Wildlife laws are important to protect animals from harmful human activity, and are largely enforced by state authorities, but occasionally by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). By reviewing academic literature and government legislation, this study explored the different perspectives and ideologies of NGOs and how they enforce wildlife law in practice, focusing on the UK and the US. The study concludes that environmental NGOs are vital for the effective policing of wildlife legislation.

Although animal protection legislation has improved in recent years, criminal justice systems still do not prioritise it in many cases. And, although specific treaties do exist (against wildlife trade for example), there remains no international legal standard for the protection of animals. Animal protection therefore relies upon domestic legislation, enforcement of which is complicated by political factors and practical limitations.

Wildlife law — defined by this study as ‘any legislation which seeks to provide protection for wildlife by prohibiting specific harmful acts, and defining these acts within legislation, or by providing wildlife protection via legislative conditions’ — is a marginal area of policing. It is usually the responsibility of small, specialist agencies with limited powers, or added to the already long list of duties of untrained police officers — neither of which is ideal.

Due to limited resources among police services, NGOs have adopted roles in wildlife law enforcement. This study explored these roles, focusing on the UK and the US. NGOs in both countries have a range of roles in environmental law enforcement, acting as policy advisors, researchers, expert witnesses and in a few cases independent investigators and prosecutors — such as the UK’s Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA).

The study describes three main categories of NGOs: Campaigning NGOs, whose primary aim is to raise public awareness of wildlife crime, such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF); law enforcement NGOs, who aim to ensure that wildlife laws are properly enforced, such as the RSPCA in the UK and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in the US; and political lobbying NGOs, whose main goal is to influence the political agenda, such as Wildlife Link, an umbrella organisation for various NGOs in the UK.

NGOs can also be classified based on the ideological foundation for their work. Via a literature review and discussions with NGOs, the researcher says wildlife crime NGOs work from three positions: moral culpability (censuring activities they believe are morally wrong); political priorities (e.g. highlighting activities they think should be given a higher public profile/issues that require legislative change); and animal rights (e.g. demonstrating the case for more animal rights, or highlighting breaches of existing rights).

As well as campaigning activity, NGOs are actively involved in policing against wildlife crime. Due to the varied nature of wildlife crime and lack of police resources, wildlife crime law enforcement has become dependent on public reporting of crimes to NGOs. This is partly because most mainstream police officers have little training in wildlife crime and because it often takes place in remote locations, outside police patrol areas. In the US, public cooperation with NGOs has become critical to so-called ‘green policing’ and may also help to prevent wildlife crime, by providing an informal control.
Wildlife law enforcement: the vital role of NGOs (continued)

Challenges for the enforcement of wildlife law include limited resources and the specialist knowledge required, which does not form a core part of police training. The researcher also says wildlife law may be poorly enforced due to a perception among governments that wildlife crime is an environmental, rather than a criminal justice, issue.

However, NGOs can help to address these problems by providing advice to the police force specialist investigators and other enforcement authorities. Consequently, these agencies rely on the expertise of NGOs, which have developed their own policing to address ineffective mainstream criminal justice, to ensure that appropriate protection is provided for wildlife.

To facilitate this, the researcher recommends that centralised resources are made available to statutory agencies. Likewise, conservation bodies may lack the appropriate criminal justice enforcement skills. There is therefore a need for coordinated action against wildlife crime.

Overall, the NGO private ‘green police’ is a powerful tool for proper enforcement of wildlife legislation, indirectly by challenging government decisions (such as reductions in the legal protection given to animals) or directly, by actively policing against wildlife crime.