



Internet Officers

IT WAS TO TURN OUT TO BE A MAJOR TURNING POINT IN MY LIFE AND CAREER AS A NORTH CAROLINA WILDLIFE ENFORCEMENT OFFICER.

I remember feeling like a fish out of water, but yet with a mission, as I headed to the big town of Charlotte, N.C. It was June 3rd, 1995 and I was on my third day of my twenty-first year as a wildlife officer. My wife and I had just sold a car we no longer needed and I had three thousand dollars in my pocket to spend on our first computer. Prior to this day, I had literally never set down to one. This was still in the day of Windows 3.1 and the consumer level Internet was just getting started.

I left the store with a receipt for just over thirty-one hundred dollars. For my money, I had a Pentium 1, 75mhz computer, a fifteen-inch monitor and a basic color ink-jet printer. It was 4:00 a.m. before I made it into bed that first night. I felt almost overwhelmed by all the new aspects and potential that I saw in this new device. Little did I know that almost every night for the next few years would see me up after midnight working and learning the inner workings of computers.

I probably entered the computer age at a good time, as it was only a couple of months before Windows would forever change with the launch of Windows 95. I found myself caught up in it with what seemed to be half of the world. Somehow, I ended up with a copy of it on launch day and another copy of it coming in the mail a few days later.

A few months later and after many late nights staring at the monitor, I decided to check into this Internet thing. As it turned out, a gentleman that would turn out to be a great friend was operating a low level Internet business out of his home in my town. I decided to visit him and look into getting on the net. I remember well, talking to him and letting him explain just what and how it worked. I was hooked and signed up. In filling out his paper work so he could know who I was and be able to bill me, I had to furnish him the prefix for my e-mail address. After he described to me what he needed, I remember thinking about the decoy deer that I had fallen in love with. We, as well as many other states, had just started using them in the early nineties. I had excelled so much with the tool that I had acquired the nickname of the dummy or decoy deer doctor. So, I figured I would use something about them as my e-mail name. It was an easy choice to throw away the dummy part, so I went with decoy and doctor. I joined them together and shortened it a bit. The result was decoydoc@hci.net. I kept this address for nine years, which is a lifetime on the Internet. When the owner finally had to sell out due to broadband competition I kept the same name, but had to change it to decoydoc@charter.net, which is what I still have.

It didn't take me long once I got on the Internet in early 1996 to realize that this was the future. A few months later I thought that maybe I could contact wardens around the country and see if we could

By Sgt. Tony Robinson

use it as a communication and networking tool. I remember looking up as many state agencies main office addresses as I could and mailing and e-mailing them a letter letting them know of my intent. I simply advised them that if any of their officers wanted to join this so-called 'Game Warden Net' to just let me know their name, agency and e-mail address.

A few days later I remember getting my first reply. I don't recall his name but I remember he was from the state of Washington. I thought how interesting this was as he was as far away from my location as he could be and still be in the lower forty-eight. It started slow at first but I was adding a new entry or two every few days. In what seemed to be no time, we had over one thousand officers that were networked from all over the world. It seemed like there were officers from every state including Hawaii and Alaska, as well as all the Canadian provinces. We even reached Australia, Italy and England. Many of these are still on-line today.

The Game Warden Net was a success. It allowed officers to keep in touch in ways they never imagined. It has been used for questions, training, surveys, investigations, and keeping up with the good and bad news. Officers learned, often in minutes, of tragedies that they would probably have never heard of by conventional means. If they needed a quick check of something a thousand miles away, they simply sent an e-mail to the list. Many good trips and friends were and are still made by using the Game Warden Net. The only requirement was that to be a member you had to be an active or retired wildlife officer or something in the category, or be in some support level for them. With success, however, comes some problems and the early Game Warden Net had one major drawback. It required me to operate it manually for it to work.

For the first few years, I had to manually enter and approve all applicants. I also had to manually forward all e-mails as they came in. This meant that a member would send me their individual message and I would then look it over and hit the forward button so that it would go out to the group as a whole, about a thousand in number. This might involve as many as twenty or more messages per day. Needless to say, all these individual addresses were not always working or some would be

changed without letting me know. Those that did let me know required me to look up their old one and replace it with the new. In peak times, I found myself spending as much as two to three hours per day just to run the list. I also found myself being the judge, jury and executioner for deciding how to handle problems that ultimately came up between people wanting on the list and others that thought certain ones shouldn't be there.

There was, and still is today, the issue of what are appropriate posts to send out to the members. I found that the least amount of input that I could use usually worked out for the best, as most problems seemed to take care of themselves.

Just as the list was reaching a point that was becoming overwhelming, I came across the 'Yahoo Groups'. This was to be the Game Warden Net's lifesaver. I sent out notices and instructions on this switch over. As a result, the list dropped about fifty percent of its peak membership but has since come back. The Yahoo Groups run list provides many benefits for the members as well as myself. Officers can remove themselves at anytime. They can control several aspects of how they receive the mail. The e-mail posts go out automatically as soon as they are sent in without any help from me. The new lists provides for a Yahoo type Web site that is restricted to members only and allows officers that take advantage of it to post photos and other files. They can even run Web based surveys. I still must approve all new members. This is mainly to make sure they are within the game warden community. I also now have an assistant moderator of the list that has been a lifesaver for me. His name is Jake Dingel, an officer from Pennsylvania. Jake is able to approve or remove members as well.

As a result of the success of the Game Warden Net, an offspring of it was born. It is the Christian Game Warden Support Group. This new list, which has about sixty members, came about from several members on the list who were Christians, wanting their own list to support each other, and even complete strangers, with prayer, e-mails and cards. The group has even established an annual meeting that takes place at a remote beaver dam in some obscure location within Tennessee each fall. Many people throughout the world have been uplifted and blessed from the actions and deeds of this awesome group of officers.

In looking back, I am truly pleased and proud of what the Game Warden Net has been and done for so many officers. Do I feel that it has peaked? Absolutely not! I do not know what the future will hold for it but I am satisfied it does have a future. New officers are added all the time but sadly not all officers know about it. We are very liberal about who can come onboard. We just require that they have some obvious worthwhile connection to the job of being a game warden. Even being a warden's child is good enough for me.

If anyone is interested in joining either of the lists, they can contact me at decoydoc@charter.net