

Gangs raking in thousands from the rising tide of wildlife crime

Report reveals the extent of poaching and poisoning and calls for tougher sanctions

by Tracy McVeigh

Poaching, poisoning and the theft of animals may sound like activities from Britain's past, but modern gangs are muscling in on the act.

A new report claims the scale of the problem is being hidden and that gangs are making large sums of money from illegal activities such as hare-coursing, raking in up to £10,000 a month in one case, while poaching of fish and deer is common and as likely to happen in urban parks as in the countryside.

In the report published this week – the first such work to look at the broad range of wildlife crime in the UK – the charity World Animal Protection (WAP) says it presents a worrying picture of how the problem is affecting not only the individual animals and fish but also our biodiversity.

The fact that statistics on wildlife crime, from badger-baiting to disruption of habitats, are not being collated by police forces is a major stumbling block to tackling the crimes, says the charity.

While people will pay high prices for creatures and wildlife products smuggled in from abroad – powdered rhino horn is worth more than cocaine or gold at £40,000 a kilo – a large live carp can fetch £12,000 for a poacher and a deer £200, and the government is being urged to get its own house in order and look after British wildlife.

Alyx Elliott, campaigns manager at WAP (formerly the World Society for the Protection of Animals) said polling

Stephen Fry, a supporter of World Animal Protection, is among the signatories of the open letter on poaching.



by the charity on public awareness of the issue had been startling. "It really brought to life for us how low awareness is in the UK; 86% of the public didn't know that the police had wildlife crime officers. If they don't know that – if they don't know that this is a crime – then the big worry is that they won't be reporting it."

Currently, police forces are not required to keep separate statistics on such incidents.

The poisoning of animals such as foxes and rabbits or birds of prey is also a public health issue, with substances potentially lethal to humans being used.

"There is a big question about carbofuran [which has been linked to poisonings], which is turning up in a few cases. This is a deadly substance banned right across Europe that can kill a human being, let alone a dog or other animal, which happens to come across it," Elliott said. "There are questions to be asked about where this is coming from. Is it imported illegally or are there stockpiles?"

The charity is calling for a more consistent approach to wildlife crime across the UK and for tougher sanctions. While most police forces have a wildlife crime officer, often it is someone who does most of that work in his or her spare time.

"A significant percentage of police intelligence reports relate to poaching of UK species – which includes hare-coursing, fish and deer poaching. All of these result in terrible suffering for the animals, as well as often being linked to other criminality, such as antisocial behaviour and organised crime," said Elliott.

The report has been endorsed by the charity's celebrity backers – Stephen Fry, Deborah Meaden of Dragons' Den and zoologist Charlotte Uhlenbroek – who all signed an open letter which called poachers in the UK just as morally reprehensible as people who shoot endangered animals abroad.



Deer can fetch £200 on the black market, live carp up to £12,000. Criminals are also making large amounts of money from hare-coursing, while foxes are being poisoned illegally. Alamy, Rex and Getty



"People who carry this out in Africa when poaching elephants or rhinos, or in India when shooting tigers are routinely condemned as unscrupulous criminals,"

it reads. "Individuals who know the price of everything, but the real value of nothing at all. But morally, nothing separates someone who kills a swan by throwing rocks at it in our country from someone shooting a wild animal for fun on the plains of southern Africa. Both are reprehensible and our perspective and condemnation of each should likewise be the same.

"And if we are to do that, then the pub-

lic has a hugely powerful role in playing its part – a potential army of eyes and ears who can report and watch out for people engaged in this sort of soulless activity, many of whom we know are already engaged in other types of criminality.

"So although this report is by degrees shocking and sad," the open letter continues, "it could act as a clarion call to those concerned about our wildlife."

Labour fears brain drain as 30 of its MPs decide to bow out

by Daniel Boffey
Policy Editor

More than 15% of Ed Miliband's MPs are set to quit parliament before the next election, raising fears among senior Labour figures of a "brain drain". Thirty Labour MPs – 15 with ministerial experience – have announced that they are leaving, despite the polls suggesting that the party will form the next government.

A senior Labour party source said it expected at least 10 more of its MPs to stand down before the election, pushing the proportion of those leaving to 15.5% of the parliamentary party. Before Labour came to power in 1997 under Tony Blair, only 8% of the party's MPs quit. A source said: "There's not enough excitement about Ed. Some worry about him losing the general election, and some worry about him winning it."

The last few months have seen a welter of big hitters announce their retirement, including former home secretary David Blunkett and former health secretary Frank Dobson.

Former chancellor Alistair Darling, who is leading the campaign against independence for Scotland, and the shadow international development secretary Jim Murphy are rumoured to be considering their positions. Darling

Murphy declined to comment on rumours that he was considering a move to Scotland to enter the Holyrood parliament at the 2016 election. Murphy, who ran David Miliband's leadership campaign, has been sidelined in recent years by the Labour leader.

Any move by Murphy would be motivated by the chance of entering a Scottish parliament with new powers, following the announcement by all three party leaders that such reform would happen if Scotland rejected independence. However, other Labour MPs are reacting against what they see as the uninspiring character of their leader.

The removal of veteran Labour MP Dennis Skinner from the party's governing national executive committee is being blamed on people in the leader's office who encouraged the 2010 intake of MPs to support John Healey, a former shadow health secretary, in his bid for a seat. Critics believe that Healey was bolstered in his bid to damage the chances of Liverpool Walton MP Steve Rotheram, who was critical of Miliband for posing with a copy of the Sun.

A source said: "It looked like an attempt to show the strength of the leader. But Rotheram is a good campaigner, so he got his seat. Healey got his seat. But poor Dennis, who they thought was a shoe-in, didn't campaign



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