

# Crimes Against Nature:



The dorsal fin of this shark is destined to become shark fin soup. The rest of the shark is dumped overboard.

## THE FIGHT AGAINST BLACK MARKET TRAFFICKING

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by Anne Stein

It was a sight that would sicken any wildlife lover: inside a Taiwanese warehouse, stacks of dorsal fins hacked from great white sharks lay in piles, just a portion of nearly 100 tons of shark fin processed there each month. The sharks had been caught by poachers who vacuumed the oceans for their prey – and sometimes finned them alive – to supply the world’s desire for shark-fin soup.

On this day in the warehouse, an interested buyer recorded the scene with a hidden camera. He and his team had spent 18 months following the trail from El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Ecuador to San Francisco and New York, figuring out where the fins came from and who was distributing them.

The “buyer” was **Steve Galster '84**, who claimed to own a string of U.S.-based exotic restaurants. The owners of the illegal processing plant eagerly explained their operations, and Galster recorded it all. Though legal loopholes precluded any arrests, the story was broadcast on Animal Planet’s *Crime Scene Wild*, which showed more than 100 million viewers that eating shark-fin soup comes at a high price.

“I don’t get nervous about undercover work because I’m focused on getting it done right,” says Galster, who’s spent more than two decades investigating and trying to

stop black market trafficking of animals and humans and the poaching of wildlife and other environmental treasures.

### Big Business

In a fight that seems unending – some 33,000 species are listed as endangered, and the trafficking of people, from the sex trades to illegal labor, is a \$32 billion annual business – he’s been quietly and remarkably successful.

“There are few people in the development world who understand the essence of trafficking better than Steve,” says Matt Friedman, director of the United Nations Interagency Project on Human Trafficking. “His instincts, his understanding of human nature, and his application of these insights in addressing counter trafficking has allowed him to succeed where so many others have not.”

Galster is executive director of the Thailand-based FREELAND Foundation, an international environmental and human rights group that focuses on poaching and trafficking. He also helped establish the Association of Southeast Asian Nations-Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN), which helps Southeast Asian governments enforce wildlife protection laws.

“We [FREELAND] work with NGOs, governments,

**A park ranger of the Save the Rhino Fund holds fragments of rhino horn after conservationists sawed off the horn of a tranquilized black rhino. De-horning took place as part of an experimental program in Namibia to prevent poaching by de-horning the rhinos.**



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the United Nations, and others on investigations, helping to arrest criminal exploiters, and helping poachers and slaves transition into a safer and sustainable livelihood,” Galster explains. “Major kinds of trafficking in living things will persist as long as there are lots of poor out there, with no alternatives, who are easily exploited.”

Winston Bowman, Asia’s regional environmental director for US-AID, says Galster “is a master at raising public awareness. ... He understands all the challenges in solving the problem at both national and regional levels. ... He’s passionate about his work and is successful in bringing people together to cooperate in tackling wildlife trafficking across government agencies and across borders.”

And, adds Friedman, Galster doesn’t just raise money and awareness — he actively addresses crime. “Steven and his organization never work alone,” Friedman says. “They develop a team approach that links policymakers, law enforcement, and technical staff into a force to be reckoned with.”

## Turning Things Around

At 6’4”, Galster can look imposing — until he breaks into his typical sheepish grin. Low-key and humble, it’s only after reading dozens of stories about him or watching his interviews with Anderson Cooper on CNN and elsewhere that you realize his impact on the world.

Galster always loved animals and as a kid growing up in the Midwest, he thought he’d become a veterinarian. He was born in Detroit, the fifth of seven children. The Galsters eventually settled in Green Lake, Wis., where his dad owned a landscaping business and his mom was a housewife.

“I used to get really upset when I saw dead animals by the side of the road,” Galster says. “We’d pick them up and give them a proper burial.”

He worked for his dad’s company, mowing lawns and planting flowers, and then went to Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, to play basketball. After two years and a Halloween visit to his sister at Grinnell, he transferred. Galster majored in biology, figuring he’d teach high school biology and coach basketball.

“But my junior year I got so upset about what was going on in the world under Reagan, I wanted to get involved in international affairs and help turn things around.” He refocused on political science, and Professor Wayne Moyer became his adviser.

“Wayne made political science fun,” Galster says. “I mean, talk about an optimistic guy. [Wayne] gave you the realities of the world, but he was upbeat. ... He helped guide me on a few levels and made international affairs attractive as I tried to figure out where I could fit in and make a difference.”

Moyer encouraged him to intern with *Foreign Policy* magazine in Washington, D.C. After graduation, Galster returned to Wisconsin and worked for his congressman, Tom Petri, and for his dad’s landscaping business. He saved some money, traveled to Europe, and taught English in Greece. He also applied and was accepted into George Washington University’s security policy studies program.

The program was fantastic, but his classmates’ politics were a turn-off. “I was sitting in class with people who were gung-ho patriots, who believed that America had every right to run the world ... who rationalized U.S. support for thugs. It was very uncomfortable, but I wanted to learn what these guys were learning so I stuck with it and did well.”

## A Bloody Trail

Rather than slide into a Reagan administration security position, Galster joined the National Security Archive, a think tank that investigates U.S. security policy “in a very academic way.” He focused on American policy in Afghanistan, from 1973–90. “We helped expose the Iran-Contra affair. ... We wrote FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] requests to different agencies, but because Afghanistan was a covert operation, they’d usually deny the requests.”

Eventually Galster went to Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, and Pakistan to interview rebels and Soviet soldiers. He analyzed insurgency and counterinsurgency support operations by the Americans, Soviets, and Pakistanis, paying particular attention to sideline black market operations where rebel groups and their adversaries swapped drugs for arms.

“I worked on this project relentlessly for five years,” he says, but in the end he was disappointed. “I’d written and published articles about what I saw, but nothing was changing. We [the United States] were still trying to paint the rebels as the good guys and ... we were basically arming what became the Taliban.”

But Galster had developed a skill set in investigating

black market operations, and was asked by the U.K.-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) to investigate Mozambique and Angolan rebels who were poaching elephants, then trading ivory and diamonds for guns. It was 1991, and Galster and his then-girlfriend, via contacts with American mercenaries and far-right wing U.S. supporters, met with African rebel groups and leaders. Posing as a journalist with the rebels and as a dealer with poachers, he secretly videotaped meetings and co-wrote a report that fueled an international campaign to uphold an ivory trading ban.

Galster then investigated illegal rhino horn trading between criminal gangs in Africa and Taiwan, eventually going to southern China posing as a South African dealer looking to buy a huge secret stock of rhino horns. His target was a government-connected company trying to corner the market on endangered rhino horns, worth up to \$60,000 a kilo. He filmed one of their warehouses filled with 1.2 metric tons of horns (about 500 dead rhinos) stored by a criminal gang. Thanks to his transcripts and video, which aired on CNN, the Chinese government raided the warehouse, burned the stockpile, and banned the sale of rhino horn in China.

In 1994, Galster co-founded Global Survival Network, which focused on human and wildlife trafficking. His first job was looking at whale meat smuggling into Japan. “We found that groups were smuggling huge amounts of endangered whale from Taiwan through the Soviet Union, and they were also trafficking women from the Philippines. That was a good investigation – we got film to the international media and convinced governments to uphold the ban on commercial whaling.”

His group also looked into Siberian tiger poaching and trafficking and found a Vladivostok gang selling tiger skins and bones, and also shipping Soviet women into Japan, China, and the United States to become slave-labor prostitutes.

## Exploitation for Profit

“I saw a trend,” Galster says. “Criminal groups position themselves to make money on whatever they can, where law enforcement is weak and profits are high.” Global Survival Network (GSN) helped reverse the Siberian tiger decline and put human trafficking on the map in the United States; the State Department worked with GSN to develop campaigns in their Eastern European embassies to alert women about “jobs” that were prostitution traps.

The next group he formed with three colleagues was WildAid, which focused on environmental work, but with a significant side focus on helping poor communities extricate themselves from poaching and illegal logging through alternative livelihoods. Because so much of his work was based in Asia, Galster moved to Bangkok in 1999 (“It seemed colonial to run it from D.C.”), setting up a



Photo by Cory Hall

Steve Galster returned to Grinnell for Reunion in 2009.



**Galster went undercover to expose illegal black market smuggling of rhino horn and shark fin.**

Photos courtesy of FREELAND

small office and hiring a few people. He planned to stay 18 months running WildAid's Thailand office, but the group's workload exploded, forcing him to rethink his timeline.

Today Galster speaks Thai and still lives in Bangkok, his base for international work.

Among its successes, WildAid reduced poaching and illegal logging in landmine-ridden Cambodian national parks by training rangers, educating the community about the forest ecosystem, and offering organic farming and free-range chicken raising as alternatives. Actress/activist Angelina Jolie hired the group to clear a park and help locals near her Cambodian home; that program is now run by the Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation.

Galster and his three partners also launched celebrity ad campaigns in Asia urging people to stop buying items such as shark-fin soup and bear gallbladder. WildAid Thailand grew to 30 people, registered as a local charity, and was renamed Peunpa (Friends of the Wild); the U.S. office of WildAid continues to run environmental ad campaigns.

In the past year, Galster has expanded his Thailand-based group to the original focus of Global Survival Network – human and wildlife trafficking – and rebranded it as FREELAND Foundation. His team includes an investigative team of former U.S. police officers, an Australian army commander, former advertising campaign officers from Asia, and a group of extremely smart and energetic young Thai staffers who are keen to support FREELAND's mission to end traffic in living things.

The FREELAND-designed ASEAN-WEN furthers the cause by getting high-level Southeast Asian government officials to take environmental issues more seriously. "We realized we could get a lot further with the support of government agencies," Galster says. "The criminals are set up in a cross-border, organized way, so the idea of ASEAN-WEN is for governments to organize and outmaneuver the wildlife mafia." ASEAN-WEN has the full support of Thailand's environment minister, who backs creating an Asia-wide conservation network of government and non-government agencies to make nature conservation a regional security issue.

"It's been interesting to go beyond textbooks and get inside government offices and meet with police, customs, and officials to see how government really works," says Galster, who on a recent Washington, D.C., trip, met with congressmen, World Bank officials, and representatives of the State Department, U.S. Forest Service, USAID, and others who support FREELAND and ASEAN-WEN's mission.

"I think I'll keep doing this for another 20 years," Galster says. "It can get depressing, but it's rewarding too. You're working with a lot of good people in this field who won't give up."

To learn more about Steve Galster's work, go to: [www.freeland.org](http://www.freeland.org) and [www.asean-wen.org](http://www.asean-wen.org).