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Feature

# The wild side

It will be a year next month since the National Wildlife Crime Unit was launched. Kay Smith reports on how the centre helps to prevent and detect wildlife crimes varying from illegal taxidermy to egg collecting

The illegal trade in wildlife globally is estimated to amount to £9 billion per year, according to the National Wildlife Crime Unit. It can involve the trade in rare species, kept in horrific conditions, as well as a whole host of distasteful crimes which often occur at a local force level such as badger baiting.

But the policing of wildlife has entered a new phase of professionalism with the combined expertise of local officers and the UK-wide intelligence and strategic development capabilities of the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) based in North Berwick, Scotland.

Where a decade ago many wildlife officers, such as Alan Stewart, a retired constable from Tayside Police, would work in a large area in their force without an awful lot of

back-up, the specialist police manpower now dedicated to wildlife crime in Scotland has increased five fold to 100 officers, four who work full-time and two civilian support staff.

“Like other wildlife crime officers, I used to potter about largely on my own. But now our horizons are being broadened and everything is much more structured. We are now looking at the bigger picture and contributing to a strategic assessment of the different types of crime,” says Mr Stewart.

The wildlife officer adds that he has gained intelligence that has now fed into the national unit on illegal egg collecting, while the work of the unit has highlighted issues such as the importance of keeping an eye on fresh water mussels. The mussels are a species marked for special conservation measures by Scottish Natural Heritage because of threats of an illegal trade in the pearls which can be found inside.

The NWCU itself has 15 staff members and includes analysts, intelligence officers and investigative support officers.

PC Jimmy McGovern, from Lothian and Borders Police, has been Scotland’s first full time wildlife police constable since the 1990s, and is also keeping an eye on jewellery shops in case any are trading in the fresh water mussel pearls. He co-ordinates the work of six who are also kept busy with policing poaching, hare coursing and badger baiting.

He tells *Police* magazine: “The national unit provides us with a single point of contact for all intelligence. Before



it was not unknown for us to go round in circles [searching for information].”

Like Mr Stewart, PC McGovern has a lifetime interest in the countryside. Originally he had to combine wildlife policing with other duties, something he did out of dedication rather than with an eye to promotion. “It was just about getting the job done,” he says.

Now he welcomes the opportunity to specialise in an area which links in with other criminal activities.

The national unit aims to address a criticism made back in 2004 by the Westminster Government’s Environmental Audit Committee that intelligence work carried out by the then National Wildlife Crime Intelligence Unit was not being translated into law enforcement on the ground.

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Now all wildlife crime policing intelligence and activity referred to the national unit is analysed and the results disseminated to forces through the national coordinating groups throughout the UK.

Sgt Chris Kerr, heading up a unit, said: “We are bringing approaches to wildlife crime in line with best practice in intelligence led policing by identifying where forces

need to focus their intelligence, prevention and enforcement efforts.”

Supt Alan Smailes, head of the Scottish tasking and co-ordinating group, stresses that the expertise of the officers on the ground have never been under question, but “through the national intelligence model we are able to channel this expertise into national priorities.”

Some wildlife crimes emerge as cross border activities, explains Supt Smailes. “This means there has to be co-operation between the forces, but resources still have to be bid for within each individual force. It’s essential that these bids, to be successful, are based on solid intelligence. But if the intelligence is right then the resources required – which may be just a couple of officers – is relatively less.”

Supt Smailes is also wildlife crime co-ordinator for Grampian Police, a force which has recently appointed its first full-time investigating wildlife crime officer. This, coupled with the work of the national unit and the tasking and co-ordinating group has, he says, resulted in Grampian seeing increased detection and prevention.

He says: “We are capturing a lot more information and have more cross border co-ordinated activities. We’ve certainly dealt with a lot more cases and have a lot more suspects going to court,” he reports.