

Primate protector turns 'eco-detective'

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Mistreated monkeys, confidential tips, an element of danger — that's what makes Shirley McGreal go.

Three years ago, McGreal, head of the International Primate Protection League, was going strong on a particularly distressing case.

Six endangered baby orangutans had been discovered at a Bangkok airport on Feb. 20, 1990, by airport officials who heard them crying from inside crates marked as "birds." The small apes were close to death.

McGreal had two priorities: make sure the animals were cared for, and catch the person responsible for their mistreatment.

League volunteer Dianne Taylor-Snow was able to save two of the orangutans. Three others died. One is missing.

"Once you get the animals taken care of, then you find out who did it," McGreal said.

Her sleuthing eventually led authorities to Michael Block, an ape dealer in Miami. Block, 31, was indicted

S.C. woman battling smugglers

S.C. WOMAN/from 1A

a year ago on four counts of violating the federal endangered species act and an international convention that governs the preservation of rare animals. His trial is scheduled for March 8.

For McGreal and members of her league, which works to conserve primates in the wild and monitors their condition in captivity, tracking down smugglers can be dangerous work.

"International wildlife smuggling is becoming increasingly criminalized in syndicates," McGreal said. "There's so much money in it."

Her "eco-detectives" sometimes pose as buyers to expose smugglers. McGreal herself has infiltrated smuggling rings and has received her share of death threats. But without her network of volunteers, she said, smugglers would operate freely.

"Ninety-nine percent of these shipments go through undetected," McGreal said of smuggling operations like the one uncovered in Bangkok. Those orangutans were found only because the tranquilizers they had been given wore off before their plane left, McGreal said.

"It was a fluke," she said.

McGreal, whose work protecting primates has been lauded by Jane Goodall, Prince Phillip and conservationists around the world, was a key player behind Block's indictment, according to court records.

She began with a tip from a source in Thailand, who told her that a bird importer living in Bangkok, Kurt Schafer, was involved in the orangutan shipment. Once exposed, Schafer provided wildlife officials in Germany with documents, later obtained by McGreal, that showed Block had hired him to transport the orangutans, McGreal said.

"Those documents were really the smoking gun," she said last week from her group's headquarters in Summerville, S.C.

McGreal said her non-profit group, which she founded in 1973, is "often the most effective force against an expanding trade in endangered wildlife."

Even when wildlife officials have information to

act on, they sometimes move slowly, McGreal said.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials dawdled for months after receiving the information supplied by Schafer, McGreal said. The investigation picked up pace early in 1991, she said, after she demanded action from wildlife officials in Washington.

"When we turn something in, we don't leave it alone," McGreal said. "It seemed to me there was a real reluctance to investigate this dealer."

Meanwhile, Block had executed his own plan to deal with what he called McGreal's "witch hunt."

In August 1990, he sued McGreal, claiming she had tried to sabotage his business dealings with a Louisiana primate center by writing the center about his licensing problems and about "damning criticisms" of his company, Worldwide Primates, by agriculture officials.

"As a result of the letter, (Block) ... had to deal with Delta Primate without profit in a hope to re-establish a business relationship with it," Block's attorney, Paul Bass, said in court papers.

Block dropped the suit after he was indicted, but McGreal, who claims the suit threatened to destroy her family and take away her home, isn't satisfied.

Block sued to force McGreal to "bite her political tongue or be dragged through a nightmare of litigation," McGreal's attorney, Thomas Julin, said in court papers. Since Block's only motive was to intimidate her, his suit was frivolous and he should have to pay McGreal's legal fees, Julin said.

That argument didn't sway U.S. District Judge Kenneth Ryskamp in West Palm Beach, who recently approved a magistrate's recommendation denying McGreal's request for sanctions against Block.

Although Block "may have been motivated by a desire to chill (McGreal) from expressing her views concerning (Block's) activities, there is no evidence of record which would support the imposition of sanctions," U.S. Magistrate William Turnoff wrote.

Last week, McGreal appealed Ryskamp's endorsement of Turnoff's report.

"I still would like Judge Ryskamp to tell me what I did wrong," McGreal said.