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Control of Poaching in Poland as a Form of Implementation of the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030¹

Abstract: This article's purpose is to present how the goals of the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030 are implemented in Poland in terms of combating poaching. It discusses which services combat poaching in Poland and how they operate. The characteristic methods of legal sciences and criminology, namely literature analysis and criticism, the dogmatic method, secondary data analysis, and the interview method, were used to achieve the research goals. The first of these was used to analyse the scientific literature on poaching published to date, with a particular focus on the poaching of land animals. The dogmatic method was used to examine selected legal acts regulating poaching. The dogmatic and literature analysis methods were often applied simultaneously, which allowed interpretation of the regulations analysed. The secondary data analysis consisted of analysing statistics on poaching, specifically criminal statistics obtained from police headquarters. The final research method used were interviews carried out using a computer-assisted individual interview technique. Interviews were conducted with an employee of the Regional Directorate of State Forests in Białystok and an officer of the State Hunting Guard in Białystok, because both institutions are statutorily obliged to combat poaching in Poland.

Keywords: Agenda 2030, crime control, hunting law, poaching, wildlife

Introduction

On 25 September 2015, the United Nations adopted a resolution defining 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), on the basis of which 169 specific targets were formulated (UN, 2015). The SDGs address five areas: people, planet, prosperity,

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peace, and partnership (known as the 5Ps). According to the Agenda, the goals set out therein are to be achieved by 2030 at the latest. The document was adopted because today's global problems, especially those related to climate, are so serious and complex that it is impossible to solve them at the level of an individual, a single state, or a single international organization (Kampania 17. Celów, n.d.).

Sustainable development implies taking measures for the improvement of the world's socio-economic situation that will take into account respect for the environment and the needs of future generations. This precludes arbitrary and uncontrolled exploitation of the environment and its resources. Unfortunately, activities that are harmful to the environment, including in particular environmental crimes, are a global threat nowadays and, worse still, one that is increasing. Due to their current characteristics, environmental crimes require a transnational response and have to be fought by various institutions working together. This is confirmed by Agenda 2030, which indicates that the foundation of the SDGs is a concern for environmental sustainability that consists largely in the protection of species and conservation of biodiversity (White, 2021, p. 259).

Some of the SDGs address broadly defined social pathologies, including crime. Therefore they are related to criminology, which is, in simple terms, the scientific study of crime. From the standpoint of criminology, priority is given to SDG 16, which entails promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all, and building effective and accountable institutions at all levels that are conducive to social inclusion (UN, 2015). On the other hand, when analysing the SDGs through the lens of both criminology and the natural environment, it is necessary to make reference to Goal 15, which declares a commitment to protecting terrestrial ecosystems, the sustainable management of forests, combating desertification, halting and reversing land degradation, and halting loss of biodiversity. Deforestation, desertification, and land degradation are mainly the consequences of human actions, including by organized crime groups that have seen the financial potential in environmental crimes (Europol, 2022).

One of the targets formulated on the basis of Goal 15 is Target 15.7, which directly relates to crime and the fight against it; it is closely connected not only with criminology in general, but primarily with eco-criminology. This target demands urgent action to eliminate such crimes as poaching of and trafficking in protected animal and plant species, as well as measures to prevent the purchase and sale of illegal wildlife products. It is estimated that the value of the game killed by poachers ranges from USD 5 billion to USD 23 billion. Elephants and rhinos are of greatest interest to criminals, since ivory is a very valuable raw material used for jewellery and art products, and rhino tusks are used for medicinal purposes (Redo, 2019, p. 935).

When analysing the links between the SDGs and environmental crimes, it is impossible to ignore Goal 14 and especially Target 14.4, which involves the elimination of overfishing, illegal, unregistered, and unregulated fishing, and destructive fishing

practices. However, since the scope of this paper is limited to poaching on land, this issue is addressed here only symbolically. What is worth noting in this context is the problem of resistance by some countries to measures aimed at protecting sea and ocean waters; a clear example of this is the acceptance by the Japanese government of unethical whaling and dolphin-fishing practices (Pływaczewski et al., 2021, p. 288).

The implementation of the goals defined in Agenda 2030 is constantly monitored, and information on progress toward goals is regularly published in reports. It is noteworthy that Poland has been successful in achieving the goals; it has almost fully achieved Goal 15 and is taking effective measures to sustain the results achieved so far (Sachs et al., 2023). Because work is still underway to fully achieve this goal and sustain the results over the long term, I deemed necessary to look at selected measures aiming to achieve it. Due to my area of research interest and the relationship between Goal 15 and eco-criminology, the analysis is narrowed down to examine the control of poaching in Poland, with a particular focus on forest poaching. In this study, poaching is understood as a criminal activity involving the illegal capture, acquisition, killing, or interception of terrestrial animals – both protected and unprotected species – without appropriate authorization, in violation of environmental protection laws, species protection regulations, and principles of sustainable natural resource management. It is important to emphasize that poaching as I use it here represents a specific form of poaching focused solely on land animals. However, the term ‘poaching’ is a broader concept encompassing all types of illegal hunting, irrespective of the habitat in which the animals are found, thereby can include poaching either on land or in water. The purpose of this paper is to broaden the knowledge about this form of crime against animals and the fight against it.

1. Methodological issues

At the beginning of the research process that resulted in this paper, the specific research problems that required scientific investigation were identified. They were formulated in three questions: (1) Does Poland implement the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in terms of poaching control? (2) What government agencies control poaching in Poland? (3) How do these agencies combat poaching in Poland? The following methods specific to legal science and criminology were used to solve the problems: literature analysis and critique, the dogmatic method, secondary data analysis, and the interview method. The first of these was used to analyse the existing scientific literature on poaching, with a particular focus on poaching of land animals. This exploration of the state of research described in monographs and periodicals made it possible to identify a research gap and complete the state of knowledge about poaching and its control in the context of the objectives of sustainable development and Agenda 2030. The dogmatic method, on the other hand, was used to examine selected legal acts that govern poaching; this analysis made it possible

to characterize the crime of poaching and to present the rules and scope of criminal liability for its perpetration. The dogmatic and literature analysis methods were often applied simultaneously, which made it possible to interpret the legislation.

The secondary data analysis involved analysing the crime statistics on poaching obtained from the Polish National Police Headquarters. They included information on crimes gathered independently by police officers, as well as information received from the State Hunting Guard and the State Forest Guard. Both of these conduct reporting activities on poaching in Poland, providing information on such crimes to the police, and both have powers related to the control of poaching. Employees of these institutions are most often the first to learn about poaching, as well as about attempts to commit this crime and preparations to commit it, in the areas they manage. They are therefore a major source of information on poaching for the police.

The last research method used was the computer-assisted personal interview. The interviews were conducted using an electronic questionnaire; questions were read out to respondents and their answers were entered into the computer immediately. The interviews were conducted with an employee of the Regional Directorate of State Forests in Białystok and an officer of the State Hunting Guard in Białystok. Both of these institutions are obliged to fight poaching, which is a form of forest sabotage. The practical knowledge of foresters and hunting guards, which results from direct, professional, and often investigation-based experience with poaching and poachers, has allowed a much deeper understanding of the forms of fighting this phenomenon, as well as of its etiological and phenomenological aspects. The research sample was chosen arbitrarily: I decided to select units to which I had the best access, while ensuring that the selection of respondents remained consistent with the research objectives.²

2. Poaching in Poland: Legal aspects

Poaching in the general sense is hunting animals or fishing in an unauthorized manner or at an unauthorized time and place (Słownik języka polskiego PWN, 2023). The Polish legislature has made the concept more specific by formulating its legal definition; thus poaching is ‘an action aimed at gaining possession of an animal in a manner that does not constitute hunting or in violation of the conditions for permissible hunting’ (Hunting Law, 1995). While the definition of poaching is provided in Article 4(3) of the Hunting Law, the definition of hunting in the context of poaching can be found in its Article 4(2). The legislature has assumed that hunting is:

2 At this point, I would like to thank the employee of the Podlasie Branch of the State Hunting Guard and the employee of the Regional Directorate of State Forests in Białystok for their time and commitment to providing as much information as possible about poaching control in their professional practice.

- 1) tracking, shooting with hunting firearms, and catching by permitted means live game, birds, or mammals of invasive alien species that pose a threat to the European Union or Poland;
- 2) hunting game with the help of hunting birds with the approval of the minister competent for environmental matters; and
- 3) catching animals of invasive alien species that pose a threat to the European Union or Poland.

For these activities to be considered hunting, they must be aimed at taking possession of game. Thus it should be pointed out that the Polish legislature has adopted two criteria for understanding the concept of hunting: the manner of the hunter's action and the goal of the action (Pązik, 2023).

If a person takes actions aimed to gain possession of animals in ways other than legal hunting, e.g. by unauthorized methods, he or she is poaching. Importantly, poaching does not necessarily end with the capture of the game. It is irrelevant whether the perpetrator has achieved the purpose of his or her action and come into possession of the game or whether he or she has obtained nothing. According to the Polish legislature, taking possession of game is only the result of poaching, not its essence (Zwolak, 1999).

The Polish legislation does not give explicit examples of activities that are considered a form of poaching. Nevertheless, the doctrine most often identifies the crime as being the acts prohibited by Article 53 of the Hunting Law, according to which, poaching is committed by a person who:

- 1) hunts migratory game birds on the sea coast within a 3,000-meter-wide strip extending from the coast into the sea or a 5,000-meter-wide strip extending inland (Article 53(1));
- 2) hunts with greyhounds or their hybrids (Article 53(2));
- 3) hunts during the protected period (Article 53(3));
- 4) hunts without having a hunting licence (Article 53(4));
- 5) in violation of the prohibition, sets up tools or devices intended for catching, capturing, or killing game (Article 53(4a));
- 6) takes possession of game by means of weapons and ammunition other than hunting ones, or by means of explosive devices and materials, poisons, food with intoxicating properties, artificial light, glue traps, snares, irons, pits, crossbows, digging in burrows, or other unauthorized means (Article 53(5));
- 7) takes possession of game without being authorized to hunt (Article 53(6)).

In order to characterize the forms of poaching specified in Article 53 of the Hunting Law, one should start with the illegal hunting of birds in the coastal strip, as specified in item 1 above. The purpose of Section 1 is to protect migratory game birds, which include geese, greylag geese, greater white-fronted geese, bean geese, mallards,

teals, common pochards, tufted ducks, pigeons, woodcocks, and coots (Słomski, 2023a). Game animal species are defined in § 1(1)(2) of the Regulation of the Minister of Environment of 11 March 2005 Establishing a List of Game Animal Species. The need to protect migratory birds is primarily due to the fact that a bird migration route runs along the Polish coast. The ban on hunting stems from the need to ensure the birds' safe and peaceful migration when they move from northern Europe and Siberia to the warmer parts of western and southern Europe (Słomczyński, 2018).

The second form of poaching, included in Article 53(2) of the Hunting Law, is the use of greyhounds or their hybrids in hunting. Greyhounds are probably the oldest hunting dogs in the world used for pursuing game in open spaces; they are sometimes referred to as ancient hunting dogs. In some countries, such as Spain, it is still legal to hunt with them (although it is controversial). These dogs are bred solely for use in hunting; after the hunting season, they become useless, even problematic for their owners (if only because of the cost of maintenance), and therefore are killed or abandoned by their caretakers to certain death, e.g. their paws are broken, they are tied to trees, or are left in deep, dried-up wells (Daly, 2016).

In Poland, the breeding or keeping of greyhounds or their hybrids requires a permit from a district head, issued at the request of the person intending to breed or keep such a dog. Regulation of breeding or keeping dogs of this type is based on Article 10(1) of the Hunting Law. The requirement to obtain a permit for owning, breeding, or keeping greyhounds and their hybrids is imposed as a result of the recognition of these animals – due to their nature – as a threat to the safety of wildlife (Judgment of the Provincial Administrative Court in Kielce, 2010); in the past, the use of greyhounds in hunting resulted in the partial extermination of some animal species (Słomski, 2023b). Importantly, hunting with greyhounds differs from hunting with other dogs. Other breeds of hunting dogs (e.g. pointers) expose the game by signalling it to the hunter and allowing him or her to shoot it (which is intended to be a death that is quick and without undue suffering and pain). Greyhounds, on the other hand, are not able to only point to the game, and from the moment they sense it, they chase it until they catch it (Sokolnictwo.pl, n.d.). It was mainly for these reasons that it was deemed necessary to abandon the use of greyhounds in hunting.

The third type of poaching listed in Article 53 of the Hunting Law is hunting during the protected period. The ban on hunting during this period stems from the need to protect game from excessive depletion (Nazar, 2017). A protected period is a time during which hunting of certain animal species is prohibited in order to allow the species to reproduce, protect its young, and maintain healthy populations. The protected periods for individual game species are specified in a Regulation of the Minister of Environment (Regulation Establishing the Hunting Periods for Game Animals, 2005). The protected periods for individual game species are in some cases differentiated by the age or sex of the individual, and in one case, involving three species of geese, also differentiated territorially between various provinces. It is worth

noting at this point that elk, classified as a game animal, is the only species under complete year-round protection without any exceptions. Hunting during protected periods is considered one of the most serious hunting offences because it causes extremely negative natural consequences; for example, once a wild boar sow with piglets is shot, the young have little chance of survival (Stec, 2014).

Hunting without a licence is another form of poaching specified by the legislature in Article 53(4) of the Hunting Law. In this case, the poacher's behaviour involves hunting without holding the required licence. The criteria of the offence are met when the perpetrator hunts without obtaining a hunting licence at all, during a period of suspension of his or her hunting licence, or despite the revocation of his or her hunting licence. Liability under Article 53(4) of the Hunting Law is also incurred by a person who hunts even though he or she has lost his or her membership of the Polish Hunting Association. This is because the Hunting Law allows hunting primarily to members of the Polish Hunting Association, as well as to foreigners – citizens of EU Member States, if they hold a hunting licence in another EU Member State and take a supplementary exam in the Polish language on the applicable regulations concerning the terms and conditions of hunting. According to Article 43(1) of the Hunting Law, after meeting certain requirements, foreigners or Polish citizens who live abroad with the intention of permanent residence are also allowed to hunt (Nazar, 2017).

Poaching also involves setting up tools or devices designed to catch or kill game; this form of poaching is defined in Article 53(4a) of the Hunting Law. For the existence of this particular crime, it is irrelevant whether these tools or devices are actually used to capture game. The criminalized behaviour consists solely in installing or placing items that can be used to catch or kill an animal in any location. This is a new form of the criminal act and was introduced into the law by a 2018 amendment. The offence is the result of the addition of Article 42(a)(a) to the Hunting Law, which contains a catalogue of prescriptions and prohibitions related to hunting.

The sixth type of poaching, identified in Article 53(5) of the Hunting Law, consists in taking possession of game by means of weapons and ammunition other than hunting ones, or by means of explosive devices and materials, poisons, food with intoxicating properties, artificial light, glue traps, snares, irons, pits, crossbows, digging in burrows, or other unauthorized means. This provision regulates the most dangerous form of poaching, as it involves the greatest suffering of animals. This form of poaching most deeply contradicts the idea of humane treatment of animals and care for their existence and reproduction (Słomski, 2023a). The purpose of this provision is to eliminate situations where animals suffer before dying and to avoid additional and absolutely unnecessary stress. Therefore, the *ratio legis* in this case is primarily the aforementioned humanitarian reasons. This provision seeks to protect animals and their life without undue suffering (i.e. without suffering that is unacceptable from a moral and common-sense point of view) and to end the animal's life in the same way (Gabriel-Węglowski, 2009).

The last form of poaching defined in Article 53 of the Hunting Law is taking possession of game without having a hunting licence (paragraph 6). In that provision, the legislature used the phrase ‘takes possession.’ It means that attributing the perpetration of the offence specified in Article 53(6) of the Hunting Law requires an effect in the form of obtaining game (Słomski, 2023a). Therefore, it is an effect-based offence, and its perpetration is independent of the value of the game that the perpetrator obtains (Supreme Court, 2014).

A person who commits the offence of poaching in any of the forms specified in Article 53 of the Hunting Law is subject to the penalty of imprisonment for up to five years. However, penalizing the perpetrator with a prison sentence is not the only option. Pursuant to Article 37(a) of the Criminal Code, for a crime punishable by imprisonment for a period not exceeding eight years, when the punishment imposed for it would not be longer than one year, the court may, instead of that punishment, impose a sentence of restriction of freedom for a period of not less than four months or a fine of not less than 150 daily rates, in particular if the court simultaneously imposes a punitive measure, a compensatory measure, or forfeiture (Criminal Code, 1997). The court may also use the institution of mixed punishment set forth in Article 37(b) of the Criminal Code: mixed punishment consists in the court simultaneously imposing a sentence of imprisonment (in the case of poaching not exceeding three months) and a sentence of restriction of freedom for up to two years. The penalty of imprisonment is then executed first, unless otherwise provided by law. It should be added that in accordance with Article 66(1) of the Criminal Code, in connection with the upper limit of the penalty of imprisonment provided for in Article 53 of the Hunting Law, conditional discontinuance of the criminal proceedings is also possible in the case of the offence in question. In addition, according to Article 54 of the Hunting Law, the court may also order the forfeiture of weapons, vehicles, tools, and dogs with which the poaching offence was committed, as well as the forfeiture of trophies, game carcasses, and parts thereof. A forfeiture ruling can also apply to items that are not owned by the offender.

3. Aspects of the fight against poaching in Poland

Crime statistics are the primary source of knowledge about crime. In order to determine the scale of the poaching phenomenon, an analysis was conducted of police statistics from the years 1998 to 2022. It should be emphasized that the analysed data do not show a complete picture of the offence of poaching in Poland; they only give an idea. This paper does not address the problems of the so-called ‘dark number’ of crimes, since no law enforcement agencies consider data on all crimes actually committed in their studies (Błachut et al., 2004, p. 227). At the same time, one must bear in mind the specific characteristics of poaching, which involves a high risk of being undetected by law enforcement agencies, due to, among other things, the place where the offence is committed, where the daily presence of humans is limited and

also because of the silent victims, namely animals. Therefore, while the statistics on poaching should be included in analyses, they must be treated with caution and with awareness of their selectivity.

Importantly, the data for the period from 1998 up to 2012 that were made available by the National Police Headquarters were prepared on the basis of a data set in which, due to the way the data was collected at the time, information on the qualification of the offence was based on a catalogue of digital symbols. This means that a single statistical code covers an entire article (with all its sections) from either the Criminal Code or another law containing criminal law provisions. Sometimes a single code even includes data on more than one article; this was the case with the offence discussed here, as information on poaching in these years was placed under a symbol that takes into account up to two articles of the Hunting Law, namely Articles 52 and 53. The police stressed that it was not possible to distinguish the legal qualifications and figures in more detail; I was also informed that it was not possible to obtain data for periods before 1998 because before that year, the statistical symbol for the Hunting Law was not distinguished at all (meaning that the police did not include any crime specified in that law in their statistics). It should also be added that until the end of 2012, the data presented included information both on pre-trial proceedings conducted by the police and on proceedings conducted by the prosecutor's office without involvement of the police. However, since the beginning of 2013, due to a change in the data collection system, the data collected has included only information on pre-trial proceedings conducted by the police.

Table 1. The number of proceedings initiated and offences detected in Poland between 1998 and 2022



Source: prepared by the author based on data from the National Police Headquarters

It should be pointed out that, based on the data presented in Table 1, the changes in the offence of poaching detected in Poland from 1998 to 2022 are characterized by an overall decreasing trend. At the same time, there are very clear deviations from this general trend, which took place in 1998–2001, 2002–2003, 2004–2006, 2008–2010, 2011–2013, 2014–2015, and 2018–2021. The volume of poaching recorded each year, especially in the last years covered by the analysis, has decreased by roughly half compared to the period of 1999–2013. Until 2013, about 700 cases of poaching were detected almost every year. Since 2014, about 200–300 such offences were detected each year.

It should be emphasized that this sharp change in the number of detected crimes is noticeable at a specific point in time. This is due to the aforementioned changes in the statistical registration methods, which affected both the Hunting Law itself and the systemic mechanism for collecting statistical data on criminal offences. Both changes in the collection of data on poaching (which consist in the separate collection of data on Articles 52 and 53 of the Hunting Law after 2012) and changes to the entire system of collection of information on crimes (which consist in the inclusion of information only on proceedings conducted by the police) are reflected in the statistical picture of poaching in Poland. For this reason, it is difficult, if not impossible, to specify the actual direction of the changes in this type of offence in the period from 1998 to 2012. However, it is worth looking at how the situation evolved between 2013 and 2022, when the methods of collection of numerical information on crimes became relatively better organized. It also needs to be clarified that the years 2016–2017 are excluded from the analysed period; the materials sent by the National Police Headquarters did not include data for these years, and a request for supplemental information in this regard was not answered.

In 2013, 824 cases of poaching were recorded. The reason for this was that the proceedings had already been initiated before the aforementioned changes came into effect. In subsequent years, about 200–300 poaching offences were detected per year. The smallest number of poaching offences, 177, was recorded in 2022, while the largest number, 383, was recorded in 2021.

Against the background of the statistics presented, one more point is worth mentioning. In the case of poaching, there are more crimes recorded than the number of proceedings initiated. However, the discrepancy between the number of prosecutions initiated and crimes detected is natural and is due to the fact that some of the ongoing cases are so-called ‘multi-offence cases’, where more than one offence is detected in the course of an investigation (Rzymkowski, 2017, p. 240).

In light of the above, it is worth emphasizing once again that the poaching statistics provided by the Polish police are extremely difficult to analyse. The picture of crime that emerges from these statistics is ambiguous and uncertain, because of the changes in the way data is collected and also by unexplained gaps in the statistical material. However, despite the difficulties, it is indisputable that the volume of

poaching offences is decreasing. This is confirmed not only by the numbers, but also by information obtained from persons who fight poachers professionally.

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the criminological aspects of poaching, and in particular the ways to fight it, interviews were conducted with two professionals involved in countering this type of crime. The first respondent was an employee of the Podlasie branch of the State Hunting Guard; the respondent was selected for the study because the statutory tasks of the State Hunting Guard include the fight against poaching (Hunting Law, 1995). The other respondent was an employee of the Forest Guard of the Regional Directorate of State Forests in Białystok. The choice of that person for the study was based on the fact that forest guards are specifically authorized to fight poaching on state-owned land managed by the state forests (Forest Law, 1991).

The respondents were interviewed one at a time, at different times, without interacting with each other. However, both expressed the identical opinion that poaching is a less and less frequent crime in Poland. At the same time, they stressed that the frequency of poaching is particularly low in Podlasie; they explained that it is committed less frequently because people's tastes and interests are changing, especially in the case of young people, for whom other areas of life are much more attractive and engaging. The respondents indicated that in the past, the root cause of poaching was poverty: poor people poached to get meat, a valuable food for themselves and their families. However, this reason for poaching no longer exists.

Nowadays, poaching is motivated by personal preferences, e.g. an ambition to get possession of an animal regardless of whether it is legal or not (this applies to wolves, for example). Some people want to experience something special or dangerous and to prove to themselves, and also to their friends, that they are special because they know how to catch game. Poaching is done both to catch game and also to get hunting trophies, i.e. body parts of captured animals, which for a hunter can be a souvenir of a successful 'hunt'.

New motivations for poaching are also emerging, arising from conflicts between humans and wildlife. These primarily concern troublesome species that pose threats to crops, livestock, and even human safety in urban areas. An example includes farmers who lay out poisoned meat to eliminate wolves. Hunters cannot reduce the populations of protected species, prompting affected groups to take matters into their own hands. Urban poaching is also a significant issue, particularly impacting bird populations. Analysis of available online sources reveals that numerous urban residents experience discomfort due to the presence of birds, which they kill when the birds disturb them in the morning or contaminate residential or recreational spaces (Leszczyński, 2020; Pająk, 2021). Those affected by this issue indicate that spring and summer are particularly troublesome periods, as birds begin singing at dawn, with the first rays of daylight causing noise that disrupts residents' sleep. Remote work, which became more prevalent during the lockdowns, has intensified

the perception of discomfort due to natural sounds in suburban areas. Additionally, the increased presence of birds results in more frequent contamination, requiring time and financial resources for cleaning, which unfortunately exacerbates social irritation (Gwiazdowicz, 2011, p. 15). Consequently, some urban residents engage in independent illegal actions such as shooting birds with airguns or poisoning them, treating these animals as bothersome pests (Dajczak et al., 2021, p. 809). The issue of urban poaching warrants special attention, particularly as it largely remains overlooked, with a significant legal gap that hinders effective resolution.

Modern instances of poaching are thus largely the result of an intensifying human-wildlife conflict (Gwiazdowicz et al., 2023), exacerbated by environmental changes and increasing pressure on natural resources. Consequently, certain species are beginning to cause more significant damage and pose a nuisance to humans, who, lacking knowledge of effective countermeasures, resort to primitive solutions such as animal elimination through poaching. Addressing this issue requires effective preventive measures, primarily through policymakers and legislators developing systemic solutions. These solutions should be formulated based on available research and scientific evidence to ensure the effectiveness and appropriateness of the measures undertaken (see, e.g., Conover, 2001).

Continuing the discussion on poaching in forested areas, it is worth noting that trapping as a form of poaching, which involves setting snares, metal lines, or traps, is currently disappearing, and fortunately, such activities are less and less common. The state forestry employee stressed that a number of preventive and control measures are being carried out in connection with trapping. In addition, both respondents noted that poachers are increasingly aware that the use of snares is highly inhumane. The perpetrators are concerned that the use of such tools would be considered particularly cruel if their offence was detected and would thus provide grounds for a harsher punishment to be imposed. In addition, poaching involves risks even before the offence is committed: the mere possession of snares and traps is illegal and punishable. Trapping is also more time-consuming than other forms of poaching, requiring setting-up of snares and then regularly checking to see if an animal has been caught. This form of catching game can take a lot of time, therefore poachers prefer to act in a different way: they use firearms.

Currently, poaching with firearms is the most common form of poaching. The respondents indicated that this was fostered by 'open' national borders and Poland's membership in the Schengen zone, which greatly facilitated illegal access to firearms. The most common paths for bringing illegal weapons to Poland lead from Belgium, the Netherlands, and France, where those interested in owning weapons for poaching purposes buy them at local markets and antique fairs and then freely bring them into Poland. Many poachers also own firearms legally; this group consists primarily of hunters who want to obtain game illegally and in violation of regulatory restrictions. Such hunters receive a so-called 'odstrzał' for culling a specific animal, the colloquial

name for a document that authorizes a hunter to perform an individual hunt. The document contains information on the quantity, species, and sex of the game to be hunted. However, hunters often do not adhere to the stipulations set out in the document for economic reasons, among others; this is because, according to the regulations, a hunter can take a shot animal for his or her own use but must pay for it. Some people do not want to pay and do not include the shot animals in the report from the hunt. Animals obtained in this way are used by the poachers for meat, for example, but also for hunting trophies.

It should be added that poachers also include former hunters who have been excluded from a hunting club but have not had their firearms taken away. It is also noteworthy that within the hunting community, some individuals condemn poaching and actively participate in efforts to counter this practice. Law-abiding hunters combat poaching by supporting game wardens' activities, reporting suspicious actions, and educating their peers. This involvement is crucial, as poaching undermines the reputation of the entire hunting community. Hunters' engagement strengthens the effectiveness of anti-poaching measures, as evidenced by data from the Polish Hunting Association, which shows that in 2023, hunters discovered and deactivated 25,192 snares, 400 iron traps, and 769 other poaching devices across 4,429 hunting districts (Polish Hunting Association, 2024).

The respondents indicated that poaching is a practice that is very difficult to detect. The fight against this crime is hampered by the frequent unwillingness of the public to cooperate in it, due to the fact that reporting a crime is often considered as equivalent to denunciation. The employee of the State Hunting Guard pointed out that although it is sometimes possible to obtain information about poaching 'from the field', i.e. from other hunters, for example, as well as from people unrelated to hunting, such as neighbours of the perpetrator, those informants do not want the notifications to be of a formal nature because they do not want to sign them.

The fight against poaching by the State Hunting Guard is carried out, among other things, by conducting patrols, for example in areas indicated by people informally reporting such crimes. Patrols are then conducted jointly with Forest Guard employees or police officers. Routine patrols are also conducted in selected hunting districts, which make it possible to obtain information about offences and also serve a preventive function. Information about the increased presence of guards in an area discourages poachers from undertaking their activities.

The state forestry employee, on the other hand, explained that forestry districts have their own posts, with two to four forest guards employed in each. It is those individuals who bear the greatest burden in terms of the fight against poaching. In order to carry out their duties effectively, they have motor vehicles and firearms at their disposal and also have the powers granted to them by the Forest Law. They obtain information about poaching from their own activities and also from outsiders.

Many hunters adhere to the ethics of hunting and the laws that govern it, and as a gesture of their opposition to poaching, they report the practice to the Forest Guard.

To combat poaching, the Forest Guard uses, among other things, their official vehicles, long – and short-range weapons, night vision devices, thermal-imaging devices, and surveillance cameras (camera traps). When something disturbing or unusual happens ‘in the field’, the cameras transmit data to a forest guard’s telephone. He or she then has a live view of the event and is able to quickly react, intervene, and arrive promptly at the scene of the crime. Camera traps also provide information on where to step up monitoring and intensify patrols, for example showing that an off-road vehicle is driving in a particular forest area at night. With this knowledge, guards can go to the site, start searching for a potential poacher, and plan future inspections.

The fight against poaching is made more difficult by the perpetrators obliterating their traces; very rarely is it possible to catch them red-handed. Poachers plan their actions and know how to avoid liability. They shoot their firearms so that there are no traces and do not gut the game at the place of its capture but quickly take it from there and hide it. According to the employee of the Hunting Guard, ‘a poacher enters the forest with nothing, and leaves the forest with nothing because he often stores his tools, weapons, and captured animal in a hiding place in the forest. He does so in order to make detection more difficult.’

According to both respondents, the ‘dark number’ of poaching offences is very large, definitely much larger than the number of cases disclosed. The perpetrators are caught only sporadically. There are many reasons for this: most importantly, poaching is a crime that is very often committed without witnesses and occurs in a large area rarely visited by people. At the same time, the area is well known to the poacher. Knowing the terrain makes it possible to plan the crime and thus minimize the risk of incurring any liability for committing it. In addition, it is difficult to determine the actual reasons for an animal’s death; sometimes it is not clear whether an animal was poached or attacked by predators.

Both respondents agreed that poaching is one of the most difficult offences to detect. Poachers rarely leave clear traces of their actions. Sometimes they leave traces of their vehicles behind them and sometimes witnesses say they heard the sound of shooting; however, these are incidental situations. Moreover, the perpetrators are often equipped with professional equipment such as thermal-imaging devices. In addition, they observe the area, act professionally, and attract the animals to come to a specific location. Sometimes a poacher only needs ten minutes to commit the crime, so even if a witness notifies the relevant agencies, they will not be able to reach the scene of the crime so quickly. Most often, however, this crime has no witnesses, therefore much of the fight against poachers is based on monitoring and organizing ambushes. Detecting a poacher is also significantly hampered by the fact that a large proportion of poachers come from the hunting community, which means that

they have professional knowledge of how to get the animals and at the same time understand how forest and hunting guards work.

An important aspect of the fight against poaching is the cooperation of the Hunting Guard and the Forest Guard with the police. Upon finding that a poaching crime has been committed, hunting and forestry guards notify the police, who conduct all investigative activities to determine the perpetrator. Police officers secure traces, write reports, and collect the tools used to commit the crime and then hand over the collected material to the prosecutor's office. Forest and hunting guards primarily serve the role of experts in the whole process; thanks to their experience and daily direct contact with animals and the terrain, they provide valuable information to the police regarding the operation of poachers and the illegally obtained animals (which are also a loss to the state treasury). Guards are witnesses in the proceedings and can (and often do) act as auxiliary prosecutors.

In addition, the Forest Guard and the Hunting Guard cooperate with the police in various planned prevention activities, with economic crime departments and also with prevention departments and local police units. The Forest Guard organizes preventive and monitoring campaigns, e.g. 'poacher' campaigns, which take place, for example, before holidays, when there is a higher demand for meat. The campaign involves organizing patrols that drive around the hunting grounds and check the legality of hunting; it also takes the form of inspections of vehicles on roads close to the forest to check the compatibility of the hunted game with the documentation. During such campaigns, poachers are often detected and then are either fined (if they have committed a misdemeanour) or pre-trial proceedings are initiated (if it is determined that they have committed a crime). Searches for snares are also organized, and campaigns such as the 'wreath' campaign, concerning the search for people who illegally come into possession of dropped antlers, also take place. In this regard, the guards cooperate with the police, hunting clubs, border guards, fishing guards, and also with municipal guards.

Both respondents stressed in their interview that the fight against poaching is very important but also extremely difficult. It is also hampered by the approach of courts: the justice system often treats poaching cases lightly. In Poland, animal protection is treated by some judges as a manifestation of the 'Bambi syndrome'. Both the State Forests employee and the Hunting Guard employee indicated that the operation of the justice system needs to be improved and that judges need to be more involved in the cases they adjudicate and take animal protection more seriously. Otherwise, the anti-poaching efforts may be useless.

Conclusions

Based on the research, it became possible to solve the research problems formulated at the outset. It should be emphasized that Poland has been implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in terms of the fight against poaching for years. The Agenda highlights the need to combat many human activities that have a destructive impact on the environment, and poaching, which poses a serious, direct threat to wildlife, is one of those activities. Goal 15 of Agenda 2030 indicates the need to fight against poaching; Poland has been successful in achieving this goal, but in order to preserve the achievements so far, the control of poaching must continue.

The analyses led to the conclusion that Poland is effectively combating poaching. However, due to the evolving nature of this activity, continual adaptation of countermeasures and strategies is necessary to ensure the effective protection of wildlife. Those who are legally appointed to fight the crime are alarmed by the justice system's trend of downplaying the poaching problem. Treating poaching as a behaviour that is of little harm to society may cause its escalation, if it leads to poachers gaining a sense of impunity. In addition, such an approach by courts gives the officers who fight this problem an unpleasant and quite hurtful feeling that their work is of little value. After all, by fighting to protect wild animals, they are in fact fighting for the natural environment, which is our common good.

Poaching in Poland is in decline. This is influenced, among other things, by the effective work carried out by officers of the State Hunting Guard and the State Forest Guard, the two primary state agencies that are legally required to combat poaching. To some extent, the effectiveness of their actions is confirmed by crime statistics, which show a decreasing number of detected poaching offences. The guards themselves also confirm that the scale of poaching is going down, but point out other reasons for this, such as the better financial situation of Polish society compared to 10 or 20 years ago, as well as a change in young people's interests, greater ecological awareness, and increased activity by pro-environment organizations. Nevertheless, poaching still occurs, and perpetrators sometimes use new technologies to commit it; this is why it is so important to provide the relevant government agencies with modern high-tech equipment.

In the fight against poaching, it is very important to take action 'on the ground' – observation and patrols, as well as contacts with local residents of the area and with the hunting community. Prevention campaigns organized together with the police also bring positive effects. Educational activities are also of great value, especially those intended for children and adolescents, who, after all, will in the future assume the burden of responsibility for the environment in which they live and in which they will raise their own children.

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