

Introduction

- Sign-cutting is a fundamental skill which was originate by prehistoric man. It was developed out of necessity to hunt prey and has evolved into a law enforcement tool for tracking criminals. Today it is an indispensable part of every law enforcement operations.
- The United States Border Patrol has a reputation for having the finest sign-cutters in the nation. Although sign-cutting has become a dying art, the patrol still utilizes these skills daily to perform its basic mission. In addition to assisting all law enforcement agencies in apprehending fleeing felons, agents have been called upon to assist in locating lost children and hikers.
- In recent years, the advancement of modern technology has greatly improved the effectiveness of our border's security; although convenient, these advancements do not replace the need for highly skilled trackers.

BASIC SIGN CUTTING

“SIGN” is defined as the disturbance of the natural or normal conditions of nature which reveals the presence or passage of people, animals or things.

Examples:

Manmade tracks (footprints, tire tracks etc.), animal tracks, insect
Discarded trash, broken twigs/branches, overturned rocks

Detecting the disturbance, or “sign”, is the first order of business in a sign-cut operation.

Identification

- When sign is encountered its appearance and characteristics must be closely examined. In order for the sign to be located later the description must be as detailed as possible (avoid generic descriptions).
- You may have to describe the particular sign over the radio. It is imperative that you take note of any specific identifying marks; there may be another group ahead with very similar prints.
- It is important that you learn the names or descriptions of commonly used sign encountered in their area.

Six Characteristics of Sign

Regularity - Objects or conditions which would not otherwise occur naturally in our environment. An effect caused by straight lines, circles or other geometric shapes, which are pressed into the ground and do not normally occur in nature.

Any man-made objects are considered irregular.

Sign Age

- The age of the sign determines the importance of the sign. Sign that was made two or three days earlier would not be as “catchable” as sign made four or five hours prior to the cut.
- Food residue is also a form of sign. The number or amount of insects feeding or the moisture content of the residue can indicate how long ago the subjects were at that location.
- For example, a discarded empty can of beans is located. Consider the weather conditions and how many insects are feeding on the residue. Are the remaining contents still moist or have they dried? Has it been picked clean by insects or other animals?

Sign Intelligence

Sign, such as footprints, can tell a lot about the individual. The size of the print will give an indication to the trained sign-cutter as to the subject's size and weight as well as whether or not the individual is laden with baggage.

Short Stride: Possibly small in stature, tired or injured

Long Stride: Possibly tall and/or running

Methods of Sign Cutting

When it comes to search and rescue it has been widely accepted in some areas to determine the gait of the missing person and use this information by transferring it to a “Walking or Tracking Stick”. The walking stick or Ab Taylor method was taught in the San Diego Sector as “The” Border Patrol tracking method in the 1940’s - 1960’s. The idea was that you used a walking stick to measure the stride length and then the foot length. They found many people with this method but it was slow and tedious. They moved one track at a time and you did not move until you located the next track

Countersign

“Countersign” is defined as the counter measures used to conceal or disguise the disturbance of the natural or normal conditions of nature which reveals the presence or passage of people, animals, or things.

All officers must constantly be aware of the attempts made by subjects attempting to hide or disguise their sign. The subjects will utilize many different methods in an attempt to fool the agent. Don’t always accept the obvious. By using a branch, jacket, or twig an individual may remove all traces of any footprints. However, the article used will leave visible marks on the drag or trail and can be picked out by the experienced sign-cutter. This is commonly referred to as a “brush out”.

Aliens will also cross roads by walking on their heels or toes, which on hard soil will leave very little if any sign.

Operational Method

The first phase of the sign-cutting operation is the actual cutting the sign. Ideal places to cut would be drag roads, ridge lines, creek beds, and other commonly traversed areas. There are three very important things to be considered when first encountering sign during a cut:

- *Sign Age*- Are these subjects catchable?
- *Size of Group*- A rough approximation of how many persons might be in the group.
- *Direction of Travel*- The direction in which the group is traveling.

Officer Safety and Sign Cutting

A career in law enforcement can be hazardous. In all things that we do as Law Enforcement Officers, safety is our number one concern and this is no different in sign-cutting. While tracking, tunnel vision is the most common tactical mistake. It is easy to forget that there is a potentially violent subject that you are attempting to locate.

How hard could it be to ambush an officer while his/her attention is on the ground and not on the potential hazards around them?

Make it a habit to look around and check the terrain behind, in front, and to the sides. You are not only protecting yourself, but you might also find the subject that you are looking for. Work with a partner whenever they are available!

Reacquiring Lost Sign

There are several methods for reacquiring lost sign. First look at terrain for the most likely line of travel at night you can turn off your light and look for easiest or most likely line of travel.

If sign is not found come back to the last had. Then go back on the track line at least 20 feet then start cutting in a circle. It's recommended you don't start from last had because of the angle, it can be more difficult to pick up the sign that doubles back on you. If you go back you'll have a better chance of picking up the sign and this gives you a better angle.

Use of Natural and Artificial Light

The use of natural and artificial light when sign cutting. Light can make it easier to follow the sign. During daylight hours it's easier to follow sign when your shadow is behind you or away from the sign.

In shady areas and where there is thick high brush or in canyons where there is limited light a flashlight can assist you in maintaining or reacquiring the sign. The use of a flashlight at night puts you at a disadvantage. The subjects know exactly where you are. When using your flashlight be aware of the terrain around you and use it to your advantage.