

## Briefing on **Wildlife crime**

**'Low-risk, high-yield' – that's the reputation of wildlife crime. Some regard it as the Cinderella of police work. Yet the money involved in the international trade in endangered species is second only to drug trafficking; and the destruction of habitat in this country is part of the single biggest conservation issue worldwide. It's time for the battle against wildlife crime to be given due priority.**

The frustration felt by police wildlife officers became clear in a survey which Naturewatch recently conducted.<sup>1</sup> These are some of the key issues:

**The levels of staffing were a major concern.** While some forces have invested significant resources in this area, others have officers working on wildlife crime only on a voluntary basis. Overall, 82% felt that there were 'too few' or 'far too few' involved in combating wildlife crime.

Respondents strongly agreed about the **connection between wildlife crime and other forms of serious crime.** Indeed, 84% agreed and there was no fundamental disagreement.

The **illegal destruction of habitat** was ranked as the most significant crime across the country. Furthermore, 87% agreed with the statement that "The fines given to developers convicted of habitat destruction are too small to act as a deterrent".

There was a strong feeling that insufficient priority is being given to wildlife crime. 87% of respondents agreed that "The **Home Office needs to take a stronger lead in tackling issues related to wildlife crime**". A similar proportion also agreed that "**Severe wildlife crime, such as badger cruelty or destruction of bat roosts, should be made notifiable to the Home Office so that police forces can give sufficient priority to tackling it**".

Even when there are convictions for wildlife crime, the punishments may not be stiff enough to act as a deterrent. Nowhere is this clearer than with the illegal destruction of habitat. For example, in 2002 at the site of a former Butlin's camp in

North Yorkshire there were about 1,000 endangered newts; instead of complying with guidelines from English Nature, the developers bulldozed the site. The fine of £7,600 is tiny compared with the likely mitigation costs, and pales into insignificance compared to the current sale price of the site – now complete with holiday homes – of £12million.

Globally, habitat destruction is the biggest single threat to endangered species – and the British are often among the first to tell developing nations not to destroy habitat indiscriminately. It is regrettable that the UK fails to set an example. If we expect other countries to modify their development in order to conserve species, we need to change.

At US\$5bn per year, the international trade in endangered species ranks second only to the drug trade. Even when prosecutions take place, some of the fines that result make a mockery of the law. Notoriously, in 1997 an exclusive shop in London's Mayfair district was raided by police, and 138 shahtoosh shawls were seized. These were made from the wool of the Tibetan antelope, for which about 1,000 would have been slaughtered for their manufacture. The average price for each shawl was £2,500 – but the shop was fined a *total* of £1,500. A more appropriate sentence was given to two traders in North London in 2001, who were jailed for four months for importing endangered species, including lions, monkeys and giant scaly anteaters as part of their bushmeat trade.

We are therefore calling for wildlife crime to be given greater priority through Early Day Motion 1990:

**This House is concerned that wildlife crime is not being given sufficient priority, as was revealed in the recent Naturewatch survey of police wildlife crime officers; notes that police believe that there are strong connections between some types of wildlife crime, like badger baiting and poaching, and other forms of crime; further notes that wildlife crime is perceived to be 'high yield, low risk'; and urges the Government to increase the priority given to tackling wildlife crime forthwith.**

We urge you to join with us in calling for wildlife crime to be given the necessary priority.



**Bushmeat haul**

Part of the US\$5bn international trade in endangered species – a haul of bushmeat. © USFWS.



**Badger cruelty**

It is estimated that 10,000 badgers per year are killed in badger baiting or other forms of cruelty such as lamping or digging. © RSPCA



**Habitat destruction**

This barn used to contain a bat roost until the developers moved in without securing a licence for the destruction. © Bat Conservation Trust

<sup>1</sup> The survey was sent to the 51 geographical police forces of Great Britain, of which 47 responded (a response rate over 90%). If you would like a copy of the full report, contact the Naturewatch office – or download it from the website.