

Eurac Research submits a report on environmental crimes in the Carpathians to the European Parliament

The study out of the Bolzano-based research centre, commissioned by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), captures the current situation and proposes recommendations

The Carpathians are one of the last bastions of biodiversity left in Europe, but poaching and uncontrolled logging endanger its survival. There are several international agreements for environmental protection laws that have been ratified by Carpathian countries, but implementing these laws and fighting crimes against wildlife has not been easy. For this reason, UNEP and the WWF commissioned regional development experts from Eurac Research to study the situation; to identify the areas of greatest concern; and to make recommendations to local governments and international authorities. Today (22 November) in Brussels, researchers are reporting to Daniel Calleja Crespo (the Director of the Directorate-General for Environment of the European Commission), to European Parliament members, as well as to representatives of international organisations.

In the international ranking of the most profitable illegal activities, environmental crimes occupy fourth place after drug trafficking, trafficking of human beings and corruption. In the Carpathians, this phenomenon is aggravated by the difficulty of implementing and enforcing international protocols at a national level. Based on questionnaires and meetings with environmentalists, researchers, public authorities and local stakeholders, Eurac Research experts identified the most pressing environmental threats in the Carpathians and suggested some solutions. Within the identified problem areas, researchers focused their attention on the poaching of birds and large carnivores; the illegal fishing of sturgeons; and illegal logging. Southeast Europe is a popular area for the illegal capture of birds, due to its biodiversity, its many species native birds, and its location on the migratory route between Europe and Africa. Wild birds caught in Serbia, for example, are often illegally sold to European restaurants.

Interviews with local stakeholders helped researchers to get a clearer picture of the context: "Environmental inspectors who monitor compliance with the law are not allowed to arrest offenders, or even to investigate possible offenses," explains Isidoro De Bortoli, one of the authors of the study. "Moreover, there is no clear distinction between administrative sanctions and penalties; it is up to the public prosecutor to decide how to deal with each single case. A high level of corruption is still the biggest plague." This confusing legal framework is coupled with a lack of environmental awareness and the conviction that humans must impose their supremacy over nature. "Bears, wolves and lynxes are exhibited as trophies. Furthermore, in economically difficult situations, poaching is a low risk way to increase income," adds Filippo Favilli, another author of the report.

To increase the public awareness and to ensure that environmental laws are respected and offenders punished, researchers have drafted recommendations, including reinforcing the training of judges and police and encouraging their collaboration; creating anti-poaching teams and providing them with the necessary equipment to control the territories, in particular cross-border areas; increasing sanctions; using geo-referencing systems to identify the areas where poachers operate; and to promote the enhancement of national natural heritage and environmental tourism.

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