

# Dirty business

By James Geary

**Organised criminals are exploiting lucrative waste disposal markets, with serious environmental consequences**

Gatherings of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) are usually pretty sedate. But the 2006 meeting in Dubrovnik was a stressful occasion. Measures to protect the Atlantic bluefin population were up for discussion, and some delegates alleged that organised crime was involved with the pro-fishing lobby.

One of the environmental groups taking part in the conference found a white lily, a flower commonly used at funerals, on its

seat at the table. It wasn't quite as dramatic as waking up next to a severed horse's head – as in the famous scene from *The Godfather* – but the message, assumed to be from the mafia, was just as clear: don't mess with our business interests.

#### **Crime boom**

"Everyone is aware that organised crime is involved in drugs and sex trafficking," says one European policing official, "but they are just now identifying ecological crimes as a

serious area they have to look into."

Ecological crime is a complex, sprawling activity, spanning everything from illicit bluefin tuna fishing, illegal logging and the smuggling of endangered species to carbon credit fraud, trade in ozone-depleting substances, and toxic-waste dumping. The increase in the amount of hazardous waste produced over recent years, combined with tougher laws regulating processing, has created a lucrative market for illicit trafficking.

Eco-mafia Report since 1994. This year's version states that almost 26,000 ecological crimes were committed in Italy in 2008, amounting to 71 offences every day.

Nearly half the crimes took place in the Campania, Calabria, Sicily and Puglia regions, all of which are known mafia strongholds. The crimes ranged from illegal construction projects to the pollution of woodland, water and agricultural resources. The estimated turnover from all this criminal activity is €20.5bn.

Probably the most astonishing statistic to come out of Eco-mafia Report 2009 is Legambiente's estimate that a mountain of toxic waste 3,100 metres high – almost the height of Mount Etna – has gone missing. According to Legambiente, Italy produced 30m tonnes more industrial waste than was legally disposed of in 2008. And no one knows where that waste went.

"Criminal organisations traffic waste from the industrial north of Italy to the south, where it is dumped," says Laura Biffi of Legambiente's environmental and legal department. "It's cheaper to get the mafia to dispose of it than to dispose of it legally." Waste ends up hidden in the countryside, added to fertiliser and spread across fields, or mixed with concrete and used for public works.

#### Concrete criminals

Biffi tells of one case in Crotona, a small town in Calabria in southern Italy. Chemical waste was discovered in the building materials used to construct a schoolyard and part of the airport. Chemical pollutants had also leached into the water supply. The local government and public prosecutor traced the waste back to a nearby chemical plant that had been shut down. The plant's waste had been secretly mixed into the concrete that was used for a range of construction and renovation projects, including the schoolyard and the airport.

Officials are now monitoring the region for adverse health effects, which might not become apparent for years, or even decades. Increases in diseases such as leukaemia, colon cancer, and stomach tumours have been recorded in other areas where illegal dumping is known to have taken place.

According to the Legambiente report, the toxic waste trade was the mafia's biggest money-spinner in 2008, accounting for some €7bn in revenue.

"Other countries have stronger public controls on these kinds of things," Biffi says. "In Italy, waste management often involves

companies that are informally controlled by the mafia, especially in the construction industry. These businessmen don't follow the rules."

These businessmen are, however, extremely entrepreneurial, continually finding new ways to dump toxic waste – including by sinking ships with contaminated cargo in the Mediterranean, a practice first identified by Legambiente in its first Eco-mafia Report in 1994. Earlier this year, a wreck apparently containing toxic waste was discovered about 30km off the Calabrian coast.

A 2003 European commission study of organised environmental crime in EU member states found that a lack of coordination and cooperation among national law enforcement agencies hampered the prosecution of ecological offences. Three-quarters the cases researched in the commission study involved cross-border crime.

This lack of coordination was especially acute among the EU's newest members

*The profit margins on toxic waste tend to be high for criminals since it is expensive to dispose of legally*

from eastern and central Europe, where the concept of organised environmental crime itself was still very new. The study recommended the harmonisation of environmental criminal law and organised crime legislation and the creation of specialised environmental crime units within national law enforcement agencies.

In Italy, the toxic trade flows from the industrialised north to the less prosperous south. The same migration takes place on a continental scale, with the waste from the developed north funnelled to countries in the developing south.

This "effluent of the affluent" typically leaves ports in western Europe and arrives in places like Nigeria and Ghana, which have particularly lax controls. These countries don't have the infrastructure to store or process the waste properly, so it ends up poisoning the water and soil, which can devastate areas that rely on agriculture and fishing for local livelihoods.

E-waste – defunct or outdated electronic equipment, such as phones, computers and printers – poses the biggest risk, according to Transnational Trafficking and the Rule of Law in West Africa, a threat assessment

The profit margins on toxic waste tend to be high for criminals since it is expensive to dispose of legally. Statistics are hard to come by, since the link between organised criminals and ecological crimes is still relatively new. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, one country has been out ahead on the issue, both in terms of the extent of the problem and the determination to do something about it – Italy.

The Italian environmental group Legambiente has been publishing its annual



Wherever there's cash, there's crime

published by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in July.

A 2007 report by the UN University estimates that the European Union produces an annual average of 8.7m tonnes of e-waste, 6.6m tonnes of which is not treated within the EU. Most of the missing waste, officials believe, is sent to Nigeria and Ghana, where valuable materials like copper wiring are recovered and components with no commercial value are discarded or burned.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime report suggests that only 95,000 tonnes of e-waste is documented as being imported into Nigeria and Ghana every year, where it has a market value of some \$95m. Whatever the extent and value of the e-waste, the environmental damage it causes will eventually cost a lot more. A computer contains large amounts of lead, and significant amounts of other toxic metals such as cadmium and mercury.

In 2008, Greenpeace took soil samples from a handful of e-waste processing sites in Ghana and found lead concentrations at 100 times normal background levels. According to Greenpeace and the Basel Action Network, an environmental watchdog that monitors adherence to the Basel Convention – which criminalises trafficking in hazardous waste – between 10 and 15 shipping containers of used electronic goods arrive every day in Lagos.

### The good guys

It's not all bad news, though. Non-governmental organisations have mobilised to document and deter this toxic trade. The Basel Action Network, which is based in Seattle, focuses on the export of toxic waste and polluting technologies to the developing world. Traffic, based in Cambridge, UK, protects wild animal and plant species from endangerment by trade. And the Environmental Investigation Agency, which often works undercover to expose illegal activities, tackles a wide range of environmental crimes. With offices in London and Washington, the EIA is currently working to stop trade in ozone-depleting refrigerants, which are also powerful greenhouse gases.

These and other organisations have wracked up some successes. Chemical waste trafficking to west Africa has actually

### Wind farms and the Sicilian mob

Contracts to build **wind farms** on the Italian island of **Sicily** have attracted the interest of organised crime. Lucrative grants to construct turbines and high guaranteed rates for the electricity they eventually produce, have combined to make the region very attractive for criminal gangs, colluding with local officials. Mafia families are suspected of offering money and votes in return for wind farm permits.

The Financial Times reported in May 2009 that – in an attempt to assert control on the sector – Sicilian crime organisations are suspected of destroying two wind towers in storage at a port on the island that had been delivered from northern Europe. Some wind farms established by companies with mafia links don't actually generate any electricity due to **poor construction standards**. Often Sicilian wind farms would be quickly sold by local developers to international energy companies who were unaware of any connection with organised crime.

Amidst confusion, several Italian regional governments, including Sicily's, have suspended authorisation of new wind farm sites to wrest control back from the criminal gangs.



Lucrative crime opportunity

### Waste from the developed north is funnelled to countries in the developing south

decreased since the late 1980s, though e-waste trafficking has increased during the same period. In Italy, Legambiente reports that 25 arrests were made for ecological crimes in 2008, the highest number ever.

There are also high-tech ways to track waste and detect when illicit dumping is afoot. Remote-sensing techniques such as ground-penetrating radar can pinpoint toxic dumps without digging into the soil. This avoids the risk of potentially disturbing toxins that can enter the air or water supplies.

But as ecological crimes – from tuna fishing to waste disposal – become more lucrative, the involvement of organised crime is unlikely to go away any time soon. "The mafia is everywhere that business is," Biffi says. "If the business is good, the mafia will be there." ■

For more on tuna fishing see p32.