter poaching by making the penalty for illegal activity greater than the reward.