



**Beastly
Business**

Placing a spotlight on European consumers:

**Drivers of demand for illegal wildlife
trade in Europe**



Key issue

Europe is a key consumer market for illegal wildlife products. Demand for both [CITES](#) and non-CITES listed species by European consumers fuels the illegal wildlife trade in EU Member States and its neighbourhood. Although policy responses have [begun to recognise the role of European consumers](#), interventions to curb consumption predominantly focus on the Global South, particularly [Asia](#). The role of Europe must be addressed as it contributes to biodiversity loss across the continent. This will require:

- demand reduction campaigns that recognise the cultural roots of demand by European consumers coupled with
- coordinated and integrated enforcement and monitoring across national jurisdictions (including in the EU's immediate neighbourhood).

The nature and extent of demand by European citizens

Europe is the [largest import market](#) for CITES-regulated wildlife and wildlife products worldwide, demonstrating the scale of demand from European consumers. The annual value of the illegal trade of CITES-listed species in the EU was estimated at [€4.7 million in 2019](#), but such estimates are based on official seizure reports by EU Member States; actual figures are likely much higher. Criminal activity within the EU and its neighbourhood has increasingly shifted towards the [trafficking of endemic non-CITES-listed species](#), such as songbirds, to evade law enforcement. This is problematic because the demand for and trafficking of European wildlife within Europe is not sufficiently captured in [current policy responses](#) that focus largely on understanding and curbing the drivers of the illegal wildlife trade of CITES-listed species in the Global South.



Demand is rooted in cultural traditions and socio-economic inequalities

Policies must target the underlying drivers of demand by European consumers to effectively tackle the illegal wildlife trade in Europe. These drivers are often rooted in cultural traditions and are enabled by socio-economic inequalities, making enforcement and monitoring alone inadequate responses. There are examples from across the Member States concerning different species which illustrate that current policies do not comprehensively tackle the underlying interlinkages of demand, traditions, and inequalities.

For instance, EU Member States like Cyprus and Italy function as important consumer countries for illegally trapped or killed non-CITES-listed birds which are eaten as culinary delicacies (e.g. *ambelopoulia* or *polenta e osei*). Every year an estimated [11-36 million wild birds](#) are killed in the Mediterranean for human consumption or leisure. Similar dynamics drive the illegal killing and trade of [other European species](#) in different European countries, such as brown bears killed for trophies in Romania and Slovakia. In 2022 alone, [Europol seized 1,255kg of glass eels](#) across the EU which are often caught and traded as delicacies. The motivation for consuming European wildlife, either for food or leisure, builds on the sense of luxury, exclusivity, and social status that the consumption or possession of illegally traded wildlife conveys.



Why must policies target demand more comprehensively?

Overlooking that demand by European consumers has its roots in cultural traditions and socio-economic inequalities is problematic for two reasons.

First, framing the consumption of European wildlife by EU citizens as an integral part of cultural and national traditions diminishes its role as an important driver of the illegal wildlife trade in Europe. While many activities associated with the illegal wildlife trade have their roots in cultural practices (such as the trapping of songbirds with limesticks in Cyprus or the hunting of brown bears by elites in Romania), contemporary practices hold little resemblance to the traditions. For instance, the use of non-selective trapping methods, such as mist nets, means that bird trapping has become a high-profit business in EU Member States. Similarly, the large-scale aquaculture of eels differs from the [traditional, localised, and demand-led](#) fishing practices common prior to industrial expansion.

Criminals often work with [legal businesses](#) or use their infrastructure to maximise profits. Framing activities associated with the illegal wildlife trade in Europe as rooted in tradition can legitimise them at national and international levels. Attempts to tighten regulations to curb such activities and demand can be considered an affront to cultural diversity in Europe. This makes the creation and implementation of policies to tackle demand by EU Member States much more difficult.



Second, overlooking the roots of demand by European citizens leads to ineffective policies that frequently rely on increased enforcement and monitoring to tackle supply networks. Such policies merely treat the symptoms and not the root cause. While enforcement and monitoring play an important role in creating seizure data and ensuring that existing legislation is implemented (such as through [EU-TWIX](#) or [IMPEL](#) networks), these policy responses only tackle one side of the illegal wildlife trade in Europe. They overlook the ways that illegal activity along the supply chain can shift from one location to another to evade enforcement. Therefore, to prevent the shift of criminal activity to other locations or species, supply and demand dynamics need to be addressed in tandem.

Recommendations

1. Policies must prioritise the reduction of demand by European citizens for illegal wildlife products, including those of non-CITES-listed species.

To be effective, policy responses must be sensitive to cultural contexts and socio-economic inequalities, for example by introducing awareness-raising campaigns that demonstrate that contemporary illegal activity is fundamentally different from traditional practices and that it can have detrimental effects on regional biodiversity. An increase in funds will be required to support Member States and third countries; the LIFE-Programme can provide crucial funding streams for conservation.

2. Enforcement and monitoring activities should be seen as complementary policy interventions to demand reduction campaigns, rather than as the prime solutions.

Tackling demand and supply simultaneously can prevent the transference of criminal activity from one location to another. Member States and key third countries must step up cooperation across national jurisdictions, as seizure and other law enforcement data can provide crucial insights into shifts in demand for illegal wildlife products. Participation in networks (e.g. IMPEL) and data-sharing initiatives (e.g. EU-TWIX) should be widened to maximise their effectiveness.



Further reading:

BirdLife International (2022). *State of the World's Birds 2022: Insights and solutions for the biodiversity crisis*. (Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International).

CITES (2022). *World Wildlife Trade Report* (Geneva/Cambridge: CITES/ UNEP-WCMC).

Dekker, W. (2018). *The history of commercial fisheries for European eel commenced only a century ago*. *Fish Manag Ecol.*, 26, 6–19.

Europol (2022). *Environmental Crime in the Age of Climate Change - Threat assessment 2022* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union).

Lordăchescu, G., Lappe-Osthege, T., Dickinson, H., Duffy, R. and Burns, C. (2022). *Political Ecologies of Green Collar Crime: Understanding Illegal Trades in European Wildlife*. *Environmental Politics*

Margulies, J., Wong, R., and Duffy, R. (2019). *The imaginary 'Asian Super Consumer': A critique of demand reduction campaigns for the illegal wildlife trade*. *Geoforum*, 107, 216-219.

About the Author

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About the Beastly Business Project

The Project is funded by the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council, grant number ES/V00929X/1, and focuses on the political ecologies of green collar crime. Our research examines the trade in European species, especially brown bear, European eel and songbirds.

For more information on our outputs, team and research:

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