

# Science for Environment Policy

## Clamping down on illegal poisoning: Spain's VENENO project

**Poisoned bait is a major threat to endangered bird species in Europe.** The LIFE+ VENENO project was set up to tackle this problem in Spain, developing an action plan for eradication of the illegal use of poison and protocols for law enforcement. As well as improving the prosecution of illegal poisoning in Spain, LIFE+ VENENO provides a useful model for other European countries.

**Poisoned bait has been used as a method of pest control for hundreds of years.** Poisons are used to kill animals that are regarded as detrimental to agriculture or hunting, such as wolves and raptors, as well as those seen as a nuisance, including feral dogs and cats. However, this poses a threat to biodiversity. Poisons used in baits are also often non-selective and therefore affect non-target species, including domestic animals and endangered species.

During the past 10 years, approximately 7 000 endangered animals have been killed by poison, including eagles, kites, vultures and brown bears. Poison also kills hundreds of pets every year and poses a risk to public health, as it may contaminate game species, such as rabbits, wild boar and partridge, which are consumed by people.

In Spain, poison use of this kind has been a documented activity for over 100 years, but was made illegal in 1983. Despite the change in law, the practice has continued.

Illegal use of poison is a threat to some of the most endangered species of bird in the 'Red Book' of Spanish Birds ([Libro Rojo de las Aves de España](#)), as large raptors may feed on the remains of poisoned animals and ingest the poisoned baits directly. Threatened species include the Spanish imperial eagle (*Aquila adalberti*), monk vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), red kite (*Milvus milvus*) and Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) — all of which are protected under Annex I of the [Birds Directive](#).

The [LIFE+ VENENO project](#), funded by the EU LIFE programme, ran from 2010 to 2014 and aimed to protect these species and reduce illegal poison use in Spain. Evidence shows that legal instruments and action against wildlife poisoning can reduce the number of incidents. Thus, a major goal of VENENO was to develop action plans — which describe how illegal poisoning can be avoided — and to establish protocols to be used to pursue and penalise those responsible. As well as creating an [Action Plan for the Eradication of the Illegal Use of Poison in the Countryside](#), four protocols were developed, including procedural protocols for wildlife rescue centres and toxicology laboratories and a legal protocol for administrative action and criminal proceedings.

The project also created a 'Poison Investigation Unit' comprising two patrols of forest rangers operating in Birds Directive Special Protection Areas (SPAs). Over the course of the project, 19 training courses on the investigation of the illegal use of poison were given to over 500 police officers and forest rangers in seven different regions of Spain, which has improved monitoring and detection of poisoning across the country.

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*(continued)*

This project provides an example of good practice in achieving environmental change. During its four years of operation, LIFE+ VENENO achieved legislative change, ensuring that regional governments in Spain implement tools for preventing and prosecuting poisoning cases. The project had a clear impact on the prosecution of illegal poisoning cases and increased awareness among judges and prosecutors, as well as members of the public. The project has also improved public involvement and awareness of illegal poisoning via the [Network of Volunteers against Poisoning](#) and Freephone SOS VENENO, through which members of the public can report cases of poisoning. Between 2010 and 2011 there were 609 calls to Freephone SOS VENENO, which generated 26 actions by competent authorities collecting animals and poisoned baits.

Although some of these outcomes are specific to Spain, the results are transferable. The protocols used expert knowledge to create step-by-step guidance on how to manage cases of illegal poisoning and are available in English, making them useful to a wide audience. It is hoped that VENENO's model of how to tackle the illegal use of poison can be replicated in other European countries.



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