

EUROPOL SUPPORTS LARGEST EVER COORDINATED OPERATION AGAINST WILDLIFE CRIME

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[Press Release](#)

Operation COBRA III, the biggest ever coordinated international law enforcement operation targeting the illegal trade in endangered species, has led to the recovery of a huge amount of wildlife contraband, including over 12 tonnes of elephant ivory and at least 119 rhino horns. European seizures included 11 439 dead and live specimens, almost 2000 parts and products, and over 6 tonnes of timber, plants and animal parts. In addition, 100 000 pills of traditional Asian medicine were confiscated. Several individuals have been arrested and investigations are continuing in many countries.

The illegal trafficking of endangered species remains a problem in the EU and beyond. The EU is a destination, source and transit region for trafficking in endangered species, which involves live and dead specimens of wild fauna and flora, or parts of products made from them. Elephants and rhinos are mainly poached in Africa and India. Their tusks and horns are in high demand by customers, particularly in South-East Asia, where there is a long ivory carving tradition. Powdered rhino horn, like many other animal and plant based powders, is used in non-evidence based traditional Asian medicine. Sales generate significant profits for the organised crime groups involved.

Operation COBRA III, conducted in two phases between mid-March and the end of May 2015, saw the participation of law enforcement teams and agencies from 62 countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and America. Europol supported the operation across Europe by facilitating operational information exchange and coordinating the activities of police, customs, forestry and other law enforcement authorities from 25 participating EU Member States (1). The operation was organised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) and the Lusaka Agreement Task Force (LATF), and supported by numerous international agencies and organisations such as Interpol (2).

Elephant ivory - Italy
Handbag made of python skin - Greece

Within the EU, key activities included the interception and seizure of: 20 kg of live leeches and 25 kg of coral in Bulgaria; 10 000 dead seahorses and over 400 live turtles/tortoises in the UK (and another 300 in Croatia); over 90 kg of coral and more than 50 kg of animal parts (including heads and horns) in Spain; more than 500 kg of frozen eel in Poland; over 800 cacti in a joint German/Chinese operation; 16 whale ribs in the Netherlands; and 50 kg of raw (unworked) ivory in France.

Commenting on Operation COBRA III Commissioner for Migration, Home affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos, said: "The illegal trade in wildlife and other forms of environmental crime are among the most damaging and lucrative forms of transnational organised crime. They destroy habitats and bring endangered species to the brink of extinction with major security consequences. This operation underlines our willingness, our commitment to tackle all forms of criminal markets with a holistic approach, encompassing international cooperation, the fight against corruption and public-private partnerships".

Karmenu Vella, Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, declared: "Wildlife crime is a threat to sustainable development, and it has to be combated globally. This joined-up operation sends a clear signal that the EU and its Member States are serious about wildlife crime and are ready to act with our partners worldwide. We have intensified cooperation with European and international police networks to strengthen enforcement against these crimes. We are currently developing strategies for more targeted support for wildlife conservation, and a new EU Action Plan against wildlife trafficking is due by the end of the year. An important part of the fight against wildlife crime is the CITES convention, and the EU is soon to become part of it."

Rob Wainwright, Director of Europol, stated: "The trafficking of endangered species remains a problem in the EU and beyond. It is often underestimated and not given the recognition or priority it deserves. Poaching and the illegal trade in species are dominated by organised crime groups, who operate worldwide and make huge profits from these activities. Operation COBRA III once again shows the true global dimension of these crimes but also demonstrates that Europol and its international partners are determined to crack down on wildlife crime. We will continue our efforts to fight these cruel crimes, to ensure a safe environment for endangered species in Europe and all over the world."

Reptile head and skin - PolandGheko - UK

On a global scale, Thai Customs made one of the biggest ever seizures of elephant ivory in its history (over 4 tonnes). The ivory was hidden in containers originating in the Democratic Republic of Congo and en route for Laos. This was followed by a seizure, a week later, of 3.1 tonnes of elephant tusks from Kenya. The 511 pieces seized, worth USD 6 million (EUR 5.3 million), were hidden in sacks of tea in containers that were also bound for Laos. As a result, a criminal network involved in the illegal trade of elephant ivory from Kenya to Laos was identified and various suspects arrested. Investigations are still ongoing.

For an overview of the results from Operation COBRA III within the EU, please visit Europol's Cobra III webpage. For global results, please visit: <http://lusakaagreement.org/>.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

About Europol

As the European Union's law enforcement agency, Europol was requested by the EU Wildlife Trade Enforcement Group (chaired by DG Environment, European Commission) to coordinate COBRA III actions across Europe. Over the years, Europol has supported several actions and operations to tackle wildlife and environmental crime by providing analytical and operational support. Europol published a Threat Assessment on Environmental Crime in 2013. In addition, Europol hosts the permanent Secretariat for the informal Environmental Crime Network (EnviCrimeNet). Earlier this year, Europol and the EnviCrimeNet finished the Intelligence Project on Environmental Crime (IPEC) and published the outcome in the IPEC Report on Environmental Crime in Europe.

(1) EU Member States participating

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

(2) International agencies and organisations involved

Organisers: The global wildlife enforcement operation was organised by the Association of South East Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) and the Lusaka Agreement Task Force (LATF), the South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network (SAWEN), the European Union's law enforcement agency Europol (on request of the EU Wildlife Trade Enforcement Group), China, South Africa and the USA.

Participating agencies: ASEAN-WEN, LATF, SAWEN, Interpol, World Customs Organization (WCO) and its Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices Asia Pacific (RILO AP) and Eastern and Southern Africa (RILO ESA), UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), CITES Secretariat, India Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), China National Interagency CITES Enforcement Coordination Group (NICECG), ASEAN Police (ASEANAPOL), US Fish and Wildlife Service, Eurojust and Europol.

CITES Secretariat

Financial supporters: Interpol, ASEAN-WEN Law Enforcement Extension Office (LEEO), and participating countries, and China Wildlife Conservation Association through LATF.



EN [Threat Assessment 2013 Environmental Crime in the EU](#) [169.61 KB]



EN [EnviCrimeNet Intelligence Project on Environmental Crime Report on Environmental Crime in Europe](#) [1018.34 KB]

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