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## PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

# Debate on wildlife crime

10 October 2013

### Summary

- **Wildlife crime and the illegal trade in wildlife are serious threats to nature and the protection of biodiversity in the UK and worldwide.**
- **Wildlife poaching for trade has escalated dramatically in recent years and has reached crisis levels. Rhinos and elephants are particularly threatened.**
  - **Rhino poaching in South Africa has skyrocketed from 13 rhino illegally killed in 2007 to 688 so far in 2013 – an increase of over 5000%**
  - **Tens of thousands of elephants are killed each year for their ivory, mostly in Central Africa, with 2011 the worst year on record for quantity of ivory seized (2012 data has not yet been analysed)**
- **The UK is a transit and destination country for the illegal wildlife trade.**
- **In the UK, the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) provides expert support for the prevention, detection and enforcement of wildlife crime, by customs and police, and collaboration with Interpol and Europol. It has six strategic priorities for 2011-13: badger persecution; bat persecution; illegal trade in CITES species (ivory, tortoises and traditional medicines including rhino horn); freshwater pearl mussels; poaching; and raptor persecution.**
- **The Government has not yet taken on board many of the 2012 recommendations from the Environmental Audit Committee, and some (particularly prosecutions) remain unaddressed since the 2004 inquiry.**

### Wildlife crime is a global problem

Wildlife crime is a threat to biodiversity, but also a problem of governance, corruption and international security. The illegal wildlife trade (not including fisheries and timber) is estimated to be the fifth most lucrative illicit transnational activity worldwide, worth \$7.8 - \$10 billion per year. It involves international criminal networks with links to other organised crimes and terrorism, undermining security and the rule of law, corrupting governance, and having a severe impact on species populations.

Shutting down the illegal trade requires greater action in source countries – to protect wildlife, stop poaching, prosecute criminals, and secure borders – and in destination countries by reducing demand, educating the public, and shutting down illegal markets.



**INVESTORS  
IN PEOPLE**

President: His Royal Highness,  
The Prince of Wales KG, KT, GCB, OM  
Chair: Ed Smith  
Chief Executive: David Nussbaum

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## Policing and prosecution in the UK

The UK is a transit and destination country for illegal wildlife products and has worked with others on international efforts to control the trade through CITES. The UK is an exemplar of good policing of wildlife crime. The **National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU)** provides expert support for the prevention, detection and enforcement of wildlife crime by customs and police, and works closely with Europol and Interpol. Products found in illegal trade in the UK include ivory, rhino horn, tortoises and some traditional medicines.

In recent years, the NWCU has been in an uncertain funding situation. WWF welcomes the Government's decision to continue funding the NWCU through 2013/14 despite pressures on the police budget. However, it is regrettable that the Government has only committed funds for one further year, and there is still no commitment beyond March 2014. WWF agrees with the Environmental Audit Committee that the NWCU should be put on a more sustainable financial footing, especially given its cost-effectiveness. Lack of certainty about the NWCU's longer-term funding makes it difficult to recruit, retain and develop specialist staff. With a global rise in demand for and illegal trade in ivory and rhino horn and other wildlife products it is essential that the NWCU is secure for the long term.

The Committee's inquiries into Wildlife Crime in both 2004 and 2012 identified that the **Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the judiciary** lacked the expertise and understanding to properly implement justice for perpetrators of wildlife crime. Wildlife crime cases are often dismissed because of lack of awareness or understanding among prosecutors and the judiciary of such crime and its impact. Police and customs expend resources investigating and preparing cases, only for them to be abandoned.

The Government has indicated that the CPS is aware of the Committee's recommendations concerning its performance, but there has been no commitment to review its practices. Likewise the Sentencing Council has not yet committed to introduce sentencing guidelines for the judiciary, nor the Magistrates' Association to provide further training. WWF urges those departments to recognise the problem and demonstrate real improvements.

## Recommendations for Government

- Commit to fund the National Wildlife Crime Unit beyond March 2014 and make longer-term arrangements, including funding to combat wildlife crime on the Internet.
- Amend the COTES Regulations (domestic controls) to better implement our international commitments under CITES.
- Review the Crown Prosecution Service wildlife crime prosecutions with a view to having specialist wildlife crime prosecutors or providing training for general prosecutors.
- Review the available penalties on wildlife crime and introduce sentencing guidelines for the judiciary and training for magistrates to ensure consistency in sentencing, and that those sentences have the desired deterrent effect.
- Support the proposal for a UN Special Envoy on wildlife crime, as proposed by Gabon and Germany, and use the UK's Presidency of the UN Security Council to make further progress on this international security issue.

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