

National Wildlife Crime Unit

THE INITIAL RISK ASSESSMENT OF THE ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE WITHIN THE UK



uk|**National Wildlife
Crime Unit**

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OWNER	Chief Inspector Kelly, National Wildlife Crime Unit

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Introduction

In June 2021, the G7 leaders agreed commitments to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, and tackle deforestation, marine litter and Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT).

At the G7 Leaders' Summit in Cornwall, countries have come together and agreed a shared G7 Nature Compact. This is a key agreement which brings G7 countries together to address the most pressing international and interlinked challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change. Leaders have also agreed to review progress against the Nature Compact to ensure delivery of its 2030 vision.

The G7 Nature Compact commits world leaders to:

- ✎ Shift incentives and use all appropriate levers to address unsustainable and illegal activities negatively impacting nature, such as through tackling deforestation by supporting sustainable supply chains, and stepping up efforts to tackle the illegal wildlife trade.
- ✎ Work to dramatically increase investment in nature from all sources, and to ensure nature is accounted for in economic and financial decision-making - for instance, through drawing on the Dasgupta Review for key actions.
- ✎ Support and drive the protection, conservation and restoration of ecosystems critical to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and tackle climate change, such as supporting the target to conserve or protect at least 30% of global land and at least 30% of the global ocean by the end of the decade.
- ✎ Hold themselves to account for taking domestic and global action for nature through driving strengthened accountability and implementation mechanisms of all Multilateral Environmental Agreements to which we are parties¹.

In light of this, the Home Office commissioned the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCUC) to produce the first ever illegal wildlife trade risk assessment. There has been additional funding provided to the NWCUC, specifically for tackling IWT.

On behalf of the UK and devolved UK Governments, the NWCUC, through a high level group known as the UK Tasking & Coordinating Group (UKTCG) produces intelligence products which include a UK Strategic Assessment on wildlife crime. NWCUC use a MoRiLE (Management of Risk in Law Enforcement) assessment to measure and identify the wildlife crime areas that pose the highest risk. The highest risk areas are then set as priorities and they are taken forward via a Priority Delivery Group (PDG). The UKTCG can review and amend the priorities at any time, but they are formally reviewed every third year.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) of Wild Fauna and Flora is one of the PDG's.

Aims & Objectives

- ✎ To examine the current picture of the illegal wildlife trade within the UK - and globally - to outline the most prominent risks.
- ✎ To outline the most common species of Flora & Fauna that are most at risk of IWT.
- ✎ To provide strategic recommendations for the wildlife crime enforcement family.
- ✎ To determine realistic key deliverables for the NWCUC.
- ✎ To include strategic recommendations within the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) wildlife crime strategy.

¹ [Government sets out commitments to biodiversity and sustainability in G7 Nature Compact - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/g7-leaders-set-out-communiqué-on-biodiversity-and-sustainability)

Enforcement and regular review periods will be scheduled in to ensure that any changes in risk are identified, captured and raised, along with any new recommendations and key deliverables. A finalised Risk Assessment along with results analysis will conclude the project in 2025.

Methodology

The following products and systems have been utilised:

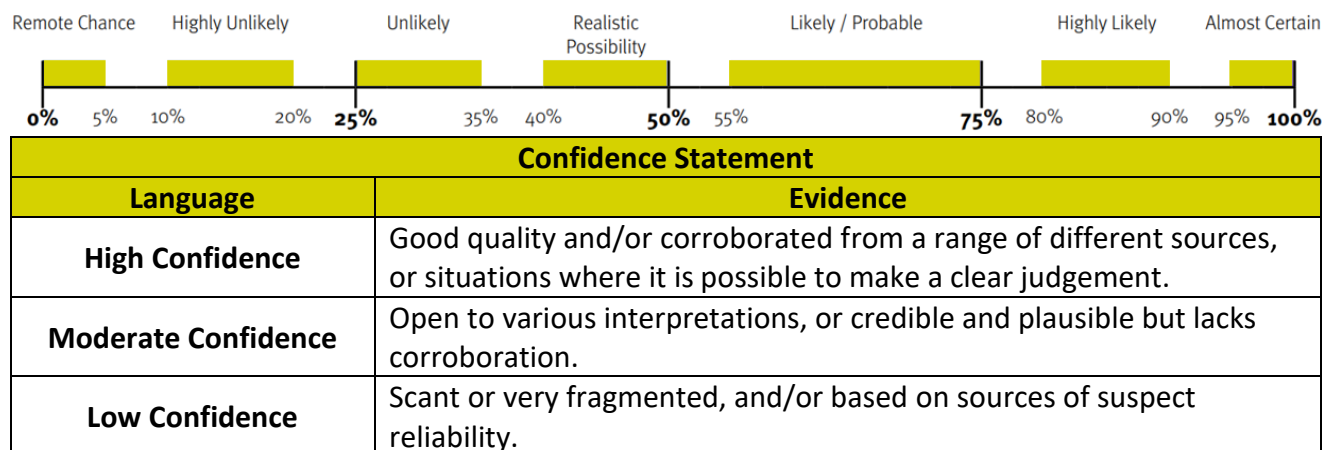
- 🦅 Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) report on illegal wildlife trade and illicit finance in the UK January 2022
- 🦅 Border Force Strategic Assessment
- 🦅 Police systems
- 🦅 Reports produced by the TRAFFIC Organisation
- 🦅 Open Source Research
- 🦅 Trends in UK CITES Plant Trade Royal Botanic Gardens Kew Horizon Scan May 2022
- 🦅 NWCUC website
- 🦅 Cybercrime Priority Delivery Group Lead

NWCUC used a MoRiLE (Management of Risk in Law Enforcement) assessment to measure and identify the wildlife crime areas that pose the highest risk within IWT. The MoRiLE assessment utilises available and suitable data sources. The NWCUC team were involved in the moderation process to add context to the rationale before assessment and scores were ratified. MoRiLE scores are calculated across three areas:

- 🦅 **Impact and Harm** (victim, community and environment)
- 🦅 **Likelihood** (frequency, volume, trend and forecast)
- 🦅 **Organisational Position** (public interest, reputation and politics, economic cost, capacity and capability)

Probability & Confidence

Throughout the assessment the 'probability yardstick' will be used to ensure consistency when assessing probability across different priority areas. The following defines the probability ranges when such language is used and the table details the confidence level of statements.



Executive Summary

The illegal wildlife trade (IWT) has been identified as the fourth largest illegal trade behind drugs, people smuggling and counterfeiting². The cost of illegal wildlife trade is estimated to generate around £17 billion per year and is concealed within the legitimate industry (however this is likely to be an underestimate). The most prominent risk is the lack of intelligence being received around the illegal wildlife trade. The current picture remains largely unknown **[High Confidence]**.

Limited intelligence and offences are indicative of a general lack of awareness on a global level across law enforcement, partnership agencies and members of the public. It is consistently highlighted as a common theme that the illegal wildlife trade is not seen as a priority for police forces **[High Confidence]**.

Intelligence indicates that some individuals are using their legitimate businesses to commit illegal trade **[Moderate Confidence]**. The principal driver for individuals to commit illegal wildlife trade offences is due to the high return low risk element. Offenders continue to commit criminal activities as they do not often lead to prosecution. When prosecutions do occur, typically they result in low-level fines or short term custodial sentences **[High Confidence]**.

The illegal wildlife trade is a criminal issue with elements of money laundering. IWT needs to be recognised as a serious financial crime.

Albeit limited, successful Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) investigations have instilled harsher penalties for offenders - an increase in POCA investigations may act as a deterrent.

Financial intelligence is key as there is always source, transit and destination countries involved in these crimes - it knows no borders. Therefore communication and valuable, reliable information sharing is crucial, not only between law enforcement and partnership agencies, but also between Countries **[High Confidence]**.

In respect of commodities - to date, European eel and Raptors present the highest risk **[High Confidence]**. Although Timber has been identified as one of the largest commodities of import, it has been assessed that the illegal trade of timber is predominantly being managed at the border. Therefore this particular trade does not appear to impose a wider risk to the UK at this time **[High Confidence]**.

Summary of Recommendations

- ✔ To implement recommendations within the 2022/2025 strategy for UK Policing to tackle IWT.
- ✔ To identify and understand the links between IWT and serious and organised crime.
- ✔ To evidence the value of incorporating financial and cyber resources within IWT investigations and to raise awareness of IWT offences within cyber and economic crime units.
- ✔ Law Enforcement and partner agencies to raise awareness of CITES and IWT across the UK.
- ✔ To encourage greater target focused intelligence sharing and partnership working between law enforcement and non-government enforcement agencies.
- ✔ To maximise the police/private sector partnership aiming to increase problem focused intelligence exchange from financial institutions.
- ✔ To maximise police and private sector relations locally, nationally and internationally.
- ✔ NWCU to work with Border Force to complete a problem profile for each CITES priority theme.
- ✔ To establish working groups to tackle key issues within the main priority areas.

² Provided by the UNODC – United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime

Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT)

International trade in wildlife is regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) of wild Fauna and Flora: an international agreement between governments that aims to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. CITES lists more than 35,000 species in Appendices, according to the degree of protection they need. Individual governments are responsible for implementation of the convention.

In the UK, Defra (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Agency), through its executive agency APHA (Animal and Plant Health Agency), is the CITES management authority. Defra is advised by the scientific authorities, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew for plant matters and Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) for animal matters. APHA provides policy advice to the government on CITES and wildlife enforcement issues. It also issues import/export permits for species listed on the appendices of CITES (and the annexes to the UK wildlife trade regulations) as well as permits allowing commercial use of Annex A specimens (Article 10 certificates).

The Convention is implemented through COTES (Control of Trade in Endangered Species) (Enforcement) Regulations 2018. The police have primary responsibility for enforcing the provisions of COTES. UK Border Force has primary responsibility for enforcing offences relating to imports and exports of wildlife at the border contrary to the provisions the Customs and Excise Management Act (CEMA) 1979. Other domestic legislation such as the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 play their part when offences relate to impact on UK species.

The UK continues to be linked to the import and export of illegal wildlife products, and has also been identified as a source country for some species (e.g. live raptors for the falconry trade and European eels for the Asian consumer market). The UK is also a transit and consumer market for a large number of CITES species.

There are numerous different themes that fall under the CITES umbrella, all of which present their own unique issues and key threats. To ensure that these themes are assessed appropriately, key themes have been looked at in isolation in order to identify the most prominent risks. The highest threats have been highlighted below, along with their MoRiLE scores:

Thematic Area	Risk Score	Organisational Risk Indicator
IWT European Eel (<i>Anguilla anguilla</i>)	104	4
IWT Raptors	24.75	4
IWT Timber	24	4
IWT Reptiles	19.25	4
IWT Beauty, Health & Medicines	16.25	4
IWT Taxidermy inc Skulls	15.75	4
IWT Ivory	8.75	5

In terms of risk score, the illegal trade of European eel currently poses the highest risk and is significantly higher than any of the other CITES themes. European eel trafficking is one of the most devastating crimes against wildlife worldwide, with populations seeing a decrease of 90% in recent years.

The key threat areas are discussed in more detail below:

European eel (*Anguilla Anguilla*) Trade - CITES Priority – High Risk

The current impact of the UK leaving the EU remains unknown. Prior to the UK leaving the European Union, there was unrestricted movement within the EU, whereas now, any trade and restocking of eels requires a permit. The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have delayed the evaluation of these regulation changes.

The illegal trading of European eels is an extremely lucrative business. The illegal global trade in eels is worth up to £2.5 billion each year. Operation LAKE is the European operation that has been adopted to try and tackle this trade.

European eels are fished from 4 main Countries; Spain, Portugal, France and the United Kingdom. Once caught, the eels are held for approximately 24 hours before being smuggled to Asia. The eels are then transported to fish farms within China and are left to grow for approximately 6 to 7 years. After this time period the eels are harvested and then distributed to Asia and Europe **[High Confidence]**.

European eel fishing takes place on the tidal sections of rivers on the west coast of the UK. The vast majority of the fishing takes place on the River Parrett in Bridgewater, Somerset, and the River Severn in Gloucester, with small scale fishing on the River Wye in Gwent. There are a handful of fishermen who operate on rivers in Devon and on the Rivers Ribble, Lune and Dee. There are around 500 licensed fishermen in total, with a large proportion operating around Bridgewater and Gloucester. Elvers are also found in a number of other rivers in the UK, albeit in smaller numbers, although there are no licenses issued for elver fishing on any of these rivers **[High Confidence]**.

The UK elver fishing season is between February and May each year **[High Confidence]**. Elvermen fish from the river bank. The use of trawlers and fixed nets are prohibited so only hand held nets must be used. Eels are transported to storage facilities, where they are kept for approximately 24 to 36 hours. Following this settling period the eels are then smuggled out of the UK **[Moderate Confidence]**.

Illegal Trade in Raptors - CITES Priority – High Risk

The last strategic period raised the illegal trade of raptors as a CITES priority issue. It was acknowledged that data barriers and issues within recording processes resulted in a true reflection of the trade not being captured. A continuation of these blockages has ensured that the significant intelligence gaps and scale of this theme remain largely undetermined **[High Confidence]**. The illegal trade in falcons, particularly peregrines, continues to be driven by a demand within the Middle East and the desire to have birds from wild stock **[Moderate Confidence]**. Currently, the volume of supply is potentially causing a glut in the legal market, which may result in a decrease in the sale value of birds **[Low Confidence]**. However, the combination of the on-going demand for raptors and the weaknesses within the CITES certification and bird registration schemes will likely lead to the continuation of illegal trade **[Moderate Confidence]**.

Timber - CITES Priority – Medium Risk

During the last strategic period it was agreed that timber would remain a priority, but the Wildlife Crime Conservation Advisory Group (WCCAG) determined that there would be a focus on Rosewood and Aquilaria. Timber products have seen a significant rise in seizures from 2020 to 2021, particularly for agarwood **[High Confidence]**. The theme of smaller timber products - typically relating to musical instruments - has continued within this reporting period. It has been assessed that high volume imports of timber are being identified and managed appropriately at the border **[Moderate Confidence]**. In light of this, whilst it is recognised there is a demand for timber within the UK, this is

a current priority for Border Force, this does not currently represent a priority for UK policing or the NWCUC.

Reptiles - CITES Priority – Medium Risk

The import of reptiles into the UK are for both personal and commercial purposes. The personal demand surrounds individuals purchasing live reptiles as pets and accounts for 4% of reptile seizures. Commercial trade surrounds the import of derivatives and reptile parts and has three main strands; collectors (mainly skulls and shells), Beauty & Health (including herbal medicines), and the main consumer demand; fashion. Not only have reptile seizures accounted for the highest proportion of overall CITES seizures, they usually relate to bulk seizures rather than one or two units being trafficked at one time **[High Confidence]**.



Changes within the regulations surrounding the trade in reptiles changed once the UK left the EU. The effect of this has potentially been delayed due to Covid-19 and therefore the true scale and picture cannot be determined. It is anticipated that there will be a greater understanding during the next strategic period. Covid-19 had a significant impact on the illegal live reptile trade. It is anticipated that due to the relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions reptile trading /seizures will now rise **[Moderate Confidence]**.

The illegal trade of live reptiles, parts and derivatives has also been linked to cybercrime, with the sale of reptiles on internet market places becoming increasingly more common. However due to the complexities of cyber enabled crime, the true scale is currently undetermined **[High Confidence]**.

Beauty, Health & Medicines - CITES Priority – Low Risk

Both Flora and Fauna derivatives continue to be seen within medicines, health and beauty products. It is currently unknown what environmental impact this has on the UK, and it is acknowledged that this is part of a wider global issue **[Moderate Confidence]**. The UK is an importing country of Beauty, Health and Medicines **[Moderate Confidence]**.

A key health threat identified for buyers and consumers of medicinal and health products is that these are not being regulated. Therefore the potential risks from consuming these products are unknown **[Low Confidence]**.

Beauty products have become an increasingly important issue especially high-end cosmetics containing caviar and sturgeon oil. The intelligence picture around this sub category remains largely unknown due to the lack of intelligence. Partnership data is crucial in order to gain a better understanding of the current picture across the UK **[High Confidence]**.

Illegal Trade in Taxidermy (including skulls) – CITES Non-Priority - Low Risk

Links to cybercrime, with online social and marketing platforms are being utilised to advertise and sell products. Intelligence and seizures currently suggest that skulls are typically imported in bulk, but then sold on individually.

A risk identified, albeit seen within historical data, is that some species parts/skulls are not being treated before entering the UK. Primate skulls being a specific issue, with some flesh still remaining

on the bones. This highlights a potential threat of zoonotic diseases being brought into and then transmitted within the UK.

In respect of offenders, repeat offender Arron HALSTEAD; a taxidermy dealer was sentenced to 56 weeks in custody in August 2020. HALSTEAD was the first person in the UK to be imprisoned twice for offences under the COTES regulations. The sentence was the result of complex two-and-a-half-year investigation by NWCU and Lancashire Police. Arron HALSTEAD had been offering to sell a black rhino skull, a sawfish rostrum and a sperm whale tooth without the required permits. HALSTEAD was well aware that permits were required and was attempting to sell the items undetected. HALSTEAD pleaded guilty to six offences contrary to the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) 1997. These related to the prohibited trade in Tiger skulls, Elephant tusks and Rhino horns – some of the world's most critically endangered species. This was the third occasion that this offender had come to the attention of the Police and the NWCU. Prior to this in 2015 Halstead was given a 24-week prison sentence for the prohibited trade in endangered species.

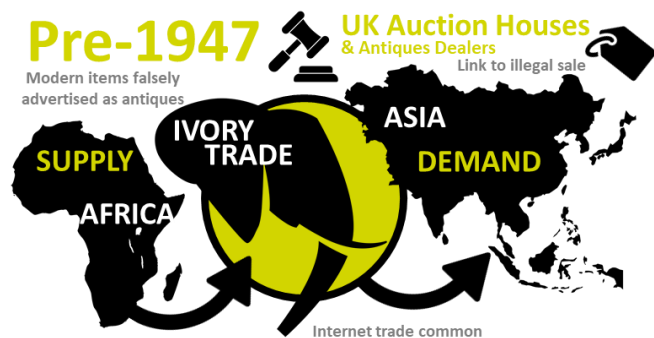


During this reporting period a Confiscation investigation has been completed around HALSTEAD. This resulted in a benefit figure of £99,137.32, with a confiscation order imposed of £71,489.40. This has to be paid within 3 months or HALSTEAD risks a further 14 months imprisonment default. HALSTEAD has also been issued with a Serious Crime Prevention Order.

Ivory - CITES Priority - Low Risk

Africa continues to be the key source country for raw ivory. The demand for ivory in Asia is one of the most important drivers for high levels of elephant poaching and ivory trafficking. Intelligence levels surrounding ivory continue to be limited, but the threat to the UK from the wider trade continues to be low [**Moderate Confidence**].

The internet trade is a common method of advertising and distributing ivory, with a significant number of purchases being shipped to China unregulated. Some sellers utilise the postal system for this, and are not applying for the relevant permits. Therefore there is the potential for more modern items being falsely advertised as antiques (prior to 1947). [**Moderate Confidence**]. The illegal wildlife trade is low risk, high reward, with the illegal trade in ivory being no exception. Conducting financial investigations and following the money flow may assist in significant seizures and act as a deterrent for criminals.



The new Ivory Act 2018 creates domestic offences not reliant on CITES and is very likely to affect the offending statistics.

Illicit Finances Linked to Illegal Wildlife Trade

The illegal wildlife trade has been identified as the fourth largest illegal trade behind drugs, people smuggling and counterfeiting. It is estimated to be worth around £17bn a year globally, although this is likely to be an underestimate, as it is acknowledged that a large proportion of IWT goes unreported.

This highly organised criminality is appealing to offenders as it typically results in a high return, and poses a lower risk when compared with trading and movement of other commodities (people, drugs and firearms) where penalties are more severe.

While the UK has clear processes to determine national wildlife crime priorities, there is no IWT-specific money laundering threat assessment or an accurate understanding of the scale of IWT related money laundering in the UK. This mirrors the global picture with extremely limited financial investigations running alongside IWT investigations and low levels of confiscation investigations being completed post-conviction.

UK and United Arab Emirates (UAE) governments launched a new toolkit to support financial institutions in tackling illicit money flows associated with illegal wildlife trade at Expo Dubai on 3rd March 2022 to coincide with UN World Wildlife Day. The IWT Financial Flows Toolkit is aimed at supporting governments and financial institutions to raise awareness of IWT helping them identify and mitigate suspicious transactions associated with illegal wildlife trade³. The toolkit builds on the landmark UK-UAE partnership agreement to tackle illicit financial flows, formed in September 2021.

The financial sector can play a pivotal role in fighting this crime. Through public/private partnerships and international co-operation, we can establish strong foundations of information sharing to detect and address illicit money flows that have a detrimental impact on our economies and environment. It can help to gain a better understanding around criminal networks and may assist in building an understanding of hierarchies both nationally and internationally. The use of the 2021 UK Government legislation (Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions Regulations), will also assist with investigating and tackling IWT.

The Proceeds of crime Act (POCA) legislation has been used to impose financial penalties which has resulted in two successful prosecutions during the last two years:

As mentioned above (under CITES section), the Confiscation investigation for Arron HALSTEAD resulted in a benefit figure of £99,137.32, with an order to pay £71,489.40 imposed.

The second successful POCA investigation related to ivory trader – Ngie CHUNG-LAW. In 2016, a warrant was executed and 500+ pieces of ivory were seized. He was sentenced to two years imprisonment (suspended for two years) and a six-month curfew. The Confiscation investigation was completed on 19th March 2022 which resulted in an order to pay £61,266.97 and also an order under S143 Powers of Criminal Courts sentencing Act 2000 for forfeiture of all ivory items seized.

These two successful Confiscation investigations illustrate the importance of financial investigations, which also help to impose harsher penalties on offenders committing wildlife crime.

Cyber enabled Illegal Wildlife Trade

Cyber-crime is an 'umbrella' term for lots of different types of crimes which either take place online or where technology is an enabler. It is one of the fastest growing criminal activities across the world, and can affect both individuals and businesses. The internet has been identified as a common facilitator within the illegal wildlife trade. Marketing sites are a key method for sellers to advertise and distribute their illegal wildlife stock, enabling offenders to both facilitate and engage in criminality.

³ Source: TRAFFIC Website

Cyber enabled wildlife crime ultimately allows criminality to continue or hinders the effective investigation or prosecution of offences. The use of the internet as an enabler in the facilitation of wildlife crime is manifest throughout many types of wildlife crime – from the on-line trade in illegal egg collections to the organisation of hare coursing competitions to the trade in endangered species. The vast majority of illegal wildlife trade investigations that the NWCU have supported in recent years have included varying aspects of on-line trade. The true extent of the trade of CITES and protected species via the internet continues to be largely unknown, however it does continue to be highlighted as a clear substantial risk. Intelligence has consistently identified links between illegal wildlife trade and online selling platforms.

It should be noted that there are also innumerable fake advertisements and scams on the Internet, many involving animal specimens. Sellers use these advertisements in an attempt to scam buyers with fake or non-existent animal or plant specimens. Regardless as to the intent of the seller, suspects can still be prosecuted under COTES if they advertise CITES listed products.

The UNODC International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC) Toolkit outlines a number of recommendations to assist with combating cyber enabled wildlife crime, the main recommendations that should be considered by the UK have been listed below:

- 🐦 Cyber PDG lead to consider the development of specific guidance for Border Force, police and prosecutors across the UK regarding cyber-enabled wildlife crime.
- 🐦 Home Office to consider reviewing existing national legislation and regulations relating to virtual transactions and consider prohibition of some items identified as particularly prevalent or of concern in this context.

Glossary

Acronym	Name
APHA	Animal and Plant Health Agency
CEMA	Custom and Excise Management Act
CITES	Convention International Trade Endangered Species
COTES	Control of Trade in Endangered Species
Defra	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Agency
IWT	Illegal Wildlife Trade
JNCC	Joint Nature Conservation Committee
MoRiLE	Management of Risk in Law Enforcement
NWCU	National Wildlife Crime Unit
PDG	Priority Delivery Group
POCA	Proceeds of Crime Act
UKTCG	UK Tactical Coordination Group
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime