

Man Pleads Guilty in Big Game Leopard Smuggling Case

South Dakota resident did not possess a valid permit.

Posted: October 23, 2008 3 a.m. EDT

A South Dakota man was sentenced for illegally hunting and killing leopards, and then smuggling them into the United States. A hunter from South Dakota has pleaded guilty and was sentenced in federal court in Denver for making a false statement to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in order to illegally import a leopard hide and skull from a trophy hunt in South Africa, according to the Justice Department.

Jerry Mason of Frankfort, S.D., was ordered to pay a \$10,000 fine as well as a \$10,000 community service payment to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Mason will forfeit the hide and skull, as well as serve a probation term of 48 months, during which time he won't be able to hunt or join anyone on a hunt anywhere in the world.

In 2002, Mason traveled to South Africa to hunt leopards guided by a South African outfitter doing business as "Trophy Hunting Safaris," according to the plea agreement. Mason shot and killed a leopard during the hunt, aware of the fact that neither he nor the outfitter had valid permits.

Because the leopards were killed illegally, fake export permits were obtained in Zimbabwe, and Mason provided false information to USFWS. In 2004, USFWS inspectors seized a shipment of five leopard hides and three leopard skulls at the Denver International Airport, including the hide and skull of leopards that Mason killed illegally in 2002, officials said.