

Annual Report 2015

Wild Birds Regulation Unit

1. Overview of the Unit's functions and responsibilities

The Wild Birds Regulation Unit was established within the Parliamentary Secretariat for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights following Government's decision in May 2013 to centralise the relevant regulatory functions pertaining to implementation of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 504.71) and related subsidiary legislation, and to oversee and drive the implementation of Government policy in relation to sustainable hunting governance and wild birds conservation. On the national front, the Wild Birds Regulation Unit was tasked with:

- Implementation of a sweeping reform of the relevant legislation concerning hunting and live-capturing to ensure simplification, greater effectiveness, safeguarding the rights of all citizens including hunters and live-capturers, as well as ensuring enforcement and compliance.
- Coordination of the work of the necessary institutional structures, including Ornis Committee, as well as liaison with the Police and MEPA to ensure adequate implementation and enforcement of sustainable hunting and live-capturing policy on the ground;
- Centralisation, simplification and streamlining of licensing processes and provision of a one-stop-shop service to hunters and live-capturers;
- Coordination of enforcement effort;
- Promotion of awareness and culture change amongst the members of the hunting community, based on the principles of sustainability and wise use of ecological resources;
- Delivery of training programmes for hunters and enforcement officers;
- Administering hunter and live-capturer education and examination programmes;
- Maintenance of statistics and data quality control;
- Coordination of awareness raising, communication and training activities;
- Commissioning the necessary technical studies and reports;
- Issuance of various licenses and permits and control over compliance with the license conditions;
- Ensuring continuous engagement and liaison with hunting organisations, environmental NGOs and members of the hunting and live-capturing community.

Within the domain of international and EU policy concerning sustainable hunting, the main priorities of the Unit are as follows:

- Ensuring compliance with the provisions of EU and international Acquis concerning conservation of wild birds, including but not limited to the provisions of the EU Birds Directive, Bern Convention and other relevant EU and international instruments;
- Ensuring correct implementation of spring hunting and autumn live-capturing derogations, as well as all other relevant derogations as decided by Government;
- Coordination of the preparation and timely submission of the relevant derogation and other reports, monitoring policy implementation and maintaining the required statistics;
- Dealing with any potential infringements, including EU Pilot procedures;
- Liaising with the relevant national, EU and international officials and performing other actions as necessary.

2. Main achievements during 2015

2.1 Policy and regulatory processes

During 2015, the Unit has:

- Coordinated preparation, review and submission to European Commission and to Bern Convention Secretariat 11 technical reports pertaining to Malta's implementation of derogations, outcome of monitoring programmes and other reporting obligations. All reporting obligations due in 2015 have been fulfilled and addressed by the Unit ahead of stipulated deadlines.
- Provided technical and policy input to the implementation of a number of EU and international policy processes concerning conservation of wild birds, including under:
 - Tunis Action Plan on the Eradication of Illegal Killing, Trapping and Trade in Wild Birds under the Bern Convention;
 - Working Party on International Environment Issues (WPIEI Biodiversity);
 - Barcelona Convention.
- Represented Malta at two meetings of the EU Group of Experts on Birds and Habitats Directives, on the Network of Special Focal Points for the Illegal Killing of Birds under the Bern Convention, on the Group of Experts on the Conservation of Birds under the Bern Convention, and at the EU Conference on Fitness Check of Nature Legislation and in the annual meeting of the European Union Hunting Directors.
- Coordinated response to infringement procedure concerning finch live-capturing, as well as ensured the successful closure of spring hunting infringement procedure.
- Coordinated the drafting, formulation and subsequent publication of a number of legal instruments, namely:
 - Protection of Wild Rabbit (Amendment) Regulations, 2015
 - Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration on a Derogation for a 2015 Spring Hunting Season for Turtle Dove and Quail) Regulations, 2015
 - Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration on a Derogation for a 2015 Spring Hunting Season for Turtle Dove and Quail) (Revocation) Regulations, 2015.
 - Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration on a Derogation for a 2015 Spring Hunting Season for Turtle Dove and Quail)
 - Conservation of Wild Birds (Amendment) Regulations, 2015
 - Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration on a Derogation for a 2015 Autumn live-capturing season for Finches) Regulations, 2015
 - Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration on a Derogation for a 2015 Autumn live-capturing season for Song Thrush and Golden Plover) Regulations, 2015
 - Conservation of Wild Birds (Declaration of a Derogation for the Control of *Sturnus vulgaris* and *Columba livia*) Regulations, 2015
- In addition, the Unit coordinated major consultation exercises leading up to the formulation of draft regulations concerning falconry, as well as a further set of amendments concerning Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations.
- Provided ongoing assessment and advice to government policies, programmes, projects and plans having impact on the conservation of wild birds.
- Coordinated administration of special licensing procedures for the autumn 2015 live-capturing derogations, and spring hunting derogation, including GIS plotting of the registered live-capturing sites submitted with the live-capturing applications and associated tasks.
- Issued 31 licenses for bird ringers and 5 licenses for taxidermists.
- Carried out reform of hunters' education and examination processes, involving development of new syllabus for examinations, complete change in the format of examinations and publication of new procedures and guidelines. Conducted 484 tests for hunting license applicants under the new procedure.
- Delivered two training sessions for police officers involved in enforcement of Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations. Over 60 officers were trained in basic ornithology, wildlife crime detection techniques, inspection procedures, applicable regulations and prosecution processes.
- Implemented 2 major scientific studies on migration of Turtle Dove and Quail in spring and autumn 2015, and a separate study concerning migration of seven species of finches as well as of Golden Plover and Song Thrush in autumn 2015.
- Ensured digitalisation of *circa* 6,000 site plans and their plotting on GIS for enforcement purposes.

- Developed and implemented a state of the art electronic game reporting system and new licensing database.
 - Coordinated, compiled and published scientific assessments of the conservation status of Turtle Dove, Quail, Golden Plover, Song Thrush and seven finch species.
 - Ensured ongoing customer care and consultations with all stakeholders within the sector, conducted several meetings with a broad range of stakeholders, with representatives of hunting associations, falconry clubs, representatives of international bodies, taxidermy association and environmental NGOs.
 - Maintained a website with a wealth of information materials and reports including statistical data.
 - Coordinated data extraction and publication of Carnet de Chasse data reports.
 - Coordinated preparatory arrangements pertaining to 2016 cycle of licensing processes, including for collection of carnet de chasse and relevant data extraction.
 - Spearheaded a major reform of general licensing processes to pave way for the complete replacement of carnet de chasse system with the new system of multi-annual licenses, state of the art licensing database, and electronic game reporting system. Ensured that Malta has become the first country in the EU to have introduced a comprehensive legally-binding real time game reporting obligation for small game hunting.
 - Liaised with the office of the Information and Data Protection Commissioner, the office of the National Archivist and other entities to develop a comprehensive data protection and retention policy.
 - Coordinated work on the Barn Owl re-introduction project, concluded management agreements for Tal-Baghal and Tal-Bosk facilities.
 - Published and coordinated, in liaison with the Veterinary Services Division, a call for expression of interest for the provision of lifetime care services for injured wild birds.
 - Issued over 25 press releases and coordinated response to over 50 requests for information from the press.
 - Provided ongoing technical and administrative support to the functioning of the Malta Ornis Committee, which held 11 meetings during this period.
 - Published new guidelines concerning importation and possession of birds. These guidelines were widely disseminated and discussed at a series of meetings with hunting trips organisers, taxidermists, representatives of hunting organisations and other interested stakeholders.
 - Coordinated over 20 procurement procedures of varying complexity comprising service tenders, calls for expression of interest, calls for quotations and other procedures to ensure the smooth functioning of the Unit. Amongst other, various equipment was procured to upgrade the capability of the Unit's Specialist Enforcement Branch to conduct patrols, inspections and other enforcement operations.
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- Ensured relocation of the Unit to new premises to improve levels of customer service. Improved provision of customer service to residence of Gozo by securing necessary arrangements for holding of license tests in Gozo and by securing, in collaboration with the Ministry for Gozo, appropriate office location to commence provision of new services on a bi-monthly basis.
 - Generated circa €700,000 in revenue from renewal of general license fees, special live-capturing license fees, fees for provision of various services (e.g. exam fees, sale of educational poster, license replacement fees, etc), and from a range of administrative fines and penalties for various offences under Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations.

2.2 Enforcement

In the field of enforcement, during 2015, the Unit has:

- Continued capacity-building exercise to strengthen Specialist Enforcement Branch, which provides technical assistance and coordinates with the Police, Customs and other enforcement entities on matters related to prevention, detection and prosecution of bird-related crime.
- Coordinated enforcement arrangements with the Police, the AFM and other entities pertaining to the supervision of the spring and autumn hunting seasons.
- Conducted 70 inspections at private residences during which 8,987 bird specimens were examined. Around 2,621 bird specimens examined during these inspections were seized due to various irregularities detected.

A total of 715 registered specimens were found to have been illegally disposed without appropriate authorisation. During the same period, the Unit also carried out 59 inspections at points of entry (port and customs at the passenger terminal and the cargo section) during which 4,571 bird specimens were examined and 56 specimens seized due to irregularities detected. Officials of the Branch attended 25 court sittings (each sitting comprising multiple hearings) which resulted in 125 convictions, 4 acquittals with the rest of the cases pending further hearing. During the reporting period, officials of the Wild Birds Regulation Unit testified in hearings pertaining to 88 cases. During the same period, the Branch also assisted other law enforcement entities in field surveillance operations by conducting 7 field inspections and covert observation operations.

- Administered the stuffed protected birds registration process. During the review period the Unit received 774 applications to transfer or dispose of declared stuffed birds.
- Provided a 24/7 on-call service to assist law enforcement authorities in response to any infringements.
- Responded to queries from the public regarding matters related to the regulation of wild bird exploitation.
- Maintained the administrative fines system. Ensured the issuance and processing of various administrative fines in respect of 677 persons.
- Maintained a common format for statistics keeping and enforcement reporting and compiled enforcement statistics for reporting purposes.