

B.C.'s bait car program wins global praise:

David Carrigg visited pre-Katrina New Orleans, where he found recognition for the work of our auto crime cops

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Corporal Tim Shields stands in front of a packed meeting room in the New Orleans Hilton.

Behind him is an image of Robert Jeremy Osborne, the infamous Surrey meth addict captured on bait car video.

"This might rub your noses the wrong way," Shields warns the police and insurance reps gathered at the International Association of Auto Theft Investigators' Bait Car Users Group, held just weeks before Hurricane Katrina devastated this city.

"You are hardened street cops and judge your success by the number of arrests you make. But that's outdated thinking. In reality, any bait car program should be judged by how well you get the message out there."

B.C.'s bait car program is the largest in North America and has generated enormous interest since Shields started posting video of bait car captures on the website www.baitcar.com earlier this summer.

Over the next half-hour Shields, of B.C.'s Integrated Municipal Provincial Auto Crime Taskforce (IMPACT), talks about the role of media and advertising in a bait car program and learns about bait cars in other jurisdictions and countries.

In New Zealand, police don't have the money for a bait car program but advertise they have one anyway.

In Minneapolis, Minn., the police don't lock bait car doors remotely for fear of liability if the criminal is trapped in the vehicle and hurt themselves, while in New Orleans the police don't yet have the technology to remotely track their two bait cars.

In Australia they call them "gotcha cars" and in Tucson, Ariz., police will shut down the motor of a bait car as soon as the criminal starts the engine.

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B.C.'s bait car success can be traced to the Richmond garage of Phil Ens, the Vancouver Police Department's auto theft expert.

It was late winter, 2001, and the VPD's Stolen Auto Squad was losing a battle with a gang stealing high-end Japanese sports cars.

"We were getting hit hard every week by this gang," says Ens. "They were getting four or five cars a week, stripping them and selling the parts."

The thefts were also hurting ICBC, so the two organizations met to come up with a way to deal with the crisis.

Ens had heard about a bait car program being operated by the Minneapolis Police Department -- considered the mother of all bait car programs -- and wanted ICBC to replicate the program in Vancouver.

"I said to ICBC, 'Let me prove this to you,'" Ens says.

The veteran policeman and car buff contacted Quebec's Boomerang Tracking Solutions, which provides a Global Positioning Satellite-based vehicle tracking service, and struck a sponsorship deal.

Boomerang shipped over a new Acura Integra and some basic equipment, while Ens bought a VCR and digital camera and turned the Integra into a bait car.

The gang worked mostly in the afternoon and targetted vehicles parked at golf courses, so Ens placed the Integra at Langara Golf Course.

"We locked the car, we didn't leave the keys in the ignition and it was gone in 45 minutes," he says. ICBC was impressed and in September 2002 funded the VPD's bait car program and launched an award-winning ad campaign.

"Auto theft went down right away because of word-of-mouth among the thieves," Ens says. "It created a level of paranoia and the advertising kept it in their conscience."

Within a year auto theft was down seven per cent in Vancouver, and the pattern continues. In the first six months of 2000 there were 1,626 cars stolen in Vancouver, compared to 1,110 stolen in the first half of 2005.

Last spring, the provincial government announced the bait car program would expand to include the entire Lower Mainland.

In April this year the IMPACT bait car program was expanded to Vancouver Island, after a spike in auto theft in Nanaimo and Victoria, with immediate results.

IMPACT now controls the largest bait car program in North America, and the only one in the world featuring a motorcycle, ATV and snowmobile bait program. It is also the first to operate a website showing bait car video.

At the New Orleans meeting, Shields showed video of RCMP officers arresting a suspect, warning the man to raise his hands, then step out of the vehicle and lie on the ground.

Two officers from the notorious New Orleans Police Department laughed at the procedure. Arrests are generally a bit rougher in the Big Easy.

While discussing police pursuits, an officer with the St. Louis County Police Department noted: "If you can shoot them, you can chase them."

Officers who observed the Osborne video were amazed he was allowed to drive for so long before the vehicle was shut down.

The incident occurred in June 2004 and prompted a review of the shut-off policy.

RCMP tests found a vehicle still has power steering and brakes for long enough after a vehicle is shut down at high speeds to be safe.

Police will now shut down a bait car traveling at any speed.

The consensus among the users group was that auto thieves in the U.S. get harder prison time than in Canada.

For example, an Arizona officer said the average sentence for a repeat offender there is between four and 10 years.

Bait cars are also loved by police because video evidence is undeniable.

In Minneapolis, of the 240 car thieves arrested through its bait car program, only one has even gone to trial and he lost.

"You just can't fight the video," says Wayne Johnson, the Minneapolis Police Department's bait car coordinator.

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