

# Operation Hunter – a peek behind the scenes

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*Poached lynx at the autopsy room*

The dawn is breaking above Krušné hory mountains, it is April, early morning, most of the village is still asleep. Grass is covered by frost, and it is very cold. My colleague and I are sitting in a car in front of one of the houses, the heating turned on, waiting. Many cars are parked all around. Customs officers are already inside announcing a house search. Realization of Operation Hunter has begun.

At the same moment, house searches are launched at other locations in Czech Republic: altogether they are nine, and two more in Slovakia. The target is an international organized group of hunters, poachers and traffickers. We have been working on uncovering their activities for two years, so it is a big action with many people involved.

Even an international investigation team has been created. Our colleagues, inspectors participating at the other house searches, are also waiting. We don't know exactly for what. We don't know what the customs officers will find, how much of it, which animal species, if the action will go smoothly or the suspects will be aggressive. Nobody knows these things in advance, it is always the big unknown, but also nerves, adrenalin, and when the action itself starts, cold, exhaustion and long hours of waiting, and then further long hours of work.

Biologists, who help during investigation of wildlife crime cases, usually serve in the role of expert advisors. Our main task is to identify the animal species, either they are alive or dead, or reduced to just their remains. Then

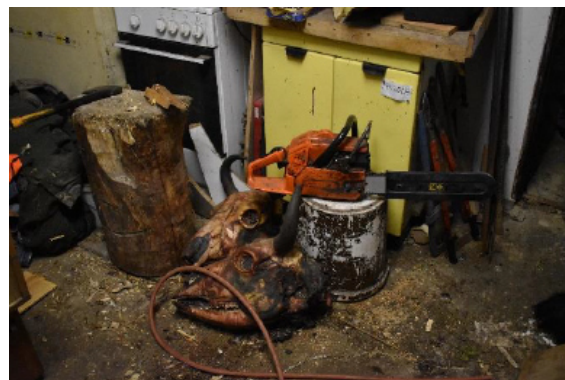
to determine, if they are protected species and if the documents submitted with them are sufficient to prove a legal origin. In cases when law enforcement authorities seize any animals as evidence, we have to address their transport and accommodation, which especially in case of live animals is not a piece of cake. After the action itself we usually prepare the experts' statements.

Here in Krušné hory is the house of the taxidermist and poacher. We are two experts here and in the meantime, while waiting in the car, we are discussing what could be inside of the dark, silent house, and chatting on Whatsapp with other colleagues: how does it look in there? In two hours, the head of the customs team comes and invites us to go inside. As inspectors we have already experienced a lot, but this place is real horror show.



*In the house of the poacher*

The house has two floors and an attic, and practically everywhere we look are the remains of animals. Apart from a few residential rooms the house is full of dirt and stink. Layers of moulded animal skins are laying on the ground in corridors, piles of antlers, bones and other stuff inside of rooms. Buckets with weird liquids and semi-soaked "something" are all around. Skulls with dry meat are hanging on a wire on the walls. There are also 13 chest freezers here... Damn it, this will not be fast, and it will be a hard work.



*American or European Bison, photo called "Chain Saw Massacre"*

The customs officer wants to know, which protected animal species are stored in the house. We start in the attic; it is all filled by piles of antlers, mostly of deer, but also elk, roe deer and mouflon horns. We are step by step going through the piles, there must be hundreds of animals here. "For these he needs papers," we are pointing at five elk's antlers with remains of skulls. The rest are not protected, so we move on. On the residential floor the walls are full of small antlers and trophies, but except for a few stuffed Black Grouses these are quite okay. Only on the ground floor does the sickening experience start. We are moving from room to room, customs officers are carefully combing through all the spaces.

They are opening every cabinet, inspecting every bucket, looking into every corner. My colleague and I have put on gloves, and we are going to rummage in the carcasses. Something is easy to determine - unfinished taxidermy of a sitting bear, a lot of stuffed Wood Grouses, Black Grouses, owls, birds of prey...



*Unfinished brown bear*

The skins thrown on the ground are worse, many of them are damp and moulded. A thought creeps in – so why did they kill the animals, if they did not even process them? Also bear and lynx skins are kicking around.

In the back room are skinned bloody heads of large ungulates, next to them a chain saw. “Chain Saw Massacre, do you know the movie?” I ask my colleague. We need a bit of black humour, otherwise one would get depressed in places like this. We are examining the heads, mainly the horns – it is not a cow, but European or American Bison. None of them is protected, so from the point of view of conservation of endangered species this is okay.

We are going ahead. A bucket is in the next room, with some kind of ghoulish limbs sticking out of it, without skin and claws. On the first sight they appear to be monkey’s hands, but the anatomy of the bones is different when examined carefully – and what would a monkey be doing here? We don’t know what it is, so it needs to be seized and given a more detailed analysis (later we learned that these were wolf paws).

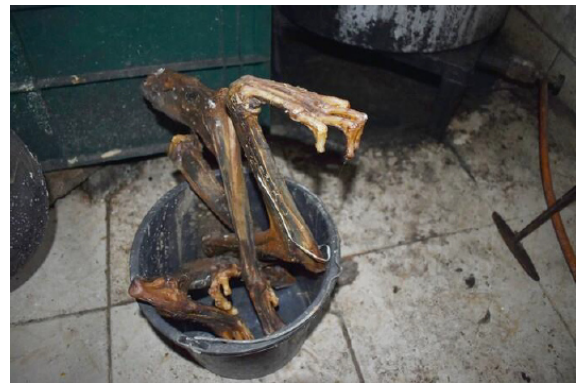


*Chopped wolf paws*

Six skulls with dry meat are hanging on the wall stringed on a wire. We are examining their teeth, they are smaller carnivores, but we can’t identify the species on the spot, so we seize them too. The technician is carefully photographing each seized object with the evidence number of the piece at the spot, where it was found, as well as outside in more detail later. A documentary site is created in

the garden. There is more and more evidence, and work as well...

It is coming to climax when we open the freezers. They are jammed full. Everywhere there are cadavers of animals, some are not protected species – an entire shot dead racoon, foxes, pheasants, wild boars, roe deer. But there are also buzzards, hawks, grouses... Protected animals, which are illegal to kill. There are no documents for anything, the owner literally has none. We find the first lynx, second lynx, wolf, another wolf, elk’s legs, bear meat with a sign “brum-brum”, an otter, beavers, another otter, again grouses, an eagle owl... We go through a freezer after freezer, and it is unending.



*Skinned wolf paws*

There are even two freezers standing on top of each other, so we have to muck out the upper one to get into the lower. We are tired, cold, there is no heating in the house. Our fingers are freezing from touching the frozen parts of cadavers, so they are almost numb. We are pulling frozen lumps of meat; our backs are sore. Have you ever tried to tear half of a frozen elk skin out of a freezer? Black Grouse, marked as “grouse for spare parts”, wolf for spare parts, killed squirrels, king fishers, White-tailed Eagle, even White Stork. Hard to believe it – do they really kill whatever they see?

“Nothing is in this freezer, I have food for kids here,” says the owner’s wife. Hmm, we are looking at each other with the customs officer and then are opening the freezer. There really are frozen peas and carrot on the top. I am

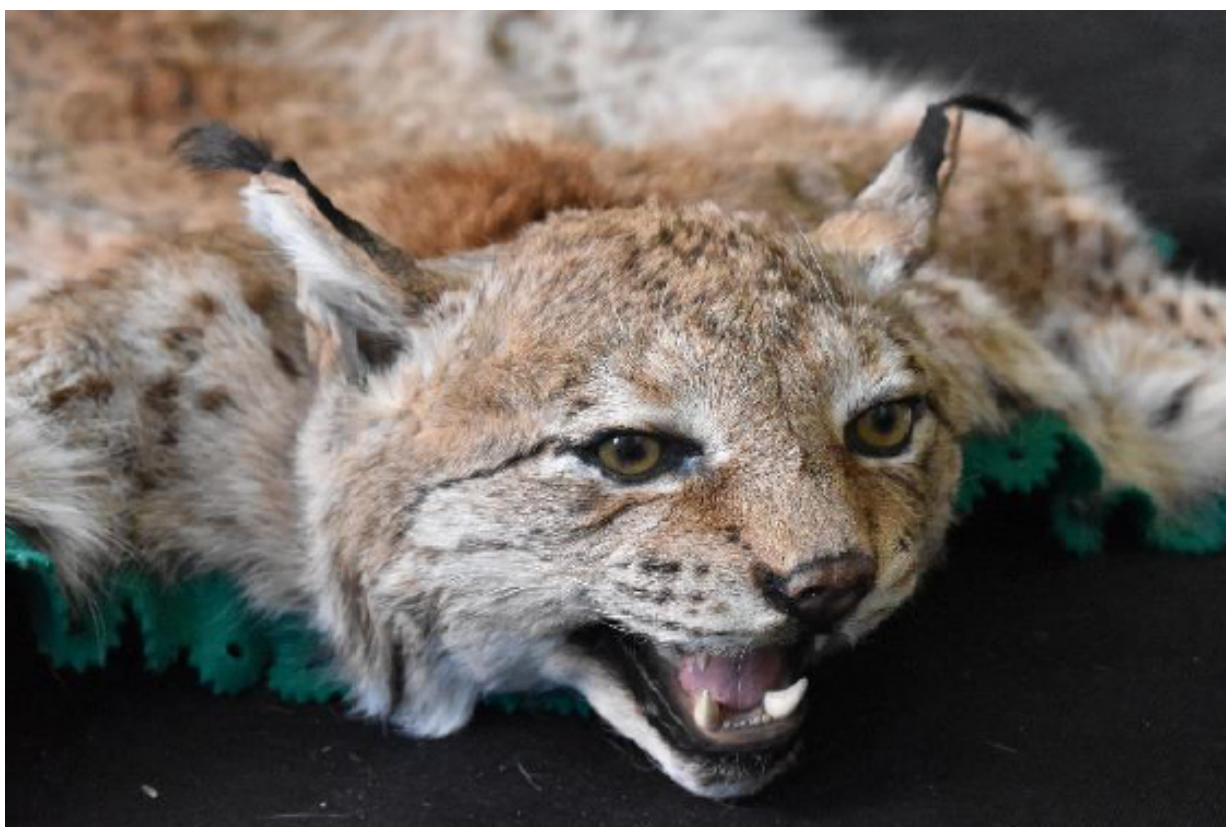
removing the bags with veggies and there is a bundle with a sign Lynx... I am picking up the bundle with killed lynx and the lady lowers her eyes.

Our colleagues at other house searches are writing on WhatsApp – their searches differ a bit from this house of horrors. They are walking through warehouses full of hunting trophies and stuffed animals in a huge taxidermy company, others are in the houses of hunters, where the trophies are hanging on the walls, or the animal taxidermies are somehow decoratively displayed.

Lynxes, wolfs, birds of prey but also lions, cougars, tigers, a cheetah or snow leopard. One cannot understand this hobby. “The Master insists that he collects felines,” my

colleague calls from a room, where there are dozens of stuffed felines along the walls. Above each there is a photo of the hunter with a gun above the killed animal.

The action ends early the next morning. Everybody is totally exhausted after many hours of work. Customs officers seized 246 specimens of protected species. Partly these were frozen bodies, their parts, meat or claws; some were already processed in the form of stuffed animals, tanned skins or bleached skulls. A truck had to be used to transport the seized evidence. Some of the specimens were returned after verification so the final number of confiscated specimens eventually stabilized at 204.



*One of many lynx trophies seized during Operation Hunter*

### **One year earlier ...**

At a meeting of the investigation team, we are discussing the progress in investigation of the Operation Hunter. The investigator is telling the team the news, and we are talking over the next steps. Gradually the activities of a

group involving a large group of poachers, traffickers, taxidermists, and final rich hunters are coming to light. They are very well organized, not simply “nickel-and-dime” poachers. They hunt in Czechia, Slovakia, in other parts of Europe and in exotic countries also. Sometimes legally, sometimes not. They

poach protected species, mostly being interested in the trophies of carnivores, but they hunt other species as well. They import exotic trophies – leopards, lions, elephants, giraffes and so on. Part of the import is legal with CITES permits, other trophies are smuggled. The records show how and where they conceal them during imports and how they cheat with papers. They use ingenious tricks.

But it is still not all, the biggest shock is yet to come. *“They want to hunt tigers in Czech Republic. Not in a cage, they are planning to release them outside. The area is not even fenced, it is a forest accessible to the public. It is about the authentic experience of hunting.”* the colleague, a customs officer, says. What? It must be a joke! We are looking at each other, everybody is silent. What kind of lunatic assholes are they?

Unfortunately, it is not a joke. One of them already brought three tigers from Western Europe, older animals from a circus, which he pretended he wanted to save (at least this is what he meritoriously presented to authorities and public). In reality, they already have clients – several rich Slovak hunters – who want to shoot a big cat.

For some hunters killing a big feline is an important experience, for which they are willing to pay a lot of money. Rare species present an extra challenge for them and the more money they have, the more often they believe that the law does not apply to them.

The imported tigers were locked in a caravan in a breeding facility of the owner, who presents himself as an animal lover. People visit him to admire animals (for a certain time he even held an official zoo licence). At an agreed date the tigers were supposed to be secretly released into a rented hunting area. It is not necessary to highlight that tigers are extremely dangerous animals and releasing them into unfenced and unsecured forest presents an extreme risk. Available information indicate that the cats would not

be sedated in any way (partly narcotized by medicaments), so the good hunting experience of the clients would not be spoiled. The organizer of the entire action received a deposit of 30.000 EUR for a trouble-free hunt; the owner of the tigers received a deposit of 100.000 CZK for delivering the animals. It seems that it is not the first business of this type, they have executed several of them.

Hunting exotic animals released free in the Czech forest is obviously a hit. The investigation team has a long discussion what to do about it. It is not very clear what shall we do with this information. Fortunately, the situation resolved itself and the planned tiger hunt was not carried out. The supplier of the animals backed out at the last moment as he got a better offer. He obtained an export CITES permit and exported the tigers to Turkey, where they are now in some kind of a facility on the roof of a shopping mall in Istanbul. Probably not a great place for animals, but still better than a caravan covered by corrugated tin and then feeling the bullet of a Slovak hunter.



*Incarnated “cuteness”.  
Otters’ taxidermy from the Operation Hunter*

## Summer 2019

The Operation Hunter itself does not end by carrying out the house searches, a great deal of work follows for us, the experts, as well as for the investigators. Concerning the professional evidence, it is required to perform a detailed examination of confiscated specimens, make photo documentation, specify the determination of species not identified on the spot, find out how the animals were killed, take genetic samples and so on. So, we are spending two days at the autopsy room of the University of Veterinary and Pharmaceutical Sciences in Brno at the Department of Pathological Morphology and Parasitology together with a veterinary pathologist and several veterinary anatomists.

Step by step we are defrosting all the cadavers, examining them and taking photos. We are eight biologists working at two large autopsy tables, the pathologist is running from one table to another, calls out details and gives us advice. The customs investigators are present as well, documenting everything.

Any manipulation of seized evidence must be unquestionably well documented, so the lawyers cannot later claim that the specimens had been substituted. It means grabbing the sealed bag, putting it on the table, taking a photo of the bag, taking a photo of the intact seal, cutting the seal, taking a photo, pouring the dead animal out on the autopsy table, taking a photo, stretching the body, taking a photo, measuring, taking a photo...



*Examination of a killed otter*

Sometimes it goes quickly, with other animals we are spending tens of minutes. We are looking for holes from bullets, damaged tissues, we are examining the remains of bodies using a magnifying glass. We are documenting the tiniest details, writing records, measuring. Then sealing again, washing the table, changing the gloves, and another bag is to come.

Sometimes one cannot avoid anger, mostly when he sees that the animals have intact body, but legs are shot through or away. What suffering it had to cause, merely because the "hunter" was unable even to aim properly? Other animals are riddled with bullets or shot to pieces, grouse for spare parts, wolf for spare parts... We don't understand dozens of shot squirrels or the killed kingfishers. What kind of trophy is a squirrel? And why the kingfisher?



*Kingfisher trophy?*

We spend the next two days in similar examinations of dry finished specimen. The key one is lynx taxidermy, seized in the house of the hunter, who "collects big cats". The investigation shows that this lynx was illegally shot in Šumava, Czech Republic, in November 2018.

The investigators have documented the activities after shooting, transport of the dead body to the preparator, processing the taxidermy and picking up the final exhibit by the hunter. However, the owner insists that he bought the lynx abroad already dead, from

another hunter. Of course, it was supposed to be in a country where it is legal to hunt lynxes. First it was Lithuania, then he “remembered” it was Croatia. The reason he has a photo of his “successful hunt” above the taxidermy in his collection he explained by saying that he did not want to look stupid in front of his wife, therefore he defrosted the dead lynx, blow-dried him, and drove him to Šumava where he took the photo...



*Hunting photo*

We are paying special attention to this lynx, photographing thoroughly, and taking genetic samples. Science as well as the field work of nature conservationists can help with this case. In fact, long-term monitoring of lynxes is undertaken in the Czech Republic using photo traps and genetic samples of the wild population are collected. Therefore, the scientists can find if the particular lynx originates from our country or some another one's population. Therefore, the customs officers are sending the samples to the Academy of Science, Institute of Vertebrate Biology, which provides the analysis. Their discovery confirms that the lynx's origins are from Šumava. So, not Croatia, Jack.

Cooperation with Šumava National Park and ALKA Wildlife NGO also brings results. Using records of photo traps, the poached lynx is exactly determined by patterns on the coat including sex, name, registration number and its area of occurrence. It is Michelle, a female living in Prachatice area and in November

2018 she had a six-month-old cub. At the time of the crime, she disappeared from the photo traps records. The hunter killed the mother, and the cub had no chance to survive after her death. It died by hunger, which could take several more days, maybe weeks.



*Lynx female Michelle with her kitten a few weeks before her death*



*Michelle as a trophy*

The following months we spend writing experts' statements and verifying the presented documents. Practically none of the suspects has an exceptional permission according to the Act No. 114/1992 Coll. on the Protection of Nature and Landscape. Some of them present various papers, showing that the animals were hunted abroad. Although in the Czech Republic these species are protected, they can be hunted in other countries. It takes months to verify these documents at various government institutions abroad.

We are writing to Lithuania, Latvia, Croatia, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, but also Argentina,

Canada, SAR, Namibia and so on. The result is quite sad – many of the submitted documents are false. The work on the case is dragging on. It is incredibly large case and verification is endless.

However, in the meantime, the offenders don't waste any time and activate their supporters. In the wider hunting community, the case, although unpublished, causes an upset. If they came after them, they may come after us next!

The information is spreading like an avalanche. Hunters start visiting regional authorities requesting exceptions for their hunting trophies. But some of them have no documents and they are not able to prove where they got the trophy of the protected animal. So, they don't get the exception. Various high positioned gentlemen are making phone calls trying to intervene. The discussion about the pitiful men who suffer thanks to stupid legislation and activist authorities starts. And this raises another wave of resentment among the hunters: *"See! They were trying hard, and the officials did not give them the exception!"*

How do we explain to them that exception is related to the word exceptional, there is no legal claim to having it, especially when the hunter is not able to prove that he hunted the animal legally? And how to explain that the hunting of these animals is not in the interest of the public, such that it prevails over the interest of nature conservation (which is the requirement for an exception under the law).



*Examination of seized lynx skin*

Unfortunately, as far as hunting is concerned, lobbying is still strong in the Czech Republic, therefore this year a change in the law on landscape nature protection was quietly smuggled into the so-called invasion amendment with the help of a parliamentary initiative. The change consists of *"exclusion of prohibition of holding and transport according to section 50 paragraph 2 Act no. 114/1992 Coll. in relation to dead individuals of protected animals legally obtained from abroad and individuals obtained before 2004, when the prohibitions did not apply to dead individuals"*. Translated to human language it means that protected animal species hunted abroad are not subject to the ban on holding and the obligation to obtain the exception.

The change went through all the readings in Parliament and Senate, and nobody was taken aback by it, nobody found it problematic. Possibly because when it was discussed, nothing was publicly known about Operation Hunter. How will it be recognized if the animal was killed, for example, in Sweden, and not in Czech mountains? That's the question.



*Examination of seized wolf skin*

The Ministry of Environment took a neutral position to the proposal of this change, stating, that the role of control bodies will increase and proving the real origin of the trophies will be, of course, professionally demanding and require using modern methods like DNA analysis.



When I realize, what an effort and how many months of work were needed to verify documents in Operation Hunter, I am afraid unfortunately that the control bodies will rather not bother to undertake such measures. I can see how keen inspectors are to control hunting trophies, knowing, that some of the hunters must have the exception (those who hunted in CZ) and some not (those who hunted abroad). They will take samples for DNA analysis and then they will learn that population genetical studies for many species are not realized yet so it is not possible to determine from which population the animal originates. And when the control bodies fully realize how much DNA analysis or radiocarbon dating costs and that there are thousands of hunters with trophies in our country, they will be eager to pay for these analyses, for sure. Before it was up to the hunter to prove that he got the trophy legally within the procedure for receiving the exception. Now it will be up to the State to verify, using the public's money, if it is OK or not. It is impressive how the offenders can influence the legislation to their profit.

But even that was not enough for hunters. It is the end of summer 2021 and the Chair of the Czech-Moravian Hunting Union actively addresses various ministries including the Ministry of Environment, members of Parliament, universities and non-governmental organizations and requests a general *ex post facto* pardon for hunting trophies in Czech Republic.

On 17th September an article was published at Ekolist Magazine: **Hunters condemn illegal hunting and call for an amnesty for trophies.** In the article the Czech-Moravian Hunting Union distances itself from the illegal hunting and concerning the published cases Hunter and another case from south Bohemia (when the poached lynx was found in a freezer of the head of local hunting union) it states that it was just a tragic failure of individuals. An excess, which, he believes, will not repeat again. I have serious doubts about

the individuals (Operation Hunter is about the well-elaborated activity of an organized criminal group). I definitely do not buy for a minute that it will not repeat again.

As confirmed by the information from monitoring of lynxes in the field as well as information from anonymous surveys among the hunters themselves – lynxes are still disappearing from their distribution range, and it is not of natural reasons.

**The reason is poaching.** It is not the failure of individuals. It is a long-term problem of not respecting the law by a large group of people, a problem exaggerated opinions about nature conservation and last but not least the careless attitude of the hunting community to offences of many their members (nobody should tell me that the hunters don't know among themselves who shoots protected species). The Chair of the Czech-Moravian Hunting Union argues about the collections and insists that trophies are often decades or hundreds of years old. In his opinion, the problem of holding trophies is deeper and the State should come with a systemic solution. We certainly concur that the problem needs to be resolved. But not by a general pardon without any conditions. It would resolve the issue with the historical collections, but also it would cover recent poached trophies – and that is perhaps the point.

The parallel with the gun amnesty is not bad at all. Actually, I think amnesty is a great idea. Only it is necessary to look more closely at the conditions of such amnesties. In January 2021, the Ministry of Interior declared a half-year long amnesty for illegally held firearms. Those, who were holding an illegal firearm, could hand it in with impunity or legalize it. For legalization it was enough to get a firearm licence and the expertise had to prove that the gun is not stolen, or a crime was not committed with it. Other firearms were passed to the State (usually they are destroyed).

I agree with and fully support a trophy amnesty under similar conditions. Let's have trophy hunters hand their illegally held trophies to the State with impunity. Those, which will be verified as not originating from poaching or are old, will become legalized and the owner can keep them (I would recommend that the radiocarbon dating be

paid by the owner who does not have documents for their trophies, if he wants to keep it). Remaining trophies will pass to the State and be destroyed. Those who will not hand in anything, cannot complain any longer that they did not have an opportunity to resolve the situation.

Prague, October 2021



*Lynx skin turned upside down*