

# Safe Harbors

## FISHERIES AND HUNTING ENFORCEMENT IN THE SOUTHEAST

STORY AND PHOTOS PROVIDED  
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**The Patrol Vessel Enforcer traveling north just outside of Petersburg.**

The question, “Where did you guys come from?” is music to an Alaska Wildlife Trooper’s ears while patrolling the remote wilderness and waters of Alaska.

Alaska is a big State and has more coastline than the entire Lower 48 combined. Much of the area is remote and outside of work, Alaska Wildlife Troopers might never see it. It is a very unique experience that most other law enforcement agencies will never understand.

In Southeast Alaska, many patrols require troopers and boat crews to spend several days together on a boat not only doing their duties enforcing state commercial fishing and hunting regulations, but maintaining a floating home away from home.

In November, the Patrol Vessel Enforcer and its crew of five spent 11 days traveling 941 nautical miles by large vessel and an additional 471 nautical miles by patrol skiff, mostly in the northern portion of the Southeast. The primary focus was commercial fisheries mostly for black cod, and commercial dive fisheries consisting of geoducks and sea urchins. Enforcement for deer hunting and other activities concentrated on between the Chatham and Icy straits, Tenakee and the Petersburg area. The Enforcer left the port of Ketchikan on Nov. 6 and returned to home port on Nov. 17.

The crew consisted of two wildlife troopers – Ricky Merritt and I – and civilians Boat Officer III John Lagasse, Public Safety Technician II Christopher Hausler and Boat Officer III Lawrence Nagy.

Our days were long and the duties many.

Our primary function on board the Enforcer was to patrol as much and as often as possible. This usually involved operating the small skiff E-1 (Echo 1) when the weather was nice enough. We also would inspect gear off of the Enforcer by using the vessel’s hydraulics to pull gear to check for compliance. Other duties included wheel watches (keeping an eye on the Enforcer, making sure it was anchored properly, etc.), cleaning dishes and vacuuming floors, paperwork and patrol planning for the next day. A typical day was getting up early, sometimes around 3 a.m.,

to look for deer hunters using artificial light. After breakfast, we’d depart on the smaller skiff and patrol whatever area we were working for any users on the water. If we were near a community or town, we’d stop and conduct village visits to see if any assistance is required while we are in the area. We would try to do village visits in all of the communities without law enforcement, such as Warm Springs Bay, Tenakee Inlet and Gustavus. We conducted security checks on any other areas that were not communities or towns, such as hatcheries, or other areas where people might live including Hidden Falls Hatchery. If we discovered any pot gear or buoys during a mission, we would then try to pull and inspect that gear by the afternoon. By the evening, we would try to end up in a location we had not been into the prior day. Some evenings we would continue to patrol for deer hunters that were using artificial light. After a shower and a good dinner, we would sleep and then start it all over the next day.

We issued three citations for patrol game, two of which were for failing to validate deer harvest tags immediately after taking and one for taking a brown bear in GMU Unit 4 without a valid registration permit. In both cases, the hunters were surprised to see



**Trp. Ricky Merritt checks gear and permits during a routine boarding of a commercial hand troller.**



**Petersburg-based Trp. Scott Sands (left) and Trp. Ricky Merrit (right) at the Petersburg boat harbor during a visit to Petersburg.**

us at the docks or boat launches. The two deer harvest tags were issued to hunters at the U.S. Forest Service dock across from Tenakee where hunters launch all-terrain vehicles. The brown bear citation was given to a hunter contacted at the Gustavus small boat launch as he returned from his hunt.

We boarded 55 vessels and inspected 20 commercial fishing and pot gear outfits.

Eight pots were seized for various violations.

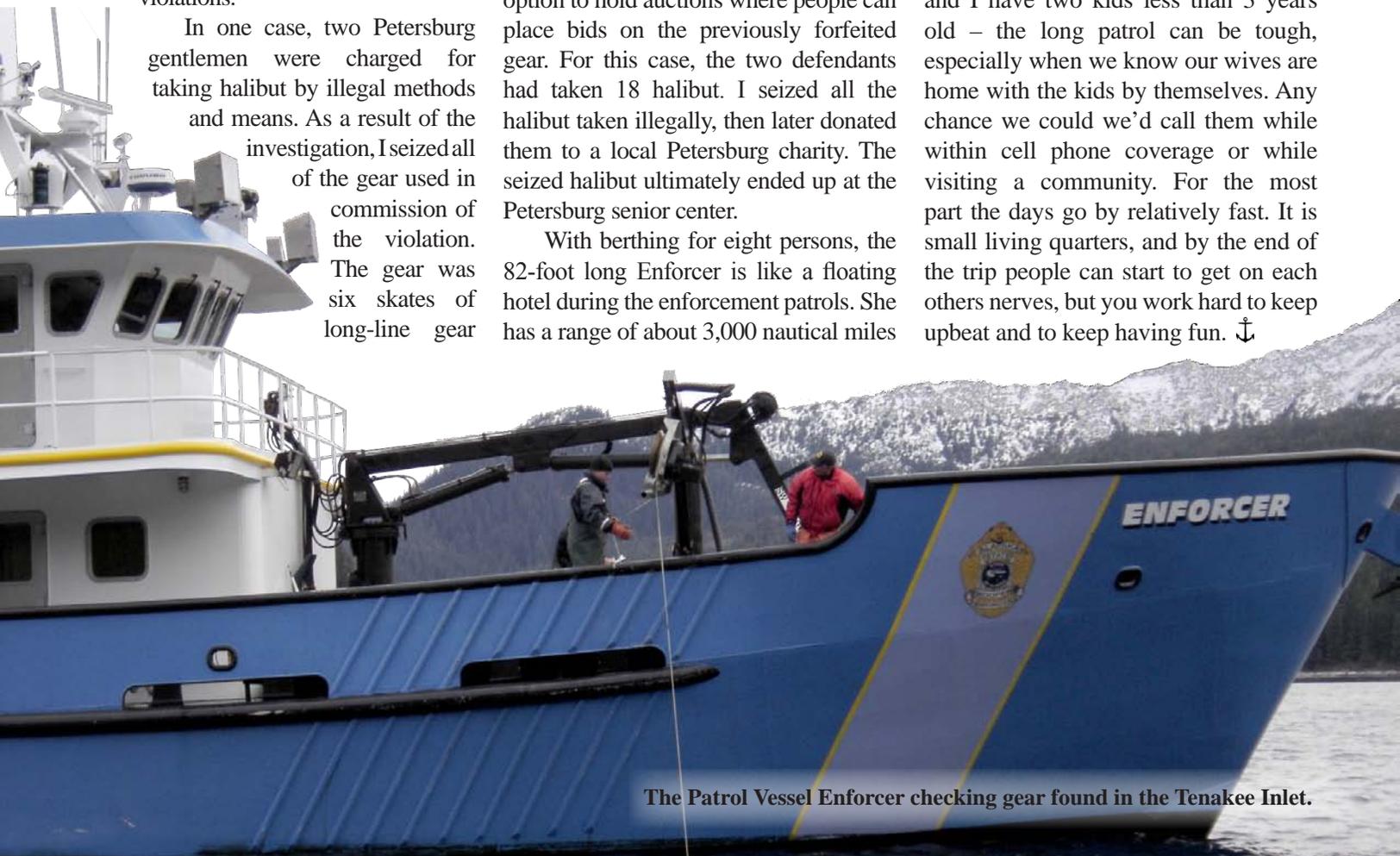
In one case, two Petersburg gentlemen were charged for taking halibut by illegal methods and means. As a result of the investigation, I seized all of the gear used in commission of the violation. The gear was six skates of long-line gear

(50 halibut hooks per skate for a total of approximately 300 hooks), two anchors, two buoys and the buoy line. The gear was placed into evidence at the post in Petersburg and pending the outcome of the case, can either be forfeited to the State or returned to the original owners. Depending on the severity of the crime, the State has the option to request the gear be forfeited to the State. Approximately every two to three years the State has the option to hold auctions where people can place bids on the previously forfeited gear. For this case, the two defendants had taken 18 halibut. I seized all the halibut taken illegally, then later donated them to a local Petersburg charity. The seized halibut ultimately ended up at the Petersburg senior center.

With berthing for eight persons, the 82-foot long Enforcer is like a floating hotel during the enforcement patrols. She has a range of about 3,000 nautical miles

or 13 days at sea. Her two Caterpillar diesel engines produce about 1,100 horsepower for a cruising speed of about 10.5 knots. She sails about 125 days a year and visits most of the villages and cities in Southeast Alaska. Her main focus is patrolling the many commercial fisheries which include salmon trolling, salmon and herring gillnetting, and salmon and herring seining, shrimp and crab pot fishing, shrimp trawling, black cod long-lining, halibut long-lining and crab pot fishing. There are many hunting and trapping seasons that are patrolled by the Enforcer, including brown and black bear, deer, goat, moose and other animals for which enforcement is needed. The Enforcer is equipped with state-of-the-art electronics including radar, infrared camera, satellite phones, weather fax and GPS chart plotter. The Enforcer crew also patrol the many sport fishing areas checking for compliance, and serve as a search and rescue platform during emergencies.

However, when you have a family and two small children – both Merritt and I have two kids less than 3 years old – the long patrol can be tough, especially when we know our wives are home with the kids by themselves. Any chance we could we'd call them while within cell phone coverage or while visiting a community. For the most part the days go by relatively fast. It is small living quarters, and by the end of the trip people can start to get on each others nerves, but you work hard to keep upbeat and to keep having fun. ⚓



**The Patrol Vessel Enforcer checking gear found in the Tenakee Inlet.**

# Changing Seasons



## SEA URCHINS

In Southeast Alaska, commercial urchin harvesters are limited to hand picking and use of an urchin rake. Divers typically use surface supplied air or scuba gear and collect urchins in mesh bags that are lifted to the surface. In order for AWT to effectively patrol this commercial fishery, we work specific locations where most of the diving occurs. Per Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission's 2007 statistics, there were 78 total permits issued for the commercial taking of sea urchins in Southeast Alaska – 34 resident permits and 44 non-resident permits. However, of the 78 permits issued in 2007, only eight resident and two non-resident permits were used to participate in the fishery. A sea urchin permit costs \$3,900. The total number of pounds landed in 2007 was 661,213 pounds, approximately 66,121 pounds per permit with total gross earnings of \$219,806.00 and \$21,981.00 per permit.

## DEER HUNTING

Deer hunting patrols in Southeast are done in several ways. For larger communities with road systems, we use our patrol vehicles to check hunters as they return from hunting

**The Patrol Vessel Enforcer checks gear while it skirts a fog in the Tenakee Inlet. It was around 25 degrees outside.**

or we can get out on foot to contact them in the field. Much of Southeast Alaska is only accessible by the water or air, so we spend a large portion of our time patrolling high-use areas. Sometimes we look specifically for hunters returning from the field to check licenses and make sure deer are properly tagged. On other missions, we focus on hunters using illegal methods and means, such as the use of artificial light. For that type of mission we worked primarily during dark hours from the evenings to early mornings to try to locate people using spotlights either on land or on the water. We try to catch these illegal users in the act by physically seeing them using the artificial light and either take or attempt to take game. Lastly, we patrol boat launches and local harbors late in the afternoon to catch hunters as they return back from hunting trips. These are good locations to make contacts and check compliance for licenses, tags, life jackets and to check people for operating boats under the influence of alcohol and drugs. We patrolled each of the areas specifically for deer hunters. Most of the time we would be on the smaller skiff and would check anybody we ran into, whether

it were commercial fisherman, shrimpers, crabbers or deer hunters. The area worked the most was Tenakee due to the popularity for hunting.

## BLACK COD

For the commercial black cod patrol, we focused primarily on the Chatham Strait area from as far north as Icy Strait to as far south as the middle of Baranof Island. The Enforcer was used to patrol both north and south in Chatham. Once we spotted a vessel, we launched the smaller patrol skiff to board the vessels and sometimes to cover more area. We simply boarded any commercial fish vessels that we spotted on the entire trip minus any down time or anchor time. The primary goal of the commercial black cod vessels was to make contact and inspect all documents and to make sure that all registered permit holders we present on board the boat while it was fishing. On this particular patrol we did not run into very many boats working black cod. The black cod fishery itself closed at noon on Nov. 15 for the Chatham Strait area, so we patrolled for people fishing after it had closed. ⚓



**This halibut was caught illegally. Troopers seized the halibut and later donated to a local charity in Petersburg.**



**Trp. Ricky Merritt on the boardwalk at Warm Springs Bay on Baranof Island where he was conducting a security check. Troopers visited with the lone caretaker there.**