The WCO Secretariat continues to work closely with other international organizations involved in environmental issues. This cooperation has been formalised through a series of Memoranda of Understanding with partners such as the CITES Secretariat, the Basel Convention Secretariat and UNEP, which maximizes joint efforts in the fight against environmental crime.

Since 2001, the WCO has been an active partner in the Green Customs Initiatives (GCI), which is a series of collaborative activities that include workshops, training material, and joint actions by partner organizations aimed at raising the awareness of Customs officers to environment issues.

In 2006, Project Sky-Hole Patching was launched jointly by 20 Customs administrations in the Asia Pacific region, supported by the WCO Asia Pacific RILO and the UNEP regional office in Thailand. This regional project led to seizures of 155 tons of ODS, and 116 seizures of almost 20,000 tons of hazardous waste, ranging from e-waste to used clothing and waste oil.

In recognition of its outstanding contribution to protecting the ozone layer, in 2007 the WCO received a Partners Award from UNEP on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer.

During mid-January 2009, all WCO Members were encouraged to undertake a one-day intensive control operation that targeted the trafficking in endangered species. WCO Members used CENCOMM – the WCO’s secure global communication tool – to facilitate the smooth and safe transmission of information during the operation. Later in the year, as proposed by the WCO Secretariat, more than 100 Customs administrations in Europe, Asia Pacific and Africa will launch a joint operation to intercept illegal movements of hazardous and other waste. This operation will also use CENCOMM and will be supported by the 7 WCO RILOs, national environmental authorities and several international organizations.

Customs faces many challenges, but one thing is clear, they are committing significant tools and resources towards the fight against environmental crime at the border. The Customs community shares the responsibility to protect the planet and its natural bounty for future generations. Luxuries can be reproduced, but endangered species cannot. Once they are extinct, they are gone forever. Being more vigilant is now imperative if we are to avoid waste dumping tragedies such as that which occurred in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire in August 2006 during which 17 people died and several thousand were hospitalised.

We have done a lot, but more action is required to stop environmental crime and protect our natural heritage. Together, we can make a difference!
Environment Crime

... now of increasing global concern

Environmental crime is a significant and increasingly lucrative business and affects society in a myriad negative ways. A number of examples illustrate this: the poaching of endangered species affects the income of rural populations and has driven some species to the brink of extinction; deforestation caused by illegal logging is a major contributor to climate change, causing up to 20% of greenhouse gas emissions; ozone-depleting substances (ODS) destroy the ozone layer which can lead to the suppression of the human immune system resulting in skin cancer and cataracts, in addition to contributing to climate change; hazardous waste causes long-term poisoning of soil and water which affects the health and living conditions of people, with this unscrupulous trade regarded as criminal under the Basel Convention on the Trans-boundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal.

Many environmentally-sensitive goods are controlled under multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and other treaties. The effective monitoring and control of their trans-boundary movement is a key component of environmental protection and, in many cases, national security.

By its nature, environmental crime is trans-boundary and in many cases involves cross-border criminal syndicates. Globalisation has indirectly made it easier to transport commodities across national boundaries: a tiger skin or an ivory tusk passes through many hands on its way from the poaching site to the final buyer; and a tree sawed down illegally can travel around the world before ending up as a piece of luxury furniture.

Interestingly enough, in many cases endangered species and tropical timber are shipped from less developed countries to the developed world whilst hazardous waste is transported from developed countries and destined for the developing world.

The Role of Customs

... a critical frontline agency

In most countries, Customs administrations play an essential role at the border in protecting the environment given their frontline position. As the first line of defence at borders, Customs are charged with ensuring compliance with the trade-related provisions of multilateral environmental agreements and with national legislation.

They are also the primary government agency responsible for monitoring the trade in certain environmentally sensitive commodities and endangered species, identifying and detecting fraud and other non-compliance, and helping to raise awareness about this illegal trade among members of the public.

The WCO Response

... a multi-pronged approach

The WCO has long been involved in efforts to combat the illegal trade in environmentally sensitive goods, with its Council – the Organization’s highest decision-making body – having adopted several Recommendations on environmental crime. The latest Recommendation approved in June 2008 calls for all WCO Members to continue their efforts to combat environmental crime and to ensure that the environment remains a priority issue for Customs across the globe.

The WCO Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) has also been widely used for information exchange for border environmental enforcement. Seizures of endangered species and hazardous waste reported globally by Customs are stored in the CEN too. A new ODS seizure database will be available in the near future. Alerts, trend analysis, as well as information from other organizations keep Customs officers around the world informed about emerging trends associated with illegal trafficking. In addition, a new communication tool “ENVIRONET” will soon be available for Customs officers involved in environmental enforcement to exchange real-time information, with the help of experts from international organizations and national competent authorities. Detailed risk indicators on endangered species, ozone depleting substances and hazardous waste developed by the WCO Secretariat support frontline Customs officers in their daily work.

A "Customs, wild fauna and flora” training course covering CITES (the Convention governing the trade in wild fauna and flora) is now available on the WCO e-learning platform. The course benefits not only Customs officers, but also other parties involved in controlling this trade or combating any illegal trade.

The ODS e-learning programme jointly developed by the WCO Secretariat and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) will be available in 2009.

At the regional level, the network of WCO Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILOs) and Regional Offices for Capacity Building (ROCBs) have been very active in environmental border protection activities by collecting and analysing seizure information, hosting training events, and participating in capacity building initiatives.

To raise further awareness about the importance attached to protecting the world’s natural heritage, the WCO has dedicated 2009 to environment issues under the theme: ‘Customs and the environment: Protecting our natural heritage’. This awareness-raising exercise was launched on 26 January 2009, the day that the global customs community celebrates International Customs Day, providing Customs administrations with an ideal opportunity to highlight the critical role they play in protecting the environment.