**Showcasing the DNR: Conservation officers work to recover natural resources thefts**

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George Berkeley, an Anglo-Irish philosopher, originally posed the question: “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

Considering there are about 20 million acres of forest land in Michigan, a lot of tree falls go unheard.

What else happens in the depths of the forest?

How are forests and other remote locations – home to Michigan’s finest natural resources – monitored?

What happens when someone steals those valuable resources?

A highly trained group of career officers is responsible for patrolling and protecting Michigan’s natural resources.

In addition to policing hunting and fishing violations and performing a wide range of other duties, Michigan Department of Natural Resources conservation officers investigate crimes of natural resource theft that occur in these remote locations, where many people believe they will leave no trace.

**Forest resources**

“You don’t know something is missing until it’s gone,” said Doug Heym, DNR Forest Resources Division unit manager for timber sales and utilization. “If you have forested property of any kind – keep your eye on it because timber rustling (theft) does occur.”

Michigan’s traditional forest industry generated an estimated $22 billion in 2019. That’s a significant source of income and jobs to local economies, especially in the northern two-thirds of the state, where most of the forest land is located.

The DNR manages about 4 million acres of Michigan’s forests – about 20 percent of the market. The remaining 16 million acres are owned and managed by the federal government, private industries, agriculture subsidiaries and private landowners.

Michigan has an array of forest species that serve many different purposes and industries – structural lumber for houses and fencing, paper, cabinets, furniture, just to name a few.

The southern third of the state has seen a recent uptick in black walnut theft – which is an ideal material for furniture due to its high-quality grain and color.

However, it was mostly sugar maple that landed an Upper Peninsula logger in court for one of Michigan’s largest known timber theft cases.

**Stiff competition**

“Many people don’t realize the value of some of these trees,” said Dustin Salter, DNR forester. “One tree might have four logs, and the value of those logs might get up to $300-$500 each; some are more.”

On state-managed land, foresters and conservation officers are familiar with where timber harvest is occurring and what trees are being harvested. If an officer notices a random tree stump on state land, they’re likely to investigate.

“Natural resource crimes are unique and are often solved over an extended period of time as evidence is pieced together,” said Dave Shaw, chief of the DNR Law Enforcement Division. “Urban and people-versus-people crime comes to fruition sooner because people talk and it’s easier to piece together evidence.”

During late 2015, the DNR sent out a standard timber harvest proposal for bid on a section of state-managed forest land in Menominee County. Most bids come back ranging within $2,000-$3,000 of each other.

However, one bid really stuck out.

R&J Logging, based out of Stephenson, won the bid by $40,000 – steep competition for what other honest bidders told the DNR was a “break-even job.”

**Suspicious circumstances**

Conservation officers met with local foresters, who mark thousands of trees at a time that need to come down. Prior to R&J beginning the harvest, foresters noticed newly marked trees.

“A forester’s mark is like their signature,” said Lt. Reid Roeske, supervising conservation officer of the investigation.

Conservation officers walked the 92 acres of land, becoming acquainted with what would become their “office.” Together, officers and foresters physically and electronically documented high-dollar trees that were not included in the original bid.

Officers then worked one of their best skills – they patiently patrolled the land and waited.

**Investigation**

After about 12-18 months, R&J Logging finally started its harvest. Under close surveillance, the DNR confirmed new trees were being marked and cut down.

Observing from a distance, officers let R&J Logging owner Raymond Vetort drop the trees.

Meanwhile, officers conducted many interviews and collected paint chemical samples from the trees they knew Vetort was not supposed to harvest.

“This took a long time,” Salter said. “Many local loggers thought Vetort got away with it.”

When the Michigan State Police lab confirmed the chemicals on the newly marked trees matched chemicals Vetort was in possession of, Vetort confessed he marked additional trees to increase his profit margin.

“Vetort cut about half of the 92 acres,” said Eric Thompson, DNR Escanaba unit manager with the forest resources division.

Ultimately, it was determined that more than $100,000 in timber value was involved in the theft. With every harvested tree documented, in 2016 the DNR reclaimed the timber sale.

The DNR followed up with mill operators who purchased the timber to determine the volume that was sold in comparison to what was harvested. Most of the documentation was found in Vetort’s house, which was obtained through search warrants.

The DNR requested assistance from [Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel](https://www.michigan.gov/ag/news/press-releases/2021/10/21/timber-harvester-pleads-guilty-to-felony) to shed light on the severity of stealing natural resources.

“Without the AG’s office, I don’t know if we would have gotten results this good,” Roeske said.

In 2021, Vetort was charged with trespassing or damages to state land, larceny, and malicious destruction of property. He pleaded guilty.

He was ordered to pay over $119,000 in reimbursement to the state and serve three years of probation, with six months in jail suspended pending his successful completion of his probation term.

The Michigan Department of Corrections currently lists the 59-year-old as on probation status.

**Mineral resources**

“Historically, the copper mining industry in Michigan was significant,” said Kirk Lapham, DNR Minerals Management Section manager.

The heyday of the copper industry in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula lasted for more than 40 years, from 1845 to 1887. During much of that time, Michigan produced more than three-quarters of the country’s copper.

Now, nearly 140 years later, copper is still a sought-after commodity.

Due to the high price of copper and growing demand, there is renewed interest in some known reserves of copper in Michigan, a return to past prospects and in exploring for new metal ore deposits that may contain copper, as well as other metals or critical minerals.

“Currently, the main demand that is driving up the price of copper is for electronics and in lithium-ion batteries,” said Lapham. “Copper is a fantastic conductor.”

Lapham said copper is also used for piping and cable for electronic applications and as an algaecide (for example, in some roofing material and other applications).

**Copper crime**

Despite copper being more difficult to find these days, conservation officers nabbed three copper thieves in 2020. Sentencing in the case concluded this month in Keweenaw County.

Officers received a tip about activity at a copper mine located in Central, part of the “Copper Country” in Keweenaw County.

The [Central mine](https://www.keweenawhistory.org/Central) produced about 52 million pounds of copper over 40 years. Roughly 1,200 people established a town revolving around the mine, which became a “ghost town” when the mine was abandoned in 1898.

Conservation officers, the county mine inspector and the local sheriff set out to investigate, confirming the mine had indeed been broken into.

“The subjects were accessing a shaft of the Central Mine complex through a man-made mine cap,” said Sgt. Marc Pomroy, DNR conservation officer. “The cap allows bats to use the mine shaft for hibernation. The top of the cap has a locked access door.”

Within a day of surveillance, conservation officers and a Keweenaw County Sheriff’s deputy went back to the mine on snowmobiles and waited until three people were caught leaving the mine.

The three individuals were in possession of hundreds of pounds of copper.

“The copper ore that was taken from the mine was in rough form, and still needed to be treated and cleaned, but was still valuable,” Pomroy said. “These folks make a living off of breaking into old mines and stealing the copper product to later sell in the clean polished form.”

The case concluded this month when Brent Hiltunen, 39, and Ike Kinsinger, 40, both of Calumet, were ordered to serve 30 days in jail for breaking and entering. They were also ordered to pay $490 in fines and costs after being found guilty by a jury in November 2022.

A third man, Erick Grandchamp, 40, of Calumet, pleaded guilty to trespassing under a plea agreement. He was ordered to pay $490 in fines and costs.

When conservation officers investigate natural resource crimes, it’s usually based on a tip or complaint, often reported to the DNR Report All Poaching hotline, or directly to a conservation officer.

When officers receive a tip or complaint, they visit the original location to look for anything out of the ordinary. But sometimes, while they’re patrolling, something just seems off and is worth investigating.

If you suspect or witness a natural resource crime, including, fish, game, recreational trespassing, environmental crimes or commodity vandalizing or theft, contact the Report All Poaching hotline. Call or text 1-800-292-7800 as soon as possible; the line is available 24/7.

Tipsters may remain anonymous and may be eligible for a cash reward for information that leads to an arrest and conviction.

Learn more about the DNR’s law enforcement work at [Michigan.gov/ConservationOfficers](http://www.Michigan.gov/ConservationOfficers).

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