

Italy rounds up mafia's sacred cows

Italy

Tom Kington Rome

Police in southern Italy are cracking down on an unlikely mafia weapon — herds of wild cows that trample crops, cause train derailments and terrorise local residents.

Over the past 40 years the animals have been set loose by the 'Ndrangheta to wander farmland in Calabria in a potent symbol of the Mob's dominance. Michele Di Bari, the interior ministry's representative in Reggio Calabria, the regional capital, said that nobody dared to complain.

About 1,000 of the mafia's "sacred cows" have turned wild, travelling in herds led by bulls weighing up to a tonne, breeding in the countryside and charging walkers and cars. In Polistena villagers cowered as a herd rampaged through the cemetery. Three train accidents have been attributed to cows straying on to the track but people have been reluctant to speak out since a farmer was shot dead in 2005 after complaining to a clan boss that the animals were destroying his land.

Officials are now rounding up the cattle and moving them to fenced pastures in the Aspromonte national park. Some diseased cattle were put down but 20 bulls have been released in the park. Mr Di Bari, who is co-ordinating the round-up, said: "We are eliminating a powerful symbol of the 'Ndrangheta. We need to halt the myth that the cows are untouchable."

The Mob has grown into a global drug cartel that launders profits throughout Europe. Its members are still obsessed about controlling their home region, however. "They feel the need to keep these roots," Enzo Ciconte, a crime expert, said.

Giuseppe Bombino, head of the park, said that the mafia occasionally rounded up the cows to win EU farming subsidies. "In recent years, however, many bosses have been jailed and their cows have become truly wild," he said.

Villagers are starting to defy the mafia, forming groups such as No Bull, which held a protest march in December. Domenico Antico, a lawyer who leads the group, said: "We have had 150 incidents in the past two years, including when a bull appeared out of nowhere and collided with my Audi."

"I wouldn't rule out bosses taking calves for butchery but I think the herds have now been abandoned and we have less to fear from the Mob. As the herds multiply, however, the problem now is public safety."



In Italia, sequestrate le vacche sacre della mafia