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At a time when climate issues are in the spotlight, for the worst reasons and with even worse consequences for Earth and humanity, CEPOL has taken on the responsibility of launching a thematic issue on environmental crime. How should we look at it?

Crimes against the environment cover a wide range of activities that have in common the violation of environmental legislation. The focus is frequently on preventing harm to human health and preserving biodiversity, particularly in protected areas.

Environmental crimes should be considered significant threats to ecosystems, which carry high risks and exploit growing vulnerabilities. They represent significant threats to the physical environment, its resources, biodiversity, human health, the economy and, more generally, society.

### **An environmental crime does not have to be large in scale to be relevant.**

The types of environmental crime are vast, and the consequence of this is twofold: on the one hand, the environment, generally speaking, is an attractive target across a broad spectrum; on the other hand, environmental legislation is also comprehensive and captures a broad spectrum of criminal behaviour. Once again, as in other crime areas, it is a game of cat and mouse, the outcome of which is down to the authorities involved.

To give just a few examples, the illegal felling of trees, the trade in protected wild animal or plant species, the contamination of water in violation of established rules, and the illegal transport of waste make clear the impact that environmental crime can have on our society and our environment. Worse still, the criminal actors and the legal companies are often indistinguishable. The so-called green economy often hides environmental crimes committed upstream and is a way of laundering the image of some corporations.

This justifies environmental crime being one of the EU's priorities in the fight against serious and organised crime under the 2022–2025 Empact initiative. Environmental crime is one of the 10 priorities set out in this European strategy, with the following statement:

To disrupt criminal networks involved in all forms of environmental crime, with a specific focus on waste and wildlife trafficking, as well as on criminal networks and individual criminal entrepreneurs with a capability to infiltrate legal business structures at a high level or to set up own companies in order to facilitate their crimes.

To this end, Empact provides a specific operational plan for each priority.

We all realise that many social practices that cause environmental damage are not criminal in nature, or at least some of these practices were not crimes until relatively recently. Cultural attitudes towards land use can vary, with some communities valuing traditional practices that may not align with modern sustainable practices. We must, therefore, recognise the need for prosecutors to move with the times and the increasing involvement of police forces in ensuring people are complying with environmental laws.

It is essential to distinguish between intentional error (intentional misconduct) with environmental consequences and negligence and ignorance (which can have criminal consequences), as the modes of prevention are different. Often, negligence and ignorance are cultural legacies that persist and should not be justified but can nevertheless be explained in the light of tradition and custom. An example that often occurs is slash-and-burn agriculture, which is still practised in many countries but has enormous ecological and safety risks for the population. On a smaller scale, we can think of small bonfires to clear land, but these are often the cause of major fires, which fall into the category of fires caused by negligence. Awareness raising and close monitoring by the authorities is essential.

In cases of deliberate wrongdoing, such as premeditated deforestation or industrial activities that lead to water and soil contamination, the criminality of these acts is unequivocal. Those accountable for such infractions face legal repercussions. Regardless of whether the offence was the result of intentional actions or negligence, the overarching outcome remains consistent: significant environmental degradation.

The differences in environmental crimes between countries and regions worldwide can be attributed to various factors, including legal frameworks, enforcement mechanisms, socioeconomic conditions and cultural attitudes towards environmental protection. Many European countries have well-established and comprehensive environmental laws that align with EU regulations. There are stringent penalties for violations, and environmental protection is often treasured in national constitutions. The EU emphasises sustainable development, and Member States typically have robust monitoring and enforcement compliance mechanisms. European environmental enforcement is generally more systematic, with specialised agencies responsible for monitoring compliance and prosecuting offenders. There is a strong emphasis on accountability, with public access to information and the ability of civil society to challenge environmental decisions.

In other parts of the globe, enforcement can be weak, often influenced by corruption or lack of resources. In many instances, environmental regulations are bypassed or ignored, particularly in remote areas where illegal activities

like illicit logging or mining occur. Additionally, criminal organisations may exploit lax enforcement to engage in environmentally harmful activities.

There is generally a higher level of public awareness and advocacy regarding environmental issues in Europe, supported by strong civil society organisations. Economic systems often prioritise sustainability as part of their growth strategies, driving legislative measures to protect the environment. In summary, all world regions face environmental crimes, but the legal, enforcement and cultural contexts significantly shape how these crimes manifest and are addressed in each region.

From what we have written above, the importance of this thematic edition of the *European Law Enforcement Research Bulletin* seems justified, and we want to emphasise its timeliness and the quality of the work gathered here. The timeliness is not justified by the first-hand revelation of some threats and facts that jeopardise the environmental balance. These threats and facts are well known and have, to a certain extent, been widely publicised by the media. This publication is an opportunity to raise awareness of these environmental problems among a community of readers who can bring these problems and their lessons to their police work agenda and practices. Hence, the quality of the works published here, some of them presented as case studies, is important.

Each article offers added value through its problem-oriented approach to LEA work. The significance of utilising new technologies, varying in complexity, is addressed in nearly all the contributions and should be highlighted in this editorial note.

Knowing how to act more effectively to prevent environmental crimes, which are highly complex and numerous, could be the take-home message of this thematic bulletin.