



LIFE SWiPE

Successful
Wildlife Crime
Prosecution
in Europe.

LAYMAN'S REPORT

AUGUST 2023



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Intro

Wildlife crime is not a petty crime, and for Europe, it is not a distant threat - it happens right here, with devastating consequences to our biodiversity and protected species. A brown bear shot deep inside the forest, a poisoned raptor, a suitcase full of live glass eels smuggled through an airport - it happens in Europe, despite EU legal instruments and different international conventions. This can be explained by shortcomings in law enforcement and prosecution, paired with the relatively low risk of detection and potentially high gains for offenders, who are increasingly sophisticated.

In 2020, “LIFE SWiPE (Successful Wildlife Crime Prosecution in Europe) project was launched to discourage and ultimately reduce wildlife crimes by improving compliance with the EU environmental law environmental law.

The SWiPE project comprises 13 partners in 11 European countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, and Ukraine) under the funding of the EU LIFE Programme.

By turning the spotlight on these crimes and contributing to a more successful prosecution, we ultimately aimed to reduce the illegal killing and trafficking of European wildlife - restoring threatened species and the health of ecosystems, and building a more sustainable and safer society.

Some key facts on wildlife crime in Europe

MEMBER COUNTRIES OF LIFE SWIPE



 **Spain:** 5 regions of Spain (out of 17) have canine units specialised in poison detection.

Total budget: 3.186.175€

EU Contribution: 1.740.018€

Duration: from September 2020 to August 2023.

Lead partner: WWF Bulgaria

Associated beneficiaries: State Attorney's Office of the Republic of Croatia, Fauna & Flora International (in Romania), Judicial Academy Croatia, WWF Adria in Serbia, WWF Adria, WWF Spain, WWF Hungary & TRAFFIC, WWF Italy, WWF Poland, WWF Romania, WWF Slovakia, and WWF Ukraine.



 **Italy:** Annual sanctions for illegal fishing ranged from 7 to over 12 million €.



 **Croatia:** Songbirds are the most affected species by wildlife crime in Croatia, in particular goldfinch, being subject to hunting tourism, sport and recreation hunting, trophy hunting and sold killed and alive to be held in captivity.



 **Slovakia:** The State claimed no damage in civil proceedings in any of the recorded wildlife crime cases, losing hundreds of thousands of euros.



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 **Poland:** Between 2016 and 2020 alone, Polish customs officers seized more than 420,000 specimens of protected plant and animal species.



 **Serbia:** The average fine for administrative offences was 385 € (45,000 dinars).



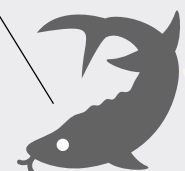
 **Ukraine:** Most wildlife offences were qualified as administrative cases. From the total number of reported criminal offences for 2016-2020, the share of criminal environmental offences was less than 1% (on average only 0.72 % per year).



 **Romania:** 1281 specimens were involved in criminal activity in 2016-2020, the most affected being: brown bear, weatherfish, sea fox, sterlet, dolphins and the picked dogfish.



 **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Environmental crimes were the third most frequently reported criminal offence during the period of 2011-2017.



 **Bulgaria:** In 2020 alone, law enforcement authorities found 23km of illegal fishing ropes at the bottom of the Danube, used to catch the critically endangered sturgeon.

What we did



Over three years, the SWiPE project team tried its best to uncover the invisible, raising the profile of the crimes that devastate our precious and protected wildlife.

Working across Europe, we built relations and boosted knowledge exchange and cooperation between hundreds of members of the enforcement chain, from public prosecutors to customs officers or environmental agents. We learned about the challenges these professionals face in their day-to-day efforts - from a lack of human and technical resources and political prioritisation to the increasingly sophisticated methods used by wildlife criminals.

We advanced knowledge, trained hundreds of professionals and deployed innovative technologies and tools to prevent the illegal killing and trafficking of protected species. And through creative communications, we have stimulated public debate and raised awareness of these devastating crimes among practitioners, decision-makers and the general public.



MAIN ACTIONS

CREATING THE FIRST INTEGRATED BASELINE ON WILDLIFE CRIME IN EUROPE: DATA COLLECTED FROM 87 DIFFERENT REGIONAL AND NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.

STRENGTHENING NATIONAL CAPACITY TO COMBAT WILDLIFE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME: 2 SPECIALISED UNITS ESTABLISHED IN BULGARIA AND IN SERBIA

TRAINING PROSECUTORS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES. 896 EXPERTS TRAINED, INCLUDING 283 PROSECUTORS

THE FIRST INTERSECTORAL EU WILDLIFE CRIME WORKSHOP: ATTENDED BY +120 WILDLIFE CRIME EXPERTS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT REPRESENTATIVES FROM 20 COUNTRIES. JUNE 2022 MADRID (SPAIN)

RAISING AWARENESS ACROSS EUROPE: A TOTAL OF 380 MILLION CITIZENS REACHED TO SHATTER AND CHANGE THE SENSE OF IMPUNITY

IMPROVING EU LEGISLATION AND POLICY (ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME DIRECTIVE, EU ACTION PLAN AGAINST WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING)

WILDLIFE CRIME PROSECUTION IN TIMES OF WAR

Tackling wildlife crime is always tricky, but doing so while your country is being illegally invaded by a foreign power is nothing short of heroic. Amid the ongoing war, Ukrainian officials continued to strive to protect biodiversity - for instance, acting against the poaching of critically endangered sturgeons. And the WWF-Ukraine team went to great lengths to continue their great work as part of the SWiPE project. They trained prosecutors to counter and investigate wildlife and environmental crimes in times of intrusion. Also, they denounced the effects of Russia's aggression against Ukraine on wildlife - such as the mass deaths of Black Sea dolphins due to acoustic trauma from Russian missile strikes and warships. Collaboration crimes have become a new challenge for the WLC in the non-government controlled areas.



Setting the baseline

LIFE SWIPE CONSIDERS AS WILDLIFE CRIMES THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS



Poaching and illegal killing for sport, predators or pest control and retaliation



Illegal collection of eggs



Illegal catching/capturing



Illegal wildlife trade



Trapping, harming



Non-selective catching and killing



Possession, supply and sale, export/import, illegal fishing

But there is no official definition of wildlife crime applied by institutions at a national or European level. That prevents organisations and researchers from exploring the phenomenon and assessing its actual scope.

THE MOST COMMON WILDLIFE CRIMES IN THE LIFE SWIPE COUNTRIES, FOR THE TIME PERIOD 2016-2020

Wildlife crime is not a petty crime. It is devastating for biodiversity in Europe and beyond. We have lost 69% of the populations of vertebrate wild animals since 1970. It poses a growing risk to the economic development and security of our societies.



ILLEGAL KILLING/ HUNTING

27%



POISONING

16%



USE OF PROHIBITED HUNTING METHODS OR EQUIPMENT

14%



ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE/SMUGGLING/ CITES VIOLATION

13%



One of the main barriers to reduce wildlife crime is the lack of knowledge. There is no centralised, uniform, and structured database on crimes against nature across Europe or within any of the project countries, nor any monitoring of the phenomenon – making wildlife crimes invisible.

But for decision makers and prosecutors, data is essential to reveal and assess the full scale of wildlife crime, to plan action and to facilitate learning and cooperation across agencies. There is not even an official definition of wildlife crime.

To address this gap, we set the ambitious and groundbreaking goal of **creating the first baseline on wildlife crime across the project countries** - first, we developed a definition and a consistent and common methodology with several experts and scientists. Afterwards, we collected data from 87 different regional and national institutions on wildlife crime cases for the time period 2016-2020.

The result is the most comprehensive picture to date about wildlife crime in Europe, assessing the impact on protected species and different types of crime and offences. A robust and reliable evidence base that critically improves the access to information, and that can be compared across Europe.



11 National Reports on wildlife crime

Building capacity & expertise



© Geberle Berici / WWF Hungary

It is not enough to improve the information on wildlife crime - obviously, it is essential to ensure it reaches those that have to fight it. Police investigators, judges or public prosecutors are mostly unaware of the scale and impact of wildlife crime on biodiversity, our economies and the security of our societies. Combined with the lack of specialised knowledge at all levels of the enforcement chain, this is a key barrier that hampers effective action to reduce wildlife crime.

To increase awareness, knowledge and capacity among wildlife crime professionals, we organised a total of 21 workshops and training events in cooperation with different public authorities. With almost 900 participants, many of these events included practical information to detect a crime or build a solid case in court, helping increase the number of successfully prosecuted offences.



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And in order to improve transnational cooperation, in June 2022 we organized the first intersectorial EU Wildlife Crime Workshop - more than 120 wildlife crime experts met in Madrid, boosting dialogue and networking along the law enforcement chain, and sharing and analyzing best practices from all over Europe.

 **LINK**

Read about Best practices, conclusions and recommendations from the EU Wildlife Crime Workshop:



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© Ivory / WWF



© WWF

 **LINK**

SWiPE training materials



SPAIN: demonstrating the effect of satellite tagging of birds in WLC detection



THE PROBLEM

As wildlife is not reported missing like humans and cannot self-report themselves as victims, most wildlife crimes go undetected. In Spain, a country that harbours Europe's largest populations of raptors, illegal poisoning is still a huge threat: it kills an estimated 10,000 animals a year, including protected species such as Egyptian vultures or Red kites.

WHAT WE DID

WWF Spain launched the campaign 'Poison Sentinels' to show how birds equipped with GPS devices can fight poisoning and other wildlife crimes. Through the story of six birds of prey, the campaign highlighted how these "eyes in the sky" work - acting as a deterrent for potential criminals.

Thanks to those technologies, law enforcement agencies can act swiftly and collect evidence against the culprits, with data that can even be considered expert evidence at trial. Birds were tagged and monitored throughout the project, with their stories shared through traditional media and digital channels.

TAKING THE ACTION FORWARD

The pilot action succeeded in generating increased awareness about GPS-tagged birds, so potential criminals realise that their actions might be detected. Moreover, as some of the 'Poison Sentinels' lost their GPS during the project, or died because of natural causes, more birds were tagged in 2023, ensuring there is a follow-up to the action.



HUNGARY: demonstrating sniffer dogs unit and upscaling to other species group



THE PROBLEM

In the North Hungarian Mountains, an estimated 40 to 70 wolves roam the forests. Monitoring this elusive species is always a challenge. A more innovative monitoring method could contribute to more effective detection of poaching cases. The majority of estimated poaching cases remain undetected and never reach the court.

WHAT WE DID

WWF Hungary implemented the innovative investigation method that has already been applied in the detection of raptor poisoning cases. BirdLife Hungary's poison and carcass detection dog unit (PCDD) has been trained to find wolf biological traces, such as excrements, blood, urine or hair samples. As a result, the unit could also play a role in the fight against large carnivore poaching.

TAKING THE ACTION FORWARD

The possibility of upscaling the carcass and poison detection dogs to other species groups has been showcased. The pilot study demonstrated that the dog unit can be really effective in wolf monitoring and showed the versatility of a unit like this. Also, sniffer dogs can be trained to be able to detect other large carnivore species. In the future, national parks and other organisations can decide if they lay down the basis to have their own sniffer dog units or collaborate with BirdLife Hungary as these relationships have been established.

WATCH THE
SNIFFER DOGS
IN ACTION!



LINK





ROMANIA: better evidence gathering on illegal fishing

THE LOWER DANUBE, A HOTSPOT OF ILLEGAL STURGEON FISHING

In Romania, for the period April 2016 to December 2022

At least **4 229** kg of sturgeon meat and at least **35,8** kg of caviar were discovered by law enforcement authorities.

Romania

125 cases of sturgeon trafficking (trade, poaching and use of prohibited fishing equipment) were reported.

553 Specimens of sturgeon caught illegally in the Danube or its tributaries and discovered by Romanian law enforcement authorities.

Source: "Poaching of sturgeon: a continuing threat for the survival of wild sturgeon in the Lower Danube Region" (WWF, 2023).



© Hartmut Jungius / WWF Romania

THE PROBLEM

Sturgeons are the most endangered species group on earth, majestic river giants that have been around since the age of the dinosaurs, but are now on the brink of extinction. Their eggs, sold as sought-after caviar, command immense worth in the international wildlife trade, while sturgeon meat is a culinary tradition in many regions.

The Lower Danube region, including its vast Delta, needs constant surveillance to curb the illegal fishing of this critically endangered species. However, logistic and personnel shortcomings in law enforcement units are resulting in low levels of detection of these crimes, and have been identified as a major gap in the enforcement chain.



© WWF Romania

WHAT WE DID

Innovative technologies and simple tools can be very effective and help make up for these shortcomings. WWF Romania purchased a drone and a camera trap, which were donated to the Romanian Police, for surveillance of illegal activities against sturgeons.

To understand the benefits and limitations, a training session on drone operation was organised for enforcement authorities. During the project, WWF Romania participated, by piloting the drone, in four control actions -one of them during the night-organised by the Romanian Police, the National Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture, and the National Environmental Guard in the Lower Danube.

Several nets were detected during the drone missions and boats in transit could be checked. In such a vast and remote area, the use of drones proved to be an effective tool to prevent wildlife crimes against sturgeons. Thanks to the use of the camera trap, by June 2023, the Romanian Police had detected 20 fishing crimes and offences in 11 control missions.

TAKING THE ACTION FORWARD

Moving forward, WWF Romania intends to sign a collaboration protocol with law enforcement authorities (Romanian Police and National Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture) to continue participating in the control activities and donate other equipment to improve the detection of wildlife crimes.

Raising the profile of wildlife crimes

How can we transform the perceptions surrounding wildlife crime? By emphasising its serious impact on biodiversity and highlighting successful penalties and convictions, we aimed to shatter the sense of impunity generally associated with these crimes against life.

Our focus was twofold. Firstly, we engaged European citizens through creative digital and traditional campaigns, street events or innovative communications tools and narratives, and by reaching out to the media. By showcasing real cases where wildlife crime led to significant penalties and convictions, we conveyed the message that engaging in such activities is risky and in need for political attention.

Secondly, we targeted a specialised audience -from prosecutors to environmental lawyers- to facilitate easy access to vital resources, training materials, and databases.

Thanks to our comprehensive communication efforts from 2020 to 2023, the combined reach was 380 million citizens across the SWiPE countries - elevating the profile of wildlife crimes. Together, we have contributed to dismantling the pervasive sense of impunity, protecting our precious wildlife and improving the health of our ecosystems. We have positioned Europe on the map of wildlife crime, not only as a transit point but also as a major hub where these crimes occur.



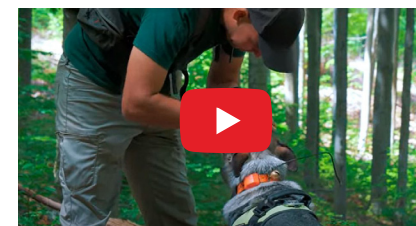
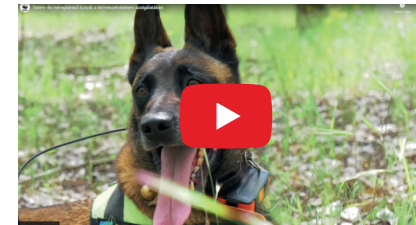
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WILDLIFE CRIMES ARE WILD CRIMES AGAINST LIFE

In the media section of the website you can find other wildlife crime videos and materials.



Changing the sense of impunity: exemplary cases from the SWiPE countries

We collected exemplary cases of wildlife crimes whose perpetrators were brought to justice, thanks to investigation and prosecution efforts. They cover all kinds of crimes and species affected - smuggling a jaguar from Serbia into Bosnia, shooting a bison deep in the forest of Poland or poisoning hundreds of birds of prey in Spain.



Raising awareness on wildlife crimes through audio monodramas.



A ten episode podcast on wildlife crime in Serbia and Croatia



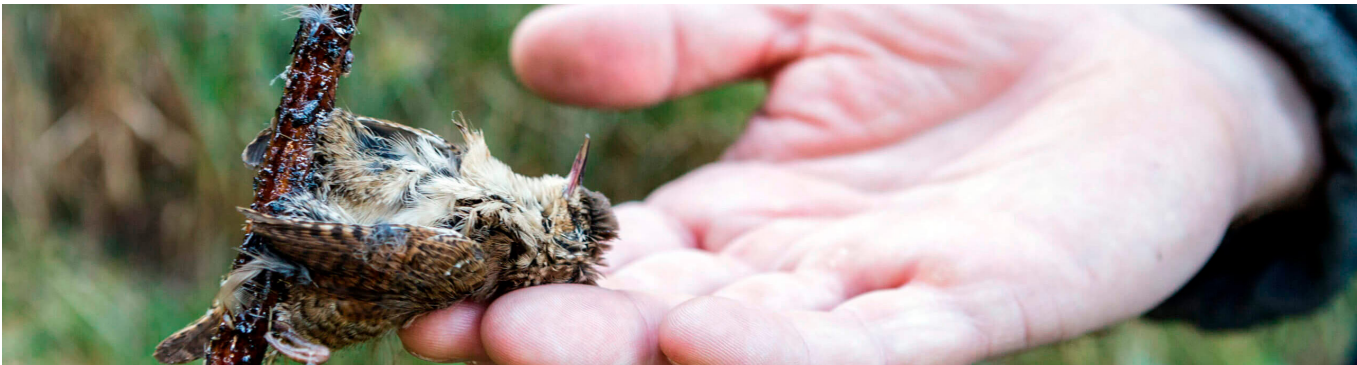
Improving legislation and policy

One of the underlying problems that makes wildlife crime invisible is the low prioritisation of wildlife crime compared to other types of crime. Police and prosecutors do not have sufficient resources to deal with them, and laws, when enforced, are not commensurate with the seriousness of these crimes. To change the situation, the role of decision-makers is vital.

LIFE SWiPE project came at the peak of the European political timeline, with key EU policy revisions and processes related to environmental and wildlife crime happening in the period 2021-2023. This gave us the momentum to build stronger partnerships with other European NGOs and to actively engage with European authorities. We also worked at the national level, advocating for stronger legislation and better implementation of EU laws.

Overall, after these years of extensive advocacy efforts, we have seen an increased level of engagement of EU policy makers on wildlife crime, measured by our Impact Assessment Tool and Behavior Change Tracker.

Our advocacy work related to European policy was targeted at three key areas where we could make the biggest impact for nature:



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Topic	Wins 	To improve 
Prioritising environmental crime	Environmental crime was included among the 10 priorities of the new 2022-2025 EU priorities for the fight against serious and organised crime through the European multi-disciplinary platform against criminal threats (EMPACT).	Environmental crime barely made it to the EMPACT priority list. This shows that constant efforts are needed from all actors to highlight the seriousness of these crimes, and the fact that the European Union is not immune to them at all.
Revision of the EU Action Plan Against Wildlife Trafficking	A number of the SWiPE's recommendations were included among the measures of this newly revised Action Plan - including the recognition of human rights and gender approaches as effective ways to better understand wildlife trafficking or actions aimed at improving implementation at the national and regional levels.	Although much improved, the new EU Action Plan Against Wildlife Trafficking has a number of shortcomings that threaten its effectiveness and implementation.
A stronger Environmental Crime Directive	SWiPE's recommendations were taken into account in the European Commission's proposal for a revised Environmental Crime Directive, which is much more comprehensive than the current one.	The proposal is currently in a challenging Trilogue process - Member States in the Council are trying to water down the Directive, while the European Parliament adopted, by a large majority, a strong position with stricter and stronger measures.

Conclusions



Wildlife crime is not a petty crime. It extends its influence across nature, public health, social development, and the economy, even here in Europe. It is crucial to continue addressing and combating wildlife crime in Europe to protect not only our natural heritage but also the wellbeing and prosperity of our communities. The SWiPE team will continue to play a pivotal role in addressing the key gaps that are essential for successful wildlife crime prosecution, for example:

Integrated WLC Databases: Encourage enhancement of data collection methods for wildlife crime and support the creation of integrated national databases, enabling the analysis of the scope and impact of WLC.

Further Research and Data Collection: Invest in comprehensive research to understand the socio-economic drivers of wildlife crime in Europe. This lack of study is primarily due to the complex and multifaceted nature of the crime.

Awareness of the Public: Raise public awareness about the complexity and consequences of wildlife crime and promote conservation and responsible consumption of natural resources.

Strengthen Law Enforcement: Enhance further the capacity of law enforcement agencies to detect, investigate, and prosecute wildlife crime. This includes training for wildlife crime units, improved intelligence-sharing, and cooperation at national and international levels.

Legislation and Penalties: Strengthen and enforce national and EU legislation related to wildlife crime. Increase penalties for offenders to serve as a deterrent.

Technology and Innovation: Leverage technology to combat wildlife crime. Develop and implement tools like AI and remote sensing for monitoring and surveillance. Use genetic analysis to trace the origin wildlife victims/products.

Cultural Sensitivity: Address cultural and food traditions that contribute to wildlife crime. Engage with local communities to find solutions that respect their heritage while also preserving biodiversity. Pay special attention to engaging local communities in wildlife conservation efforts.

Conservation Efforts: Strengthen conservation initiatives to protect vulnerable species and their habitats. This includes habitat restoration, collaborative protected area management, etc.

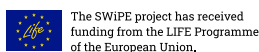
Policy Advocacy: Advocate for policy changes at the national and international levels to address the root causes of wildlife crime, including poverty, corruption, and weak governance.

Addressing wildlife crime is a complex and long-term endeavour, but by taking a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving governments, NGOs, local communities, and the general public, it is possible to make significant progress in protecting both wildlife and the well-being of people.

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