



# Wildlife crime conservation priorities

## Background

A workshop was convened by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) in September 2003 where the Statutory Nature Conservation Organisations<sup>1</sup> (SNCOs) and the Non-Government Organisations were asked to identify species and protected sites most under threat from wildlife crime, which through the intervention of effective targeted policing, could make a significant conservation benefit.

The workshop agreed that European protected species should be treated as a priority but recognised in practical terms that it was necessary to focus on a small number of species. The workshop also agreed that Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) recognised as internationally important for habitat and species conservation at a European level (Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) were also of high importance at the UK level and those sites subject to third party<sup>2</sup> damage from illegal burning and illegal off-road vehicle use, should be considered a priority for enforcement.

It was recognised that the priorities would be subject to regular review by both the police and the SNCOs. In addition the SNCOs were also tasked to identify national and regional priorities for both species and habitats, including the identification of wildlife crime 'hot-spots'.

Note: the police launched Operation Artemis to tackle the illegal persecution of hen harriers and Operation Bat in June 2004 to tackle bat crime.

## English Nature's objectives for conservation priorities

Objectives for the conservation priorities identified are:

- Reduce damage and destruction to protected sites and the resulting effects on species and their habitats.
- Raise awareness about the criminality of illegal activities and the effect that such activities have on protected habitats and species.
- Provide a strategic direction at a national and regional level to tackle wildlife crime, as opposed to the ad-hoc informal arrangements that are currently in place. This will ensure that the priorities and resources of all those involved are effectively focussed

---

<sup>1</sup> English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage

<sup>2</sup> those who have no legal rights over the land on which they carry out activities

towards the prevention, detection and enforcement of wildlife crime affecting the identified priorities.

- To form the basis of partnership working initially and primarily with the police, leading to the formalisation of a Memorandum of Understanding between key players, such as English Nature, the Countryside Council for Wales, the police and Crown Prosecution Service. It is envisaged that regional partnerships between English Nature and the police will be set up across England and will evolve to include local stakeholders such as land owners, local authorities, conservation groups and land users.
- Raise awareness both amongst English Nature's own staff and externally with partners about the roles and responsibilities of those involved in tackling wildlife crime and subsequent enforcement action.
- Encourage the expedient reporting and accurate recording of offences.
- Encourage other agencies to use their powers where appropriate.

## **English Nature's wildlife crime conservation priorities**

During summer 2004 English Nature's 22 Area Teams were asked to identify local priorities for tackling wildlife crime for species and SSSIs. The criteria for identifying priorities was based on those illegal activities that result in the decline of a particular species or a factor contributing to the unfavourable condition of a SSSI, where police enforcement of species crime or their assistance with SSSI enforcement would make a difference.

The majority of the Area Team responses were consistent with the UK priorities although, as expected there was some variation, especially with crimes affecting species. English Nature's priorities for habitats are applicable to all SSSIs irrespective of whether they are of international importance (as opposed to the UK priority for habitats which focuses on those SSSIs coincident with international designations).

### **Species**

- Species affected by unlicensed developments, especially European protected species.
- Illegal persecution of hen harriers.

### **Protected habitats**

- Illegal off-roading
- Illegal burning

## **Justification**

### **Species affected by unlicensed developments**

Unlicensed developments can result in illegal damage or destruction of bat roosts, and the destruction of great crested newts and other European protected species, and their habitat. In some cases it is likely that such illegal activities are driven by a desire to save the costs associated with considering the presence of protected species and providing the required level

of mitigation necessary to secure an appropriate development licence. Developments can also adversely affect more widespread species such as slow worms, common lizards, adders and grass snakes.

### **Illegal persecution of hen harriers**

The hen harrier is one of the few species in England thought to be threatened with extinction as a direct result of wildlife crime. English Nature's Hen Harrier Recovery Project (HHRP) has monitored the hen harrier breeding population in England during the last three years. Only seven successful pairs were found in 2002, eight in 2003 and eight in 2004. Research has indicated that there is sufficient upland moorland habitat to support at least 230 pairs. The HHRP believes that illegal persecution is the most important factor in limiting the hen harrier breeding population. In the past three years birds have been shot, nests and their contents destroyed, nest sites lost through the inappropriate burning of heather, and nesting attempts have failed because of disturbance close to active nests. It is known that hen harriers breed less successfully on moorland managed for grouse shooting than on moorland managed with conservation as the main priority. Hen harriers range over wide areas of countryside and persecution appears to be sufficiently widespread to hold the population at a dangerously low level despite the efforts of conservation organisations on areas they manage.

### **Illegal off-roading**

Illegal off-road vehicle use can affect the ground flora of protected sites and disturb species. This is a widespread problem with reports of on-going damage from around England, the activities being more prevalent within upland and coastal sites and within common land.

This problem appears to be linked to the increasing popularity of off-roading as a recreational activity. This type of activity accounts for the highest level of incidents and damage to SSSIs.

The nature and location of this type of activity make it difficult for English Nature to 'police' sites and in some circumstances the police may have more appropriate powers than us to take effective enforcement action.

### **Illegal burning**

Fire can damage SSSI habitats and kill or injure species; some being more vulnerable than others. The impact will vary according to the type of habitat and species, the time of year, ground conditions, etc, but can be highly detrimental.

Whilst illegal burning has been identified as a UK wildlife crime conservation priority, the number of reported incidents of fire damage to SSSIs is very low. A few of these cases were as a result of accidental damage by third parties. However, this figure is probably not a true reflection of the problem nationally; this may be as a result of incidents not being discovered or reported.

## **Regional priorities**

As mentioned above the majority of regional priorities are consistent with English Nature's national priorities.

In summary the regional priorities, other than those already identified as national priorities, include such issues:

- birds – collection of eggs of rare species and illegal poisoning;
- butterflies and other invertebrates – collection of rare or restricted range species for captive rearing or sale;
- otters – illegal persecution;
- plants – theft for commercial interest or by collectors;
- water vole – damage and destruction of habitat.

The table at Annex 1 details the priorities on a regional basis.

## **Marine priorities**

We have also identified marine priorities which are more area specific or of a more general nature.

- Sea bird bycatch in fishing gear.
- Harm to seals.
- Disturbance to marine mammals and cliff nesting seabirds by boats.
- Collection of protected species for aquarium trade.

## **Justification**

### **Sea bird bycatch in fishing gear**

Although this problem tends to be restricted to specific areas, such as around Flamborough Head and Portland Bill, it has relevance to national wildlife and fisheries law.

Individuals concerned continue to set gear in the knowledge that they are likely to catch (breeding/feeding) seabirds from adjacent cliff nesting colonies even though it would be possible to take measures to avoid this. This is an activity which could contribute to local declines in particular species if not tackled.

Sea Fisheries Committee officers are involved but police assistance is required in order to emphasise that this is a wildlife crime issue, and to assist fisheries officers who often do not have the training, experience or knowledge to deal effectively with the individuals involved.

## **Seals**

Seals being found injured or dead is currently localised off several coastal areas, although the principles involved have wider applicability. This is an illegal activity and although it is unlikely to lead to significant population declines, it involves a high profile species with strong public sympathy.

### **Disturbance to marine mammals and cliff nesting seabirds by boats**

Potentially illegal disturbance incidents will be area and species specific but could contribute to local declines in particular species if no action is taken to reduce them.

Boat trips are very popular amongst the public and the variety of experiences offered continues to grow. With this increase comes an increase in the potential for disturbance to the wildlife that many go to see. In areas and or times of high concentrations of boat trips, this disturbance could be repeated and significant – potentially affecting breeding success of seabirds and seals in particular. English Nature is currently part funding a marine accreditation scheme to train boat operators in wildlife law and appropriate wildlife watching techniques. This scheme is, however, voluntary and would be strengthened if operators who do disturb marine wildlife came to understand that their activities could constitute wildlife crime.

### **Collection of protected species for aquarium trade**

Collection might be site specific, depending on the species. In the case of England's two species of seahorse, the areas where they are known to occur in quantities sufficiently attractive for collectors are limited to the south and south west of England. This is a potentially illegal activity which could contribute to the decline of both species. The involvement and assistance of the police could make a significant difference.

There are very few known populations and since animals are territorial and pair for life, collection has the potential to cause significant harm to their conservation.

## **Other issues**

English Nature Area teams also identified issues that were not based solely on the set criteria and not effecting *per se* the conservation status of a species or loss or damage to a SSSI habitat. Issues such as flytipping and dealing with illegal encampments and raves, are concerns within local communities and English Nature staff spend time dealing with enquiries from the public concerning these issues, when in some cases we are not the most appropriate enforcement agency. These issues, together with the identification of wildlife crime 'hot-spots', will form the basis of action plans drawn-up as part of the regional partnerships. As with the national priorities, the regional priorities will be subject to review by English Nature, the police and other relevant agencies.

These issues are also identified in the table at Annex 1.



Region	SSSI	Species	Marine	Other issues (lesser priority)
<b>Eastern</b> Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk	arson *  off-roading *	bats - vandalism of hibernation sites - unlicensed developments *  birds - egg collecting - bittern, stone curlew, marsh harrier - illegal wildfowling (disturbance issue not effecting bird population)  butterflies - collection of Duke of Burgundy species  great crested newts - unlicensed developments *		deer poaching  fly tipping  hare coursing  illegal encampments  raves
<b>East Midlands</b> Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire	off-roading *	bats *  moss theft		
<b>London</b>		badgers, bats*, great crested newts*, reptiles - unlicensed developments		
<b>North East</b>  Cleveland, Durham, Northumberland	off-roading *	unlicensed developments affecting species *	harm to seals	dumping of vehicles  fly tipping
<b>North West</b> Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Merseyside	off-roading *  recreational disturbance on estuaries - jet-skiing, microlites	bats *  hen harriers *		
<b>South East</b> Hampshire, Kent, Thames & Chilterns, Surrey, Sussex	arson*  digging of shingle for garden use  off-roading *	bats * - unlicensed development  plants - theft		dumping  illegal encampments  raves
<b>South West</b> Avon & Somerset, Devon & Cornwall, Dorset, Wiltshire	arson *  crayfish introduction  fossil theft  off-roading *	birds - egg collecting - stone curlew, corn bunting, tree sparrow  watervole - damage to habitat  unlicensed developments affecting protected species *	sea bird bycatch in fishing gear	dumping of vehicles  fly tipping
<b>West Midlands</b> Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Mercia, West Midlands	arson *  off-roading *	bats - unlicensed developments *  otter - persecution		fly tipping
<b>Yorkshire &amp; Humberside</b> Humberside, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire	off-roading *	hen harriers *	harm to seals	

\* national priority