



Standing Watch

125 Years of Conservation Law Enforcement in New York State



Few people realize the great tradition of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) Division of Law Enforcement (DLE). The oldest law enforcement organization in New York State remarkably began with a contingent of eight men appointed as Game Protectors in 1880. Since then, DLE has grown to a force of more than 300 uniformed Environmental Conservation Officers (ECOs) and plainclothes investigators. Their dedication to duty has its roots in a long and proud tradition of fish and wildlife enforcement, that also includes environmental protection today. 2005 marks the 125th anniversary of DEC's DLE, and here is its story.

The Early Years

The end of the 19th century was not a good time for fish and wildlife in America. Unregulated market hunting and habitat destruction had nearly exterminated many wildlife species; beaver were reduced to small isolated populations in remote mountain ranges, white-tailed deer were at their lowest historical numbers, and species like the passenger pigeon were fast disappearing. Many hills and mountains stood barren of standing timber, which had been cut for lumber and paper. Resulting runoff choked once pristine trout waters, and acids from tanning factories and pollutants from paper mills exacerbated the problem. In short, the country's natural resources were in serious trouble, as were those in New York.



Citizens familiar with the outdoors, primarily hunters, anglers, trappers, and foresters, became alarmed over these conditions, giving rise to the conservation movement. Influential men like Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot gave this cause national momentum, resulting in legislation to criminalize, or at least regulate, past practices. The laws were useless without men to enforce them; hence the Game Protector profession was born.

Incredibly, the eight Game Protectors appointed in 1880 were charged with covering the entire state. Protectors were granted authority to enforce laws to protect deer, birds, and fish, and to bring legal action against those who chose to violate those laws. They could arrest without warrants, and seize nets as evidence. A total annual budget of \$6,000 supported the \$500 annual salaries and expense accounts for each



Game Protector.

The first annual Game Protector reports of 1881 provide a glimpse at the challenges faced by these early defenders of the state's natural resources:

"Permit me to say....," stated Game Protector J.S. Collett of Otsego County, "that in searching for offenders I have not always been successful. They are shrewd, active, lawless men, and it requires time to run them to the ground." Game Protector Dodge of Prospect agreed, reporting that most of the violators are "...old offenders, and manage as carefully as a gang of counterfeiters, and have peaceable and law abiding citizens about them terrorized..."

Public support of Game Protectors was sometimes lacking. Twenty men were arrested for taking ducks at night on Long Island's north shore in 1911. Although all were found guilty, their sentences were suspended.

Wartime Service

During WWII, game protectors assisted other law enforcement agencies protecting the home front. While several officers served in the armed forces, the remainder worked with the FBI, rounding up aliens and saboteurs, and investigating reports of mysterious parachutists landing in remote areas. Many protectors were involved in civil defense as air raid wardens, auxiliary firemen, and police. They patrolled power lines, dams, canal locks and bridges, and lent a hand collecting scrap tires to assist in the war effort.

Post War Years

After the war, veterans returned home to improved working conditions, a shorter work week, and more leisure time. There was increased public interest in the state's natural resources and their use for outdoor recreation. Fishing and hunting attracted the lion's share of attention from a new breed of outdoor enthusiast. For example, the number of licensed hunters and anglers in New York State doubled from 1945 to 1952.

This unprecedented pressure on fish and game demanded an attendant increase in resource protection. Unlike many neighboring states, New York's natural resources were regulated by legislation. Therefore, any change in hunting, fishing, or trapping, even as simple as a size or creel limit, required action by the State Legislature.

Growth and Change

By 1950, the Bureau of Law Enforcement counted 160 uniformed Game Protectors among its ranks. The



Bureau also included 979 "special game protectors," civilian volunteers deputized by the Bureau of Law Enforcement and given peace officer status. Only a few of the "specials" (as they were called) aggressively pursued violators, and the role of special game protector was abolished in the early 1970s.

As the budget for the Conservation Department and the Bureau increased during the 1950s, new boats, walkie-talkie radios, and even motorcycles and airplanes were bought for enforcement details. Game Protector training was improved to include use of these new technologies. To attract recruits, the starting annual salary for Game Protectors was increased to \$2,771 by 1952. However, Game Protectors were still required to provide their own cars, had one day off in seven, and were expected to be on call 24 hours a day. It was during this time that the enforcement work force began to specialize. In 1950, Oyster Protectors and Shellfish Protectors joined the new Marine Protector Unit to address the growing demand for marine resource protection.

In 1958 the State purchased the first vehicles for the Game Protectors to use in lieu of their personal vehicles. A 1958 tan, four-door Ford was the standard issued vehicle. In 1960, two-way radios were installed in the cars of protectors whose districts had lots of hunters. Popularity of the two-way radios grew quickly, and by 1963, the radios were installed in all protectors' vehicles.





The Modern Era

In the 1960s, people became concerned with widespread pollution of our land, air and water, and the environmental movement took hold. The first Earth Day was held in 1970, and called national attention to environmental issues. This increased environmental awareness affected state policies and organizations, including the Conservation Department, which became the Department of Environmental Conservation in 1970. DEC's Bureau of Law Enforcement now had the additional responsibility to many existing public health



and agricultural laws, including those relating to solid waste, petroleum products, air emissions, industrial chemical disposal, pesticides, and wetlands protection. In 1971, the Bureau became the Division of Law Enforcement, and legislation upgraded the newly named Environmental Conservation Officer from peace officer to police officer status with authority to enforce all NYS laws.

Along with this new authority came a need for increased training. In the early 1970s, the 240-officer force was trained at the State Police Academy in Albany, and the Division's training academy was established. Newly appointed ECOs were required to attend a rigorous 16-week paramilitary style training session, covering everything from physical fitness to all the laws of New York State. By 1982, the training sessions were increased to 26 weeks.

The K-9 program

The Division initiated its canine program in 1978. ECO Richard Matzell and a German shepherd named "Paws" completed 18 weeks of intensive training at the State Police Academy. Over the course of his 11-year career with the division, Paws was responsible for hundreds of arrests and helped locate many lost people, including small children. Today the program boasts eight canines stationed throughout the state.



1980 Olympic Security

New responsibilities accompanied police status; division staff were called upon to assist the state with public protection. In 1980 a detail of officers and supervisors were assigned to provide security at the Olympics in Lake Placid. Officers were assigned to patrol at Whiteface Mountain, Mt. Vanhovernberg, the athlete's quarters at the Olympic village, and the Olympic ski jump.

Bureau of Environmental Conservation Investigations

In 1982, DLE created the Bureau of Environmental Conservation Investigations to conduct investigations of inactive hazardous waste dump sites and transportation and disposal of hazardous waste. This enforcement activity grew in sophistication, and in 1990 DLE and FBI conducted a joint investigation of waste carters near New Paltz. An undercover



Environmental Conservation Officer risked his life by “wearing a wire” while posing as a corrupt government official. As a result of DEC’s involvement and the bravery of the undercover officer, two organized crime associates were convicted on bribery, racketeering, and money-laundering charges.

Today, the Environmental Conservation Investigators work on many unique investigations, ranging from illegal commercialization of fish and wildlife to timber theft, and continue to be a valuable asset in the Division’s environmental law enforcement efforts, tracking down poachers and polluters.

Operation Berkshire

In 1987, what began as a simple investigation of an illegal venison market in Connecticut became a major wildlife commercialization case that encompassed seven states and one Canadian province. New York Investigator Stephen Canfield and Officer Jack Dickman of the Massachusetts Environmental Police spent two and a half years undercover, documenting many instances of illegal taking and sale of deer and bear. The three major defendants in this case plead guilty to 274 counts, were sentenced to jail and paid fines totaling \$38,000. The investigation snared 28 people for almost 1,100 charges. More importantly it established a precedent for future fish and wildlife investigations in New York to include undercover surveillance as part of day-to-day operations. For further reading, see: Undercover! in the February 1990 *Conservationist*.

The Present and Future

Modern equipment, including improved radios, state-of-the-art law enforcement vessels, 4x4 vehicles, snowmobiles, and ATVs have greatly improved enforcement and emergency response. DLE often responds to events that affect public safety and homeland security such as the Long Island wild fires of 1995, and the TWA flight 800 disaster. During the 9/11 tragedy, members of the Division assigned to New York City were among the first to respond.

While the Division has evolved into a top-rated police organization, it maintains a unique focus in the law enforcement profession because of its association with resource and environmental protection and public education. Through its Environmental Awareness Gives Life to the Ecosystem (EAGLES) program, DLE provides environmental and resource education for school-aged children.

Division staff maintain the values and work ethic of their dedicated predecessors, the Game Protectors. By working day and night for a mission in which they believed and to which they were committed, Game Protectors provided the standard for today’s ECOs. DLE is dedicated to its mission of resource and environmental protection, a mission which all New Yorkers can be proud of.

Lt. Deming Lindsley, Lt. Tim Huss, and ECOs Tim Canfield, Marion Hoffman, and Eric Haslun contributed to this article.

Division of Law Enforcement Timeline THE EARLY YEARS

- 1880:** Governor Alonzo Cornell appoints the first eight NYS Game Protectors
- 1881:** First Game Protector reports filed with Senate
- 1883:** NYS Senate doubles the force to 16 men
- 1898:** Governor Theodore Roosevelt declares he wants Game Protectors proficient with gun and rod, and who could live comfortably in the woods
- 1902:** Force increased to 38 Game Protectors
- 1909:** Hunting licenses made mandatory, increasing revenue to the Department
- 1914:** Force increased to 145 Game Protectors and three Oyster Protectors
- 1920:** Protectors were issued a standard firearm and training as a result of the murder of Sam Taylor (see In the Line of Duty sidebar)
- 1931:** Salary for a Game Protector was increased to \$1,200, with a \$1,800 salary cap. Force increased to 150 uniformed protectors and 11 inspectors
- 1932:** New uniforms and firearms are purchased with state funds for the first time
- 1938:** The first formal training session in twenty years is held in Delmar
- 1945:** Number of hunter doubles by 1952 after veterans return from WWII
- 1950:** Force increases to 160 Game Protectors. Marine unit formed
- 1958:** First state-purchased vehicle in service
- 1960:** Two-way radios installed in some patrol vehicles
- 1962:** Game Protector title changed to Conservation Officer. NYS invests \$200,000 to launch a statewide communication system, leads to two-way radios in all patrol vehicles, marking the beginning of the modern era of DEC law enforcement
- 1971:** Bureau of Law Enforcement becomes Division of Law Enforcement; officers given full police status



In the Line of Duty: Honoring DEC's Fallen

Samuel S. Taylor: April 5, 1914. Oneida County, fatally shot while attempting to apprehend illegal duck hunters along the Mohawk River.

John H. Woodruff: November 19, 1914: Schenectady County. Murdered while on patrol. His remains were discovered buried in a creek bed on April 4, 1921. The case was never resolved.

Harvey B. Cruikshank: June 8, 1926. Washington County. Fatally struck by lightning while on patrol.

William T. Cramer: September 29, 1929. Queens County. Fatally shot while attempting to apprehend illegal bird hunters near Jamaica Bay.

Paul DuCuennois: October 16, 1932. Warren County. Drowned while patrolling by canoe on Jabes Pond, Town of Hague. At 21 years old, DuCuennois was probably the youngest member of the Bureau at the time, and a strong swimmer. Two witnesses were not implicated, but suspicion over the incident continues to this day.

Clarence J. Webster: November 16, 1944. Washington County. Died in an auto accident while on patrol at age 64.

Benning W. Delamater: June 24, 1961. Albany County. Drowned while on patrol in the Hudson River near the Federal dam in Troy when his boat capsized.

William Becker: March 11, 1981. Suffolk County. Drowned while on duty in the marine district.