

Rethink ahead as huntsman is fined for breaking ban

- Private prosecution leads to £500 penalty
- Campaigners hope police will launch cases

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Hunts and police forces will be forced to rethink the way they operate after a professional huntsman yesterday became the first in Britain to be found guilty of breaking the controversial ban.

Supporters of hunting with dogs said enthusiasts would look at the case and find ways of adapting their methods to allow them to carry on. Animal rights campaigners said the verdict would prompt police forces to take reports of illegal hunting more seriously.

The League Against Cruel Sports, which brought the private prosecution against Tony Wright, huntsman of the Exmoor Foxhounds, was jubilant at the verdict, arguing that it sent out a clear message that it was illegal to chase a fox with hounds and it was possible for the law banning hunting to be enforced.

Wright, 52, was found guilty of hunting a wild mammal with a dog, an offence under section one of the Hunting Act 2004.

He was videotaped by monitors from the league while leading a hunt two months after the ban came into force last year. He was said to have urged his hounds on as they chased a fox down a hill on Exmoor and done nothing to call them off when they pursued another across open moorland. He argued he was following an exemption which allows hunts to flush out foxes to guns, but Judge Paul Farmer said the foxes had been hunted for "substantial periods". He fined Wright £500 and ordered him to pay £250 costs.

Outside Barnstaple magistrate's court in north Devon, Wright said he would appeal. "I may have been found guilty but I don't feel like a criminal," he said. "I'm still convinced that what we were doing on that day was legal. It is a stupid law, which should be repealed."

Among Wright's supporters in court were Lady Mallalieu, Labour peer and president of the pro-hunting group, the Countryside Alliance, and Otis Ferry, son of rock star Bryan, who hit the headlines when he stormed the House of Commons in protest at the ban. Simon Hart, chief executive of the alliance, said the verdict would make hunt supporters more determined to carry on. He said they would use other exemptions. But Mike Hobday, head of public affairs for the League Against Cruel Sports, said: "The message of this case is absolutely clear. It's a crime to chase a fox with hounds. People who hunt do so because they wish to torment a fox. I would now expect the police to be visiting their local hunts to make it clear that they are not allowed to pursue foxes."

The league hopes the result will open the way for further prosecutions. It believes police have been reluctant to be the first to launch a prosecution but will be encouraged by the success of their case. Avon and Somerset and Devon and Cornwall police were presented with the evidence against the Exmoor Foxhounds which formed the basis of the prosecution but decided not to pass a file on to the Crown Prosecution Service. Superintendent Adrian Coombs, Avon and Somerset police's hunt liaison officer, said the force would analyse how it investigated reports of illegal hunting.

The disputed hunt took place in April last year. Hunt supporters, some on horseback, followed as

Wright guided two foxhounds across open moorland in north Somerset. Also there were Ed Shephard and Graham Floyd, employees of the League Against Cruel Sports and hunt monitors, who recorded the day's hunting. Hunts have continued to ride out despite the ban, and an estimated 25,000 days of hunting have been carried out by around 300 hunts. The act provides a number of exemptions, which has allowed hunting to continue. Some hunts lay artificial trails for their packs of hounds while others have invested in golden eagles and eagle owls to make use of a bird of prey exemption.

In his defence Wright relied on an exemption under which two dogs may be used to flush out a fox to a gun or guns. The fox must be shot "as soon as possible" after it is flushed according to the act.

Mr Shephard and Mr Floyd watched as two foxes broke cover. The first ran across open moorland with the two hounds not far behind and Wright nowhere to be seen; the second raced down a slope through heather with the hounds, Wright and the rest of the field following on. Both incidents were captured on videotape.

The League Against Cruel Sports alleged the tape showed a traditional hunt. The judge agreed that what was seen on the tape was "hunting".

Backstory

If hunting is a religion to many supporters, those who follow the **Exmoor Foxhounds** are fundamentalists. **Tony Wright** followed his father **Sam** into hunt service. He worked with the **Heythrop** in the Cotswolds and the **Quorn** in Leicestershire before moving to the south-west to refine his skills under legendary Exmoor huntsman **Captain RE Wallace** in 1982. Wright lives at the kennels with wife Jill and more than **100 hounds**. He says the two horses he rides are his "best mates" and when his wife is out shares his sofa with favoured hounds to watch racing. His house and car are owned by the hunt; he works 60 hours for a minimum wage. But "I've got a millionaire's lifestyle without the money."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/hunt/Story/0,,1837783,00.html>