



The thin green line: DNR Officer Eileen Soper, on the prowl for illegal pets. *Below:* A fish store next to a sushi restaurant seems suspicious to us, too, but the store passed inspection with flying colors.

Pet detectives

BY DAVID A. TAYLOR

Officer Eileen Soper coolly guides her green police Chevy Blazer (with roof-mounted warning lights and standard-issue shotgun) into a Timonium strip mall. Soper speaks calmly into her radio: “Ten-twenty three, at 51 E. Padonia Road. Going in for inspection.”

Her latest quarry lies here, between The Dinette Store and Edo Sushi. Her target . . . 2001: A Fish Odyssey.

Soper, a 23-year veteran of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Police, is conducting a surprise inspection that’s a legacy of 1998’s Operation Pet Shop. Back in 1993, a booming black market for exotic pets resulted in tighter pet-trade laws to protect vulnerable native reptiles and amphibians. The law aimed to safeguard wildlife without taking a bite out of business, but after five years of pet dealers not following the new laws, Operation Pet Shop was born.

For six months, agents conducted “surveillance and purchase activities” (known to civilians as “visiting shops and buying pets”) across the state. The sting resulted in heaps of charges, fines, and convictions . . . plus a haul of bootleg pets which included a four-foot alligator, two barking tree frogs, and three spiny softshell turtles.

For the sting and the follow-up

inspections that continue today, Soper and other DNR officers had to bone up on how to tell a bog turtle (illegal) from a box turtle (just fine)—and they wore out a lot of shoe leather.

“When the order came down to inspect every pet shop [in the state], I said, ‘You gotta be kidding me!’” Soper recalls. There were hundreds of shops, and a mere handful of officers. When the shock wore off, she started organizing inspections in her district, and went undercover. “I’d go in as a shopper, with two uniformed officers outside.” If she found a deceptively labeled skink or corn snake, she’d call in the backup. If everything checked out, the officers left unannounced. (“They’d been inspected and didn’t know it.”)

On this day in Timonium, Soper gives the fish store the all-clear. But before she leaves, a clerk turns informer: Another dealer seemed to be mistreating animals, and Soper writes a note to follow up on the tip (another duty of the DNR).

Soper usually does inspections in slow times between other duties—such as when she found herself helping one reptile breeder inventory his entire stock: 500 snakes, plus all the mice and rats he raises to feed them.

“It was,” admits even this hardened veteran, “disgusting.”

