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## **Marijuana Growers Find Fertile Ground in Malibu Hills, Santa Monica Mountains**

The Santa Monica Mountains have become fertile ground for illegal marijuana growers, with authorities reporting a major uptick in the discovery and eradication of pot-growing farms.

In the last year, park rangers and Los Angeles and Ventura County sheriff's deputies have confiscated about 42,000 marijuana plants -- worth \$130 million -- in areas under the jurisdiction of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area or the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, said Walt Young, chief ranger for the MRCA.

The haul from the mountains is a nearly threefold increase over last year, which marked the first year of an aggressive and sustained effort by park rangers, the U.S. Forest Service and the Sheriff's Departments to eradicate the marijuana plantations, Young said.

"Our whole goal is to make this [pot farming] economically unviable," he said.

Officials said the farms damage the environment and present a public-safety threat because of fires and possible harm to park visitors that unwittingly stumble on them. The installations can wreck natural soil and vegetation and disturb wildlife in remote areas that are home to species such as bobcats and mountain lions, Young said.

The cost of cleanup, which can often total more than \$10,000, takes money away from worthwhile scientific projects that protect the fragile ecosystems, officials said.

So far in 2010, seizures have taken place in Malibu Canyon, La Tuna Canyon, Tuna Canyon, Rocky Peak, Whittier and Zuma-Trancas Canyon. About 27,000 plants were seized and destroyed on Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Land, and an additional 15,000 were confiscated on public parkland. The street value of \$130 million for those plants compares with \$49 million worth of plants confiscated during the 2009 growing season, Young said.

In all, there have been 13 successful interdiction operations this year, officials said.

Multiple marijuana plantations have been discovered in Malibu Creek State Park in the Santa Monica Mountains. It was during one of the rangers' back-country patrols in August that they found the skeletal remains of Mitrice Richardson, the 25-year-old Los Angeles woman who vanished after being released from the Lost Hills Sheriff's Station on Sept. 17, 2009.

Another notable incident took place in April when authorities arrested two men after locating nearly 1,000 pot plants and 3,000 seeds in a remote section of Malibu Creek State Park in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Sheriff's deputies and park rangers found the operation near Malibu Canyon Road and Piuma Road while conducting a routine search for possible cultivation sites. The men fled but were later tracked down. One of the men was treated for injuries after falling off a 15-foot-high rock face.