

What went wrong: Why a locally-viral "To Catch a Predator" style sting operation won't lead to prosecution

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PONTOON BEACH – On Sunday, several people from across the Riverbend tuned their internet-connected devices to Kyle Swanson, a self-described “predator hunter” as he conducted a live video of himself and a fellow hunter known as T.J. Philips meeting with someone they have deemed a potential predator.

According to screenshots of a conversation posted within the group administered by Swanson as well as his website, an area citizen was allegedly attempting to meet with

who he thought was a 15-year-old girl named Jess. The man's name will not be mentioned in this story, due to the fact he has not been charged or otherwise accused by authorities – and likely will not be. In spite of the supposed evidence provided to the community through Swanson, prosecuting this person would be nearly impossible due to the way the case was handled by Swanson and his fellow predator hunters, Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons said. Gibbons is the person who would have prosecuted this case if it was handled correctly.

According to the screenshots posted by Swanson and his team, this man was knowingly meeting with a 15-year-old girl who he said “turned him on,” while constantly asking for reassurance about the weirdness of the situation. He said he was worried about his wife and kids finding out and even seemed to agree to a meetup at the Pontoon Beach McDonald's.

Swanson and Philips recorded themselves traveling to the meetup, and they read comments posted by their YouTube subscribers who were waiting with bated breath to see how this situation concluded. Swanson had not yet released the man's name, but said he was married with kids.

When the meetup was supposed to occur, Swanson and Philips approached the man and said they were Jess. The man said he was not there to meet anyone, and the predator-hunting duo went outside to wait for him to leave. They then yelled at the man's vehicle as he drove away from the fast-food joint.

So what went wrong?

“The main takeaway people should have is if someone is aware of a potential predator trying to meet with a minor, the first step is getting police involved,” Gibbons said.



A representative of the Madison County Sheriff's Office said they were made aware of the incident on Sunday, but directed any further questions to Gibbons.

“This person seemed to put himself out plainly,” Gibbons continued. “They should have gotten the police involved – this video would have ended with an arrest. They should have taken it to police instead of directly to Facebook. I'm not discouraging people from trying to find out if there are predators out there. Once they have that information, though, they should let the police handle it. Police are trained to do it, and their methods lead to successful arrests and prosecution.”

Questions were sent to Swanson following the meet-up, including the question of if he had any training with law enforcement or the law in general. Those questions were sent Monday, but had not been answered by late Tuesday morning. Swanson did say he wanted to consult a lawyer for the questions before sending those answers.

“This seems like a publicity stunt, which does not take predators off the streets,” Gibbons said.

A few thousand people have watched the YouTube video of the meetup. More than 2,000 people are a part of the Kyle Swanson Predator Hunter group on Facebook. Due to the ability to share posts, it is unknown at this time how many people may have seen the screenshots of the man who is accused of wanting to meet a 15-year-old girl for sex.

Gibbons also had objections to the way the pair went to the Pontoon Beach McDonald's.

“Confrontation may have been exhilarating for his people and their follows, but instead of catching a potential predator, this person got away,” he said. “It may actually make things worse, because predators generally hide themselves. I am also concerned with them causing a confrontation in a public area. They may not be afraid for their own safety, but police would be thinking of the safety of everyone around them. What if this person got desperate and pulled a gun or other weapon or drove erratically out of there and someone got hurt? There was a lot of potential for public harm with this confrontation. Their heart may be in the right place, but their methods are not correct.”

While Swanson did not answer questions sent to him via Facebook Messenger, he did make a posting on his group alerting his followers their operations have been paused.

“All operations from our team are being momentarily paused for at least the week,” he posted. “We will not doing any stings or take request of any kind. I love that you guys are coming to me for help, but I have hundreds of messages in my inbox and I just cannot keep up with them all. Also we are seeking additional help from a police department on where and what we need to do to get these people prosecuted better. So

until we get this further training and talk face-to-face with the cops we're in contact with. We will not be doing a sting operation.”

While it seems Swanson is at least making an effort to correct the methods of himself and his team when attacking potential child predators in the area, this particular target of his sting will likely not face charges due to the way it was handled by the team. Gibbons said Swanson was not breaking any laws with what he was doing or the way it was handled, but did add it was both incorrect and a “public safety risk.”

“Having reviewed all the material, there is no evidence here we need to prosecute this case,” he said. “What these folks used as the end of their operation, officers would use as the beginning. I've been doing this since the 90s. One of my first cases was a member of the St. Louis Election Board meeting an Alton Police officer at Schwegel's thinking he was going to meet a 13-year-old girl. This doesn't rise to the level. It is not enough. They need to bring police in if they want to keep doing it. They need to develop evidence needed to make an arrest instead of driving them off.”

The good news, however, is Swanson seems to have decided to work with at least one local police department, according to his recent Facebook post, so his community-driven, public persona may be able to be used in conjunction with law enforcement instead of in direct conflict.