The international trade in endangered plants species, primarily timber, is a significant component of the wider, multibillion-euro illicit wildlife trade.

The trade involves a diverse range of goods, from plants to products derived from them, including food products, timber and medicines.

Often with the use of false documents, organised crime groups smuggle items such as corals and prohibited types of wood into Europe via routes also used for illegal immigration and drug trafficking.

As a party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 2015, the EU is obliged to protect roughly 30,000 species of listed plants against over-exploitation through international trade.

The timber trade, worth an estimated USD 14.8 to 17 billion, is of particular concern. A number of wood species, such as rosewood and mahogany, are listed by CITES. Forest crime can take the following forms:

- the illegal exploitation of high-value endangered wood species;
- the illegal logging of timber for sawn wood, building material and furniture;
- illegal logging and laundering of wood through plantation and agricultural front companies to supply pulp to the paper industry;
- use of the vastly unregulated trade in wood fuel and charcoal trade to conceal illegal logging.

The rules covering the timber trade in the EU, which in 2011 was the second largest single importer of timber products in the world, are laid out in the 2013 Timber Regulation, which:

- prohibits the placing on the market of illegally harvested timber or derived products;
- requires operators to exercise due diligence when placing timber or timber products on the market;
- requires traceability.

The cross-border aspect of crimes in this area underlines the need for a pan-European response by law enforcement. With dedicated staff working on environmental crime issues, Europol provides the permanent secretariat for the Environmental Crime Network (EnviCrimeNet), an informal network connecting police officers and other crime fighters in the field.

In 2015 Europol supported Operation COBRA III, the largest-ever coordinated international law-enforcement operation targeting the illegal trade in endangered species. The operation recovered a huge amount of wildlife contraband, including endangered flora.

Europol supported the operation by facilitating operational information exchange and coordinating the activities of police, customs, forestry and other law-enforcement authorities from 25 Member States.

European seizures included 5,068 kg of wood, 140 kg of corals and 358 plants or pieces of plants that were included in CITES list of species requiring protection from over-exploitation.
EUROPOL AND WILDLIFE JUSTICE COMMISSION TEAM UP AGAINST ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

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OPERATION COBRA III

EXPERTS ON ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME MET AT EUROPOL