

New initiative to combat growing global menace of environmental crime - 2 June 2003

BRUSSELS/PARIS/NAIROBI, 2 June 2003 - Customs officers around the world are getting some extra backup in the on-going battle to beat the multi-billion dollar illegal trade in ozone depleting substances, toxic chemicals, hazardous wastes and endangered species.

With a focus on training border guards to better spot and apprehend criminals trafficking in "environmental commodities," a new "Green Customs" web site is being launched today (see <http://www.unepie.org/ozonaction/customs/>). The web site is part of an initiative to help tackle the growth of environmental crime, one of the most profitable and fastest growing new areas of international criminal activity.

Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which is driving the new initiative, said, "The smuggling of ivory, tiger bones and rare orchids are a direct threat to species survival. The illegal traffic of toxic waste negatively impacts on the environment and health of thousands in the developing world. At the same time criminal groups smuggle environmentally harmful products like ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) whose legal trade is subject to stringent international restrictions."

"Building the capacity of customs officials, who are on the front line of every country's efforts to combat this illegal trade, is vital," said Mr. Toepfer.

Environmental crime is a big and increasingly lucrative business.

Thomas L. Sansonetti, Assistant Attorney General of the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the US Justice Department, said, "According to a December 2000 US Government report, it is estimated that local and international crime syndicates worldwide earn \$22 - 31 billion dollars annually from hazardous waste dumping, smuggling proscribed hazardous materials, and exploiting and trafficking protected natural resources. When it comes to law enforcement and customs training around the world, we urgently need a more coordinated international response to strengthen the domestic capacity of countries to tackle this problem. The UNEP-led Green Customs initiative can provide an effective training package for strengthening domestic institutional capacity on environmental crime and enforcement of multilateral environmental agreements."

The same US Government report, the International Crime Threat Assessment, notes that criminal organizations earn \$US 10-12 billion per year for dumping trash and hazardous waste materials. It also says that the stealing and illicit trade of natural resources, (including illegal logging and the trade of forest timber) is also a significant income generator for criminal organizations, earning them \$5-8 billion per year.

The size of the global black market for ozone-depleting substances is estimated to range from 20,000 to 30,000 metric tonnes annually. Illegal imports of these substances are far cheaper than CFCs that are legally recycled or obtained from limited existing stocks.

In an effort to help combat these problems the UNEP-led Green Customs initiative aims to improve coordinated intelligence gathering, information exchange, guidance (such as codes of best practice) and training amongst the partner organizations involved.

The dedicated web site where interested organizations and the customs officers themselves can get information such as lists of upcoming training, environmental trainers, and training presentations and more is a key feature of the project.

The initial partners in the project include UNEP, Interpol (the international criminal police organization), the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) that have trade provisions. These UNEP administered treaties include the Basel Convention on the Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), and the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer.

Many of the partners are already collaborating on training and information exchange. However, one of the aims of the Green Customs project is to harmonize efforts amongst the various actors, particularly the MEAs, so that customs officers receive training that covers all relevant environmental agreements.

"By sharing expertise, experience and infrastructure multilateral environmental agreements are working together to present a coordinated customs training front," said Klaus Toepfer. "In addition, this coherent approach to the problem of illegal trade should help ensure the implementation and enforcement of the MEAs in question."

Mr. Toepfer was speaking today from Brussels where he was signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the WCO, the main purpose of which is to foster stronger ties between the two organizations on environmental enforcement issues

"Among its many important activities the World Customs Organization has been providing investigative support to track environmental crime," said Toepfer. "As the only international inter-governmental organization specialized in customs matters they are an essential partner in the new Green Customs initiative we are launching today.

For more information contact:

Robert Bisset, UNEP Press Officer/Spokesperson for Europe on Tel: 33 1 44377613, Mobile: 33 6 22725842, E-mail: robert.bisset@unep.fr.

Eric Falt, Spokesperson/Director of UNEP's Division of Communications and Public Information, on Tel: 254 2 623292, Mobile: 254 (0) 733 682656, E-mail: eric.falt@unep.org

or

Nick Nuttall, UNEP Head of Media, on Tel: 254 2 623084, Mobile: 254 (0) 733 632755, E-mail: nick.nuttall@unep.org

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