

Rob Gibson,
Convenor Rural Affairs, Environment and Climate Change Committee
Committee Room T3.40
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

30 September 2015

Dear Rob

I am writing to advise you that the Scottish Government's Wildlife Crime in Scotland - 2014 Annual Report has been laid before Parliament this morning and can be viewed on the Scottish Government website at: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/09/6676>.

This report has been produced under Section 26B of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011). This section provides that Ministers must lay a report every calendar year on offences which relate to wildlife, to include information on incidence and prosecutions during the year to which the report relates, and on research and advice relevant to those offences.

During evidence sessions held following the publication of last year's report, and in subsequent correspondence, the Committee made some recommendations for improvements to the report and the availability of useful data. A summary of these recommendations, and the progress made, is presented in an Appendix to the report. However, I would like to provide you with an update here.

“We welcome the commitment of the Scottish Government, the COPFS and Police Scotland to work together to improve the data and ensure it is easier to understand.”

Scottish Government officials and statisticians have worked with Police Scotland and COPFS to identify a number of improvements which could be made to the presentation and data in the report, both in the short and long term.

Significant changes have already been made for this report, including a clearer structure, labelling, and commentary, and additions of some useful data not previously included.

Going forward, the offence categories used for the main sources of data in the report will be reviewed to ensure they are as useful and comprehensive as possible.

“The Committee expects to see all data in future presented consistently, in a calendar year format, to enable future Reports to be directly compared year for year.”

All types of crime and court proceedings data have been recorded and published in financial year format since 1994. Unfortunately, discussions have established that it is not practical at present, or in the foreseeable future, to make wildlife crime data an exception to this. Making such a change would have a significant effect on the publication of wildlife crime data:

- Court proceedings data for any complete calendar year (e.g. 2014) is not available until December the following year (e.g. December 2015) at the earliest. This would cause significant delays to the preparation and publication of each report.
- Recorded crime data could only be converted to calendar year for 2014 onwards, and so the report would lose valuable trend data for the previous 4 years.

To allow for easier comparisons, all other sources in this report have been switched to a consistent financial year format, to match the SG recorded crime and court proceedings statistics. This year's report will therefore focus on data for financial years up to 2013/14 only, but will continue to provide updates on other activities throughout 2014 as a whole.

“The Committee urges you to consider what further disaggregation [of data] is possible to ensure that the Report is as useful as possible.”

Some improvements which can be made immediately have been implemented in this report, including a detailed breakdown of court proceedings data included as an Appendix, and where possible, additional breakdowns of some other categories (such as trapping and snaring, and hunting with dogs) have been included.

The Scottish Government is working with Police Scotland and COPFS to identify solutions that will allow greater disaggregation of official statistics – particularly police recorded crime data relating to the six wildlife crime priorities and other areas of interest.

Changes to police recording systems will take time to implement however Police Scotland are investigating what further manual disaggregation of wildlife crime reports could be carried out in the near future, and I am hopeful that a more useful breakdown of recorded crime data will be possible from next year's report onwards.

Inclusion of data on penalties issued by courts

This data has been added to the new report. However, due to the way Community Payback Orders (CPOs) are recorded by the courts, it is not currently possible to obtain an accurate breakdown of the length of CPOs for any specific crime type.

Inclusion of data on illegal poisons/baits

This data had been included last year, but, as part of the restructured report, it is presented earlier in the new report (as part of SASA's poisoning data) and has been highlighted in more detail in the commentary.

Inclusion of data on trapping/snaring offences

It is not currently possible to disaggregate official recorded crime statistics to show these kinds of offence, however additional data has been provided by SAC Consulting Veterinary Services and COPFS to allow some information to be presented in a new section on this

type of offence. This issue will be addressed further as part of wider efforts to improve disaggregation of recorded wildlife crime data.

Inclusion of data on restrictions of firearms licences and general licences issued as a result of wildlife crime

Police Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage have provided relevant details for inclusion in this report. It was not possible to provide firearms licence restriction details relevant to wildlife crime prior to 2013-14, however future reports will include further data allowing a long term picture to build up.

I welcome the commitment shown by Police Scotland and COPFS to help drive improvements to the data available for the report. These improvements have already started to take shape in this year's report, and I am confident further benefits will continue to be seen in subsequent editions.

I hope you find the report useful.

Kind regards

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