

COVID-19 AND THE WILDLIFE TRADE



Photo: Jo-Anne McArthur / We Animals

CURRENT SITUATION

At the time of writing, SARS-COV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, continues to spread around the globe, causing economic rampage, panic and confusion and impacting millions of people worldwide. While research is not conclusive about the source of the virus, it is widely believed to have been transmitted from wildlife to humans as a consequence of the proximity and variety of species sold in an Asian “wet” market¹, mutating across the species barrier to create a new virus in humans.

Like SARS-COV-2, many viruses can be transmitted between animals and from animals to humans; indeed, over 60% of all human infectious diseases recognised so far are zoonoses (diseases that can spread from animals to humans), and about 75% of emerging infectious diseases that have affected people over the past three decades originated from animals². In fact, scientists have probably identified only a fraction of the viruses that have co-evolved in a variety of wild animals, and a wide diversity of viruses are still to be identified in wildlife³. A recent paper says an estimated 1.6 million viral species are yet to be discovered in mammal and bird populations; of those, an estimated 650,000 to 840,000 have the capacity to infect and cause disease

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-020-2012-7>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1088493/pdf/TB010983.pdf>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11516376>

in humans⁴. However, wild animals have carried viruses and bacteria for millennia. What has changed is the way humans interact with them, due to urbanisation, destruction of wildlife's natural habitats, and the growing legal and illegal wildlife trade.

WHY IT MATTERS

The growing exploitation of wild animals for domestic and international trade places biodiversity under unsustainable pressure⁵ and results in increased risks to animal welfare and human and animal health. This is not only an issue for Asian countries, where COVID-19 and previous coronavirus epidemics have emerged. The EU is a main destination for live wild animals – including primates, reptiles, and amphibians. In 2018, the reported value of illegal wildlife trade in the EU was at least EUR 2.3 million⁶. Illegally smuggled animals are likely to have been transported in close confinement in unsanitary conditions and so also present a very clear risk of zoonosis infection.

Thousands of wild animal species are also legally traded, at a much higher economic value, transported and kept as pets in EU citizens' homes, with no sanitary control. Live wild animal traders are not subject to any of the precautionary safety provisions required in other EU industries that provide products to the public. Some of these animals are wild caught or captive bred in third countries and may be kept in unsanitary conditions similar to those of Asian or African markets, before being transported to European homes. Several European countries also regularly host markets and fairs to sell exotic animals (e.g. Terraristika in Germany, the largest reptile fair in Europe). Stress caused by such conditions is likely to lower the animals' immune defenses and further facilitate disease spread.

In recent years, due to the exploding trend in exotic pet keeping and commercial trade in captive-bred wild animals⁷ with the consequent worldwide movement of wild animals whose health condition is unknown, the potential for the transmission of zoonotic diseases has significantly increased. For example, between 2015 and 2019 there were at least 61 primates rescued in the EU who were infected with one or more viral infections potentially transmissible to humans⁸.

Exotic animal diseases are not only dangerous to humans, they can be transmitted to native wild animals too, with dire consequences for their conservation. One of the most notable examples of introduced disease which has spread among local wildlife populations is the amphibian pathogen *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans* (B.sal). This pathogen is native to Asia and was introduced to Europe a few years ago with amphibians imported for the exotic pet trade. Largely as a consequence of this, at least one-third of amphibian species

⁴ <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6378/872>

⁵ <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

⁶ <https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/12745/eu-seizures-report-2020-final-web.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.worldanimalprotection.org.au/news/brief-history-global-exotic-pet-trade>

⁸ <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.aap.nl/en/news/aap-reveals-many-exotic-animals-kept-europe-carry-dangerous-diseases-potentially-lethal-humans&sa=D&ust=1585676834928000&usg=AFQjCNFK8GmTmqGqvZfWVAbhXXmJWerr-A>

face extinction worldwide, with at least 90 confirmed extinct and another 500 species in decline⁹. The disease has recently caused the local extinction of fire salamander (*Salamandra Salamandra*) populations in the Netherlands and their local disappearance in other EU countries¹⁰. The global spread of B.sal has been described as a case of “panzootic”, the equivalent of pandemic among humans.

EUROGROUP FOR ANIMALS POSITION

The EU must take the responsibility in taking action on trade in wildlife and show that the painful lesson of COVID-19 has been learned. The European Commission is presently drafting the Biodiversity Strategy to 2030, a crucial component of the EU Green Deal and a great opportunity to take action. This document, if ambitious enough, can initiate a decisive change of direction for the EU policies on wildlife trade.

Eurogroup for Animals believes that:

- The EU should encourage national governments in Europe and worldwide to **promptly and permanently close wildlife markets**. These include live animal markets and “bush meat” markets in EU Member States.
- We believe that wild animals should not be traded and kept as pets. As a first step in this direction, **the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 should include specific actions to effectively regulate the exotic pet trade in the EU**, thereby protecting the health of EU citizens, improving the welfare of the animals, and safeguarding the European and global biodiversity from the risks posed by the currently poorly regulated trade in live wild animals.
- **An EU-wide ‘Positive List’ stating which animal species are more suitable and safer to be kept as pets should be adopted**. Such a list- an instrument that is preventive by nature - has already been successfully introduced in Belgium and Luxembourg and is being developed in the Netherlands. The positive list system is a “deeply transformative policy”, which checks many boxes that are included in the European Green Deal: it provides a preventive mechanism with the “do no harm” principle at its very core, will empower consumers to make informed and sustainable choices, and is based on reliable, comparable and verifiable information.
- European governments should adopt emergency measures to **financially support rescue centres and sanctuaries**. These facilities – which play a critical role in supporting countries’ effort to fight against wildlife trafficking and in ensuring the welfare of wild animals that have been confiscated – are facing a dramatic reduction of their revenues as consequence of lockdown procedures.

⁹ B. C. Scheele et al., Amphibian fungal panzootic causes catastrophic and ongoing loss of biodiversity. *Science* 363, 1459–1463 (2019).

¹⁰ Fisher MC, Ghosh P, Shelton JMG, et al. Development and worldwide use of non-lethal, and minimal population-level impact, protocols for the isolation of amphibian chytrid fungi. *Sci Rep.* 2018;8(1):7772. Published 2018 May 17. doi:10.1038/s41598-018-24472-2

- The EU should clearly advise **against the use of wild animals for the production of traditional medicine** both for consumption and distribution within the EU as well as outside the EU.
- National governments in Europe and worldwide should **permanently ban the import of hunting trophies**. Not only are these potential vectors of disease, but this activity contributes to the exploitation of natural resources placing unsustainable pressure on biodiversity, which is linked to the spreading of COVID-19.
- The EU should **maintain and strengthen its global leadership role in continuing to fight against wildlife trafficking and to address the growing challenges faced by endangered species through both illegal and legal trade**. For instance, the EU should end the commercial trade in captive-bred tigers and tiger parts as this commercial trade effectively undermines international efforts to end illegal trade and poaching¹¹. **The post-2020 EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking should be fully integrated into the 2030 Biodiversity Strategy and receive adequate funding.**

DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this document, the following definitions are adopted:

Wild animal: those species of which populations still exist in a wild state, in the country of origin - that is to say, a species whose collective behaviour, life cycle or physiology remains unaltered from the wild conspecific despite the breeding and living conditions of individual animals being under human control for multiple generations.

Wildlife market: any markets selling live wild animals, either caught from the wild or captive bred.

Bushmeat markets: markets selling meat from wildlife species that are hunted in tropical forests.

Exotic pet: those wild animals that are traded and/or kept as companion animals.

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¹¹ <https://tigertrade.four-paws.org/europes-second-class-tigers>