

Wildlife Crime and Curriculum Development: A Pilot Study in Officer Perceptions to Inform Policing Education in Wales

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DOI: 10.70386/ijcpe.v1i1.20

Abstract

Wildlife crime is recognised as a major global issue. In response, the UK has developed an increasingly complex policy framework to address both international and domestic threats, including national policing strategies that emphasise the need to improve wildlife crime enforcement. However, both academics and practitioners have noted that the curriculum underpinning initial police education makes no mention of wildlife crime. To address this perceived gap between policy and practice, this pilot study interviewed two police wildlife crime officers serving in a Welsh force. The aim was to explore their views on what should be included in future police curricula. The findings highlight the importance of awareness of key legislation, the role of relevant partner agencies, and an understanding of how wildlife crime can intersect with other forms of criminality.

Keywords: *Wildlife crime; Police education; Green criminology; Wales.*

Introduction and Purpose of the Study

Wildlife crime is a major global issue. It takes many forms, from the poaching of elephants and rhinos for their ivory and horn, to illegal logging and the destruction of tropical rainforests (UNODC, 2020). The illicit international trade in wildlife is recognised as the fourth largest transnational criminal enterprise after the trafficking of people, drugs, and firearms, and is estimated to be worth approximately £17 billion annually, although the true figure may be significantly higher (McFann & Pires, 2018; NPCC, 2022).

As a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the UK is legally bound to support global enforcement efforts to disrupt the criminal trade in wildlife (CITES, 2019). From the perspective of UK police forces, this responsibility is enshrined within the Rural and Wildlife Crime Strategy 2022-2025 alongside six other wildlife crime priorities (NPCC, 2022). Whilst CITES Issues (as described in the strategy) provides an important global outlook to UK wildlife crime enforcement, the reality is that most of the priorities are domestic in nature, including Bat Crime, Birds of Prey Crime, and Badger Crime (NPCC, 2022). The priorities represent a balance between protecting the public from human-centric risks associated with wildlife crime (such as violence and links to organised crime) and the need to conserve and protect species which are increasingly in danger of extinction (NPCC, 2022). At the operational policing level, differing regional and local contexts play a significant role in determining the level of focus individual forces apply to these national priorities (Nurse & Harding, 2024; UNODC, 2021).

The existence of international treaties and national strategies arguably suggests that, generally speaking at least, wildlife crime enforcement within the UK is on a relatively strong footing. In their appraisal of the UK's response to wildlife crime, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) highlighted the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) as a particular strength. The NWCU acts as a central hub for intelligence analysis and dissemination, provides investigative support to police forces, and offers strategic leadership (NWCU, 2023). This is complemented at the operational level by the presence of at least one dedicated Police Wildlife Crime Officer (PWCO) in most geographical police forces (Wildlife and Countryside Link, 2024). Yet despite the positivity, question marks surround the ongoing financial viability of the NWCU, and notwithstanding their commitment to the role, PWCOs lack formal accreditation (UNODC, 2021).

These issues reflect several broader challenges facing wildlife crime enforcement in the UK. Firstly, the very conceptual boundaries of what constitutes wildlife crime are contested (Nurse & Harding, 2024; UNODC, 2020). Secondly, relevant legislation is often outdated and inconsistent (Law Commission, 2015). Thirdly, unlike most other criminal offences, there is no statutory requirement for police to officially record instances of wildlife crime (UNODC, 2021). This lack of formal

recording obscures the true extent of such offences and hinders the development of a meaningful intelligence picture. Finally - and perhaps most significantly - there is a chronic lack of allocated resources, particularly in terms of staffing and training (Nurse, 2015; UNODC, 2021).

It is not simply that there is a lack of specialised training and accreditation for PWCOs. The reality is that most police officers will likely go through their whole careers having never received any formal education in respect of wildlife crime (Nurse & Harding, 2022). As a result, they are poorly equipped to investigate wildlife offences and may not even be able to recognise when a crime has occurred (Nurse & Harding, 2024). This apparent lack of frontline understanding clearly conflicts with the strategic goal of improving police responses to wildlife crime (see NPCC, 2022), highlighting a clear need for improvement.

The NPC (National Policing Curriculum) offers a vehicle to help bring about this improvement. Underpinning all current police constable entry routes in England and Wales, the NPC embodies the core knowledge deemed central to police professionalism and competency (CoP, 2024). What is missing from this curriculum is any requirement for students or trainee officers to gain an understanding of wildlife crime (CoP, 2023). Therefore, this small-scale preliminary study will explore the views of serving PWCOs - those on the frontline of wildlife crime enforcement. It will seek to gain their perspectives on what they believe should be covered within the NPC and why. The study focuses on Wales, taking into account its increasingly divergent policy and legal environment (see Welsh Government, 2023 & Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015), as well as its unique social and geographical context.

Literature Review

There is no denying the perilous position the natural world finds itself in. The rise in human population and the ever-increasing demand for materials have led to a situation which has seen biodiversity stretched beyond capacity (WWF, 2020). As a species, we have been slow to recognise the harm we have caused - not just to other creatures, but the wider environment and our own wellbeing (IPBES, 2019). However, in recent years, there has been increasing public concern about the plight of the natural world, especially amongst younger generations (Cotton, Bailey & Tosdevin, 2020). The

increased awareness of the issues and resulting public pressure have led to governmental responses. In Wales, this has included the passing of legislation mandating public bodies to maintain and enhance biodiversity, while simultaneously promoting ecological awareness amongst their employees (Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015; Environment (Wales) Act 2016).

The slow awakening to the environmental issues we now face is symptomatic of humanity's anthropocentric view of the world (Nurse, 2015). As the dominant species, humans have always relied upon the natural world for food, shelter, energy, and material wealth (Wyatt, 2013). In more recent years, however, this relationship has become increasingly exploitative and ultimately unsustainable (Nixon, 2011; Wyatt, 2013). Driven by a neoliberal market economy that tends to view flora and fauna as mere commodities to be bought and sold, the well-being of non-human species has grown ever more precarious (White, 2010; Wyatt, 2013). In fact, McFann and Pires (2018, p.118) highlight the views of experts suggesting that due to human activity, 'the earth is facing its sixth mass extinction'. A prospect that will likely lead to increased human suffering through food shortages, increased zoonotic disease, and a severely degraded environment (UNODC, 2020; FAO, 2020).

Nixon (2011) argues that the plight of non-human species and the wider natural environment has gone relatively unchallenged because of the slow pace of decline. In contrast to dramatic interpersonal criminal incidents (such as shootings or stabbings), the gradual loss of biodiversity has been barely noticed, and even now, many people choose to shy away from the problem, content to leave it to others to solve (Nixon, 2010; Brisman & South, 2023). This social commentary can also be seen to have played out within the disciplinary boundaries of criminology. With a traditional focus on street-level crimes, it was not until 1990 that Lynch coined the term green criminology. Seeing the potential for criminologists to lean into the green movement, to explore and critique the concerns of environmental activists, Lynch (1990) argued that green criminology could provide new and radical terrain. Indeed, Brisman and South (2023) stress that to remain socially relevant, criminology needs to adapt and respond to contemporary threats and challenges, suggesting that there are none more pressing than those facing the natural world.

In the years following Lynch's (1990) publication, green criminology has developed extensively, providing a flexible theoretical perspective for the study of environmental harms (Brisman & South, 2017; Lynch & Stretesky, 2020). Yet for all the positive sentiment, due to its focus on non-human victims, wildlife crime is still seen to sit at the margins of the discipline (Wellsmith, 2011). This is undoubtedly due in part to the position of flora and fauna within the framework of the criminal law. As Nurse (2013) points out, legislation does not typically attempt to outlaw harm to other species but instead only aims to conserve and improve welfare conditions. For scholars who pursue criminological research from a legalist (or realist) perspective - one that denies victimhood to non-human species - the lack of attention to wildlife crime is perhaps understandable (Wellsmith, 2011; Maher & Sollund, 2016). This is especially true given that many leading criminological journals clearly prioritise empirical, data-driven studies over more conceptual or exploratory work (McFann & Pires, 2018). Since wildlife cannot complete questionnaires or surveys, the potential for collecting such data is limited, which in turn impedes the development of the subject area (McFann & Pires, 2018).

The academic response to the marginalisation of wildlife crime has arguably taken two distinct forms. The first relates to the framing of victimisation. Many green criminologists have rejected what they see as outdated and anthropocentric legislation and contend that laws should be redrafted from an eco-centric or bio-centric perspective (White, 2010; Wyatt, 2013; Nurse, 2015). The general view is that by reframing the nature of harm and better reflecting its consequences, the response to wildlife crime by the police and other criminal justice agencies will improve (Wyatt, 2016; Maher & Sollund, 2016). The second approach involves extending the analysis of wildlife crime, making links to more traditional areas of criminology. Nurse (2013, 2015) and Nurse and Harding (2022), for instance, highlight potential links to organised crime and suggest that violence against animals may be indicative of broader interpersonal aggression and abuse. While anthropocentric in focus, these arguments aim to strengthen the case for taking wildlife crime seriously - even amongst those who may not typically support concepts such as animal rights or sentience.

From a more practice-based perspective, there have been a limited number of studies examining the police response to wildlife crime. Nurse and Harding (2024) in

their recent work reinforced previous findings (e.g.: UNODC, 2021 & Nurse, 2022) that training, knowledge and investigative skills were all lacking. On this basis Nurse & Harding (2024) argue that there is a need to change the policing mindset, but that this will only happen if officers understand the wider context of the offending - who is likely to be involved, why it takes place, and the impacts it can have on both the community and the environment. They, like others (Maher & Sollund, 2016; UNODC, 2021), have called for wildlife crime to be incorporated into the Police Educational Qualification Framework (PEQF) as part of the NPC, ensuring that policing students and initial recruits have some exposure to the topic (Nurse & Harding, 2022). However, what exactly should be covered within the curriculum - in terms of theory, law, skills, and other insights - is not something the literature currently considers.

To begin addressing this problem of practice, this study adopts a socio-legal approach - one that recognises the legal construction of wildlife crime, which in Wales is defined as 'any activity that contravenes the legislation which protects Wales's wild animals and plants' (Welsh Government, 2023, p. 7), whilst also acknowledging individual lived experiences and the existence of multiple perspectives. This approach is supported by White (2010), who argues that a narrow legalist alternative would fail to uncover the practical realities of wildlife crime enforcement, neglecting the rich first-hand insights of frontline professionals.

Methodology and Method

Rarely does a research project reach its end destination without problems or unexpected issues arising along the way (Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur, 2006). In the realms of the social sciences, this is exacerbated by the debates around the very nature of reality (Clark et al. 2021). For some scholars, the social world is objective – a fixed reality, whilst for others it is subjective and open to individual interpretation (Gray, 2022). It is important, therefore, to make plain the basis on which a study is conceived and executed to ensure that there exists an understandable logic in respect of the gathered data, how it is analysed, and the conclusions that are reached (Clark et al. 2021). For criminologists, *crime* sits at the heart of their work, but this very concept is contested. At times, crime is measured through statistics and victim surveys, at others it is reduced to a label applied by those with power to assert social

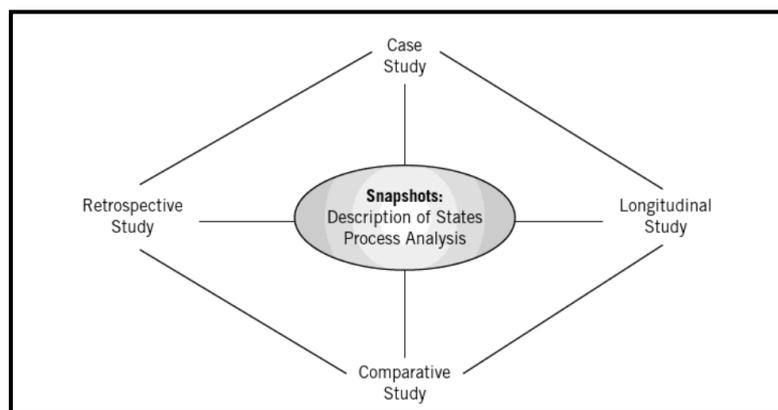
control over others (Rock, 2017; Tibbetts & Piquero, 2023). In a way, it is these ontological disagreements which encouraged the taking of an interpretive stance for this study. Exploring the subjective realities of PWCOs and their lived professional experience provides the foundation for this research. There is no attempt to objectively conclude the 'true' nature of wildlife crime, but instead to provide space for individual practitioners to offer their personal views on how policing education could be improved.

Accepting the notion of a subjective ontology inherently requires the rejection of positivistic forms of knowledge creation (Clark et al 2021). The use of large-scale surveys and questionnaires to identify patterns, to build hypotheses, and to test theories suggests the existence of laws or inarguable truths (Tracy, 2020). This form of epistemology is simply incompatible with a research stance that accepts the existence of multiple realities which are situated within their individual personalised contexts (Clark et al. 2021). Instead, an 'appreciative' approach based on the work of Matza (1969) is deployed, one which aims to comprehend the texture and nuance of the participants' lived experiences. This is achieved through the gathering of qualitative accounts which do not aim to be statistically representative, but instead facilitate the uncovering of individual perspectives, stories, and wider insights (Fulton et al. 2013).

For some, especially those who subscribe to grounded theory, qualitative researchers should start their investigations untainted by preconceived ideas or a priori theory (Clark et al. 2021). The idea being that the collection and subsequent analysis of data will be less likely to be tainted by researcher bias (Clark *et al* 2021). However, based on a review of the literature, as well as my own professional experience as both a former police officer and practising academic, there is no denying that the overarching aim of this study was influenced by external factors. Yet in the absence of the contextual background, the importance of this research would not have been identified. Furthermore, Gray (2022, p.22) sees no issue with this approach and questions whether any research can take 'absolutely no note of pre-existing theories or ideas when approaching a problem'.

Despite carrying what could be termed my own 'theoretical baggage' into the research, the study nevertheless took on an exploratory cross-sectional design. Exploratory research is fundamentally inductive, seeking to unveil social issues,

improve understandings, and provide foundations for the development of suitable solutions (O’Leary, 2005; Gray, 2022). The cross-sectional component provides the direction. Flick (2018) notes that qualitative studies often avoid being prescriptive when it comes to *research design*, based on the contention that qualitative works should remain flexible and not be overburdened by restrictive frameworks. However, as illustrated by Fig.1, qualitative studies can take several forms, and it makes sense to be clear about what is being undertaken and why. Cross-sectional (or snapshot) data capture is concerned with the here and now, contemporary issues and context (Flick, 2018). This study did not seek to understand the past, nor observe changes over time. This open-minded but focused approach, therefore, made methodological sense.



**Fig.1 – Basic Designs in Qualitative Research
(Taken from Flick, 2018, p.41)**

The choice of method was a relatively straightforward decision. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their innate ability to facilitate a conversational style dialogue, whilst maintaining a clear purpose based around specific themes (Kvale, 2007). This allows the interviewer to balance the need to capture subjective ‘opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences’ of participants (Wincup, 2017, p.99) against the aims of the research. What is more, unlike the fully structured alternative, semi-structured interviews maintain a high degree of flexibility, allowing the exploration of other areas of interest to be explored if they arise organically during the process (O’Leary, 2005).

Given the central importance of engaging with Welsh PWCOs to the research, the sampling strategy was largely predetermined from the outset. PWCOs work in what is undoubtedly a specialist area of police work, and it is arguably only these individuals who can provide detailed practitioner-level insights into the policing of wildlife crime. From an academic perspective, Petintseva, Faria & Eski (2019) suggest that for this study, PWCOs would occupy the position of *experts*. Using expert knowledge within the social sciences is by no means a novel approach, and as seen in the work of Heydon (2023) or Renda and Caneppele (2024) (for instance), it is difficult to conceive how their research could have been successful without the purposeful sampling of experts. More broadly, purposeful sampling itself is a well-established strategy in qualitative research, where the goal is unlikely to be generalised findings (Clark *et al* 2021). Yet purposeful sampling can take different forms, and it was felt that *criterion sampling* was the most appropriate means of identifying potential participants based on their professional identity (Tracy, 2020). Fully aware that PWCOs' numbers are limited (UNODC, 2021), the criterion for inclusion was simply a requirement to be a serving or recently serving constable in one of the 4 Welsh police forces – operating, or having recently operated, in the role of PWCO. The two participants of this preliminary study were serving officers and both operationally deployed as PWCOs.

Ethical approval was received for the research by Cardiff Metropolitan University. As an interdisciplinary study, due attention was paid to both the BERA (2024) and BSC (2015) ethical guidelines. Efforts were made to ensure full transparency for participants. They were provided with information sheets pertaining to the nature of the research and its aims. Having formally agreed to take part, they were advised that their consent could be withdrawn at any time. This was followed-up post interview by offering participants the chance to review and agree on their transcripts. To protect the anonymity of the participants, any details referring to their identity or place of work have been removed. They have also been provided with the pseudonyms PWCO1 and PWCO2, respectively.

The resulting interview transcripts were subjected to Framework Thematic Analysis (FTA) as originally developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). Unlike other methods of analysis, FTA is a flexible approach not tied to a specific epistemological

position (Parkinson *et al* 2016). At the same time, it stresses the importance of 'both a priori issues and emergent data-driven themes' (Parkinson et al. 2016, p.7). This offers a balance between the applied leanings of the study (to develop policing curricula) and the subjective exploratory nature of the methodology.

Findings and Discussion

As a preliminary or pilot study, the findings are clearly limited in terms of depth of data. Nevertheless, as a precursor to an intended larger piece of research, they help illuminate key areas of interest. As per FTA, the findings are themed around the intended objectives of the study, as well as more inductive – perhaps unexpected discoveries (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

Becoming a Police Wildlife Crime Officer

Both participants identified their connections to the countryside and rural communities as key factors influencing their decision to pursue the role of PWCO. Their prior knowledge likely heightened their sensitivity to the challenges experienced by rural populations. This perspective is supported by Ambarli (2016) and Heliene et al. (2023), who argue that increased exposure to natural environments and rural settings builds greater empathy and understanding. The obvious implication is that by incorporating an element of outdoor learning into police education, students may become more attuned to the natural world. Yet, whilst Saylan and Blumstein (2011) are big advocates for all students being exposed to nature, they caution that exposure alone is unlikely to be a sufficient means of increasing emotional attachment. This point is perhaps echoed in the participants' own depictions, in which the novelty and unique challenges faced by PWCOs appear to offer the biggest draw. As one of the participants put it:

PWCO2: 'I love it because like I said back on response, I was stale, like - oh, what's he done this time? same old, same old, same old people, same old offences...'

Reiner (2002) argues that, despite the occasional excitement, mainstream police work can often be mundane and repetitive. In contrast, there is no denying that wildlife

crime offers a very different frame of reference for police officers, especially those coming from conventional policing teams such as response. The legislation which PWCOs rely upon is not routinely taught to policing students or recruits (CoP, 2023) and is based on laws which are often criticised for being out of date and lacking coherence (UNODC, 2021; Law Commission, 2016). Furthermore, the very nature of wildlife crimes – involving non-human victims, unfamiliar crime scenes, and unclear motives – only adds to the complexity (Nurse, 2013). Yet for the participants, it is these very challenges that offer professional satisfaction.

Despite their enjoyment of the role, the participants reflected on the lack of formal training available to support new PWCOs. Unlike other specialist positions (such as family liaison officer or child abuse investigator – see CoP, 2025), there is no accredited programme of learning, and both participants noted that national in-person training opportunities no longer existed. Although the online training packages provided by the NWCUC were noted and considered helpful. Ultimately, the participants did not dwell on the issues, instead taking the lack of structure in their stride, with one commenting:

PWCO1: 'I've always been willing to just give things a go. Yeah, you just kind of find your own feet with things, isn't it?

Becoming a PWCO is a journey infused with intrigue and challenge, yet one that necessitates venturing into the unknown. Early insights into the context and realities of the role may contribute, at the very least, to increasing the visibility of this marginalised area of policing (Nurse, 2015).

Educational Requirements

The participants were keen to stress that partnership working is central to the successful enforcement of wildlife crime in Wales. These partnerships occur at an organisational level - through cooperation with the NWCUC, Natural Resources Wales (NRW), and others - as well as with individuals, typically ecologists who act as expert witnesses. This emphasis on partnership working is neither surprising nor unusual in the context of modern policing. However, both participants acknowledged that they

were unaware of the remit of other agencies before becoming PWCOs. A lack of understanding among police call handlers and initial response officers is problematic for strategic reasons. As wildlife crimes in the UK are, for the most part, non-notifiable, there is little pressure on officers and staff to formally record incidents (Nurse, 2015). This situation is exacerbated by a common misconception among the frontline that wildlife offences fall outside their remit, leading to incidents being erroneously referred to other agencies. The result is an increasingly distorted picture of the extent and nature of national wildlife crime, making an effective macro-level response more difficult (Wildlife and Countryside Link, 2024).

Therefore, alongside the need to understand the role of key partners, the participants agreed that students should be made aware of key legislation:

PWCO1: 'They don't necessarily need to know the ins and outs of the legislation, just that there are potential offences. Like a basic overview, you know...'

PWCO2: 'Maybe a bit of a... like an overview of, you know...the basic sort of level stuff that they may come across'

This perspective is shared by Nurse and Harding (2022), who argue that for policing to achieve the policy goals it has set for itself (see NPCC, 2022), all officers should ideally have a clear understanding of what constitutes wildlife crime. By raising awareness of key legislation, such as the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the participants believe there would be a greater likelihood of crime scenes being correctly identified, golden hour principles of investigation being applied, and evidence being gathered effectively - ultimately increasing the chances of offenders being held to account. For this to be successful, one of the participants felt that experiential learning was probably a necessity. Although the participant accepted that classroom learning had an important part to play, they made their views clear:

PWCO1: 'But yeah, I think that you need...we need some real sort of mock scenario type things where you take people out on the ground and show them what to look out for and maybe the inclusion of experts in their field. That sort of thing.'

According to Howden (2012), this makes logical pedagogical sense because it takes students out of their normal surroundings and makes the learning 'memorable exactly because it looks and feels different' (p.43). A point supported by Turner (2022), who argues that exposing policing students to the unfamiliar should be a fundamental part of their university education.

This need for improved awareness of wildlife crime was further justified by the participants because of its perceived links to other forms of criminality.

PWCO1: 'I think there should be an awareness of it definitely - because there's an overlap into so many different crimes...'

Specifically, crimes such as poaching were seen as offering a means of cover for thieves to trespass on farmland and scout out valuable agricultural equipment. PWCO1 felt this was problematic on two levels. Firstly, that officers typically failed to recognise and therefore enforce the offence of poaching. And secondly, they missed valuable opportunities to prevent and disrupt wider criminality. This view is shared across professional and academic literature, which has grown increasingly confident in detailing the links between wildlife crime, organised crime groups, and violence (UNODC, 2021; NPCC, 2022; Nurse & Harding, 2022).

Professional Challenges

Some of the specific challenges described by the participants are reflected in the two prior themes. The scarcity of formal training and the lack of officer awareness have clearly had an impact:

PWCO2: 'In [the time] I've been on here we've not caught a single active poacher or badger baiter...'

PWCO1: '...and that all comes back to the awareness, if the call taker has some awareness and dispatched an officer with some awareness... you know it would potentially change the outcome on a lot of crimes'

To address these points, the PWCOs explained how they worked with colleagues and made use of their professional relationships with other agencies to curate their own in-house training. The participants spoke positively of the willingness of partner organisations to fill the apparent police training gap. This aligns with Nurse's (2016, 2015) analysis of the significant role non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play in UK wildlife crime enforcement, including their involvement in the setting of national priorities (NWCU, 2022). Yet there was clear frustration that it had to be left to local forces to arrange:

PWCO1: '...and it is not like you can go anywhere... and you know anyone is pitching the training... you've got to rely on your network of contacts and people's goodwill really.'

This frustration was also evident in how the participants described the size and composition of their team. Although they spoke favourably about the support they received from line management, they both noted that, as in most forces, their remit encompassed rural, wildlife, and heritage crime. As a small team, this often put them under pressure, stretching their capacity and occasionally pulling them away from their core responsibilities. For Nurse (2015) this bundling together of rural and wildlife crime is nonsensical and counterintuitive. The killing of protected birds of prey may, for instance, constitute a criminal offence - but for some individuals living in rural communities, such actions might be viewed as necessary to protect their livelihood (Burnside, Pamment & Collins, 2021). Nevertheless, both the current Welsh and UK rural and wildlife crime strategies argue that there is significant overlap between the two, and that it is therefore efficient and effective to address both crime types simultaneously (NPCC, 2022; Welsh Government, 2023).

From an educational perspective, Ambarli's (2016) small-scale study of urban and rural students' attitudes towards wildlife - in this case the Turkish Brown Bear - offers a useful platform for reflection. The study found that students from rural backgrounds had more of a general interest and understanding of the Brown Bear, but their perceptions tended to be more negative than those of urban students. Ambarli (2016) surmised that the bear is known to cause damage to rural properties, and that students residing within those communities are therefore much more likely to witness or hear about the negative impacts. Heliene et al. (2023) support this analysis, pointing

out that myths, stories, and the media can all impact how individuals perceive non-human species. This is compounded by the rise in urban environments and technological advancements, which cut our ties to the outside world (Heliene *et al* 2023). Under these conditions, wildlife-focused education needs to consider how these cultural and physical barriers can be mitigated. For police officers, the importance lies in being able to comprehend competing social perspectives, so that they can execute their duties with empathy whilst ensuring they remain impartial.

The Position of Flora and Fauna

The language used by the participants to describe and give meaning to their roles offered a window into their underlying perceptions of the position of non-human species. There was a tendency to refer to their work as 'rural crime', and their concerns were typically focused on human victims:

PWCO1: 'I mean, there's lots of links nationally...proven links between people who are involved in poaching activity and people who are involved in rural crime and farm thefts.'

PWCO2: 'You know at the end of the day it is their livelihood. It's not just all about I have had my car nicked or I've had my bike nicked. For us that's just an inconvenience. If a farmer has a quad bike stolen in the middle of lambing season, that is a big, big problem. You know, they could lose lambs...it could cost them a lot more money than just the quad being lost itself.'

These views are further aligned to their downplaying of the significance of wildlife crime in comparison to other forms of criminality, with PWCO1 noting that the levels of threat, risk and harm were relatively low. This was contextualised in the following comments:

PWCO1: 'If it was a toss-up between an officer going to a burglary, my nan's house say, or an officer attending a tree being cut down with a bird's nest in it. I think I would still choose the officer going to, you know, an elderly relative. And I think that's always going to win. And I think it should really.'

PWCO2: 'Our topic is a tiny nugget in the grand scheme of policing... and, it sounds a bit harsh, a very low-level offence when you have got ABHs and other things...'

Given that policing operates within a professional framework that seeks to prioritise human victims (UK Government, 2025), whilst often failing to recognise non-human victimisation (Nurse, 2013), these views are understandable. However, Wellsmith (2011) contends that the under-resourcing of wildlife crime is directly related to the commonly held policing view that it is relatively inconsequential. It could be argued that this underlying assumption needs to be challenged to encourage officers to adopt a more eco-centric or bio-centric outlook, but the educational mechanisms to support such change remain unclear. Yet even if this were feasible, Bonnett (2010) questions whether environmental education should be a means to impose a particular perspective on students at the expense of allowing them to develop their own standpoint. Instead, providing students with the resources and opportunities to be critically curious about the position and importance of other species may be a more appropriate pedagogical goal (Saylan and Blumstein, 2011). Because even if one maintains a humancentric lens, 'wildlife crimes are not victim-free offences. Those who harm wildlife steal something precious from everyone' (Wildlife and Countryside Link, 2024, p.4).

Conclusion & Recommendations

Global and national concerns about the state of biodiversity have become increasingly visible in recent years. In Wales, this has been reflected in the passing of environmentally based legislation and the establishment of Welsh rural and wildlife crime priorities. Yet despite the strategic developments, academics and professional groups alike have maintained their concerns that police officers simply lack sufficient knowledge and understanding of wildlife crime to tackle the problem effectively (UNODC, 2021; Nurse & Harding, 2024).

Many aspiring police officers hoping to join a force in England or Wales will undertake a licenced degree in professional policing. These undergraduate courses, like other police entry routes, align with the NPC (CoP, 2024). However, despite its breadth and depth, the NPC makes no mention of wildlife crime. The result is that

many students will go on to join their respective police forces with little if any exposure to the often-complex nature of wildlife criminality. Building on the calls for change, this preliminary research aimed to seek out and critically assess the perceptions of serving Welsh PWCOs. Taking the form of a pilot study, the research provided an opportunity to test the efficacy of the methodology and offered some early insights that may inform the findings of a proposed larger study.

The use of semi-structured interviews was successful, providing the intended balance of eliciting individual perspectives from the participants, whilst ensuring that the needs of the research were addressed. The resultant findings were analysed based on a priori issues and emergent themes.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the recognition that police education should strive to raise awareness of wildlife crime was the most comprehensive finding. It was strongly felt that officers' lack of understanding led to a range of problems - failure to recognise offences, missed evidential opportunities, inability to draw connections to wider criminality, and limited awareness of the roles and responsibilities of other organisations. Introducing key legislation, such as the Countryside and Wildlife Act 1981, alongside experiential opportunities which allow students to observe wildlife habitats (such as badger setts) first-hand, would likely go a long way to addressing the educational gap. However, it would make sense to extend and deepen levels of understanding by incorporating the views and perspectives of other organisations into any learning packages. There seems to be a willingness for bodies such as NRW and other NGOs to share their expertise, so where appropriate, it makes sense for this goodwill to be appropriately harnessed.

Interestingly, the study suggested that the participants tended to perceive their role through an anthropocentric lens – prioritising harm to humans over non-human species. This is not a criticism, but it does raise the prospect that police education should also include a more theoretical stance, one which presents competing views on the value and significance of flora and fauna. This would allow policing students to critically assess their own perceptions, challenging them to reflect on the role of the natural world and their relationship to it. There is an argument that wildlife crime should be embedded into police culture (NPCC, 2018), but this can only happen if individuals are given the space and opportunity to decide for themselves what matters and why.

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