Illegal Cannabis on Public Lands: Rapid Impacts to Social-Ecological Systems

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Outline and Acknowledgments

Background
Purpose of the study
Methods
Results and Interpretation
Next Steps
Background

- Plants seized annually on public lands increased from fewer than one million in 2004 to 2.6 million in 2009 (USAO, 2012).
- Within a three year period, 49,105 metric tons of marijuana was confiscated on California’s public lands alone (Miller, 2012).
- During the summer of 2012, approximately 67% of all marijuana plants captured in the west occurred on public lands (USAO, 2012).
- However, successful seizures represent as little as 15% of estimated production efforts on public lands (NDIC, 2012).
Ecological, economic, and social impacts
Purpose

1. To understand managers’ challenges, successes, ideas, and experiences regarding cannabis cultivation

2. To highlight specific drivers that prohibit, assist, and influence the prevention, mitigation, and response to cannabis cultivation on public lands
Methods

• Semi-structured interviews
  – $N = 21; M = 55$ minutes
  – Key informants; purposive sampling
    • BIA, BLM, BOR, DOJ, HIDTA, NPS, USFS,
    • Resource managers, law enforcement, ecologists, administrators, public affairs

• Interview protocol (modified Seidman [2013] approach)
  – Focused history
  – Perceptions, insights, and experiences
  – Reflections and meaning
  – Audio recorded, field notes, and data saturation

• Open and axial coding, and iterative discussion; multiple coders, interrater reliability (Patton, 2002; Miles & Hubermann, 1994).
“Different agencies, at the federal levels, don’t talk. Within this region there are XX DEA offices, XX forest districts, XXX divisions, and not each division will take the same stance on marijuana on these lands. Here we make it the feather in our cap, but XXX says they don’t care and then someone else can run the show [responding to cannabis cultivation on public lands]... Just not aggressively pursuing it with the same tenacity, even within one agency, much less with a lot of agencies working together.”
“There has been a bigger emphasis placed on the investigation side. We’re trying to tie it all together...getting people camping at the grows, means nothing.”

“One of the market disruptions we look at is we have to remove the infrastructure. If we don’t do that many of the growers will come back within the same grows the following year and use the facilities that have been left behind. So that is why for reclamation we now remove everything in the grow site, trash, piping. Because if we leave that stuff, it takes minimal effort to get the grow site up and running again.”
“One of the challenges is the support from the public and support from the hill as to what the environmental impacts actually are, and I think our biggest challenge is being able to educate everybody...that it is a huge impact related to public lands. What we need to do better and what a lot of people don’t know is the environmental impacts.”

“Visitor safety is our number one priority, but I worry about our rangers also...99 percent of the grows I go into I find weapons.”
“But how it should be handled? This is different and we don’t know, really.”
Complex System

Not well understood

Performed inconsistently

Limited Resources
Financial, human, physical

Collaboration

Ecological impacts

Removal of infrastructure

Safety

Tactics and policy

Complex System
Next Steps

- Systems Analysis Approach
  - Identify inputs, outputs, externalities, and associated factors within the complex system
  - What are the elements of the system that should and can be adjusted to increase success and reduce challenges?
  - Meetings, interviews, focus groups, and ultimately a national questionnaire
  - Systems Generation Modeling with follow up focus groups to refine
First Step

- Two-day symposium (March, 2015) in Salt Lake City, Utah
  - Land managers, park professionals, restoration ecologists, public health, and law enforcement personnel, and researchers who address marijuana cultivation on public lands
  - Identify inputs, outputs, externalities, and associated factors within the complex system
  - Distill best practices and institutional challenges regarding marijuana on public lands;
  - Compare and contrast challenges across different land management agencies and positions regarding the issue;
  - Produce multi-agency communication tool in the form of proceedings
Discussion

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