Behind the Scenery Profile: Special Agent Ken Johnson

Parks and protected areas are losing key resources to rapidly evolving global markets. Sophisticated poachers take everything from rare reptiles and cacti in the Southwest to medicinal plants in the Appalachians. Notorious crimes, such as the murders at Yosemite and Shenandoah National Parks, can have lasting service-wide effects on the visitor experience. These and other trans-boundary harms to the agency mission are of growing concern to park managers. The National Park Service law enforcement program is evolving to mitigate these risks. Ken Johnson, a 30-year NPS veteran who spent ten years as a Special Agent at Shenandoah, is one of those transforming conservation law enforcement in this age of global travel and instantaneous communications.

In 1997, enforcement operations at Shenandoah got a wake up call. Resource Management Specialist Tom Blount bravely appeared at a protection division staff meeting and asked tough questions. Why was law enforcement largely irrelevant to his priorities in natural resource protection? For instance, why do the park’s rangers spend a large part of their time pursuing deer poachers when the park had too many deer? How are the rangers contributing to the parks other priorities?

“After our initial consternation, we realized the resource staff had a point,” says Ginny Rousseau, then Chief Ranger. “In spite of the best efforts of our talented rangers, resources entrusted to the NPS were in decline. We needed to improve our mission effectiveness.”

“Park law enforcement evolved largely reactive capacities to effectively respond to visitor needs,” notes Johnson. “Until recently, resources in peril could not dial 911. Now, maturing park science programs are ‘dialing 911’ for the resources. We must meet those mission requirements as well. These emerging needs may be different from those of visitors, and will likely require conservation law enforcement to develop new protective capacities.”

Deputy Chief Ranger Clay Jordan continues. “Protection efforts must also look beyond individual park boundaries to address growing ecosystem risks. Perhaps most importantly, park enforcement and compliance programs need to set priorities or performance measures based on resource and visitor values at risk.”

To test the validity of these beliefs and to illuminate solutions, Johnson researched key NPS documents such as the Vail Agenda, and five recent evaluations of NPS’ protection capacity. He notes all of them support the need for a law enforcement capacity carefully prioritized and linked to science and the agency’s performance measures. Whether reviewing the Park Police, rangers, agents, or Interior operations at large the same issues emerge.

The Shenandoah staff turned to the Natural Resource Protection Fund, part of the Resource Challenge. This fund supports the development of better protective capacity. With NRPF funding, they designed the three-year Appalachian Chain Demonstration
Project. This involved three parks: SHEN, BLRI and GRSM; six-agencies, NPS, USFWS, USDA Forest Service, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, USGS, North Carolina Department of Agriculture; and the research capacities of three universities. It used the risks to ginseng and three other plants to experiment with ecosystem level interdiction using the reinforcing tools of science, enforcement, education and regulation.

Staff were surprised that reliable data on these species was scarce, despite long histories of commercial exploitation. Two parks had no population data. Only fragmentary case incident information supported beliefs about the exploitative risk. With Johnson’s leadership the project was designed to:

1. Employ science tools to gather population data.
2. Task resource economists to research market factors driving removals.
3. Use covert law enforcement operations to determine the level of resource risk.
4. Improve forensics to support enforcement and deter violators.
5. Develop predictive models of violator behaviors to target patrol operations.
6. Foster eco-system level improvements in regulations.
7. Experiment with tools that support the collection, analysis, and sharing of information by rangers.
8. Conduct literature reviews on the relevant species to support regulatory change.

“We accomplished much, but learned even more,” says Rousseau. The covert work, led by special agent Skip Wissinger, revealed a risk of unimagined proportion. It resulted in 694 charges, including 300 felonies, against 103 defendants. One of the species at risk, galax, will be protected under the Convention on International Trade and Endangered Species because of this project. Monitoring plots have been established. Forensics and marking techniques have improved. In fact, covert officers were able to guide the plant marking teams to areas mere hours in advance of the poachers! The NPS’ only intelligence analyst, Joan Yorkey, tracked the flow of NPS resources to international destinations.

Together, the Deputy Associate Director for Natural Resources and the Law Enforcement Program Administrator recognized Ken Johnson with an award for his design and leadership of this project.

Johnson, now retired, is advancing this work as the Director of the Institute for Conservation Law Enforcement, a partnership between three CESU universities. Clayton Jordan, Ed Clark, Beth Waldow, Neal Labrie and many others continue the good work from within the NPS.