

# COVID-19 AND WILDLIFE RESCUE

## CURRENT SITUATION

The spreading of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is endangering the lives of thousands of animals housed in rescue centres and sanctuaries across Europe. The current crisis comes at a time when housing for seized, confiscated or surrendered wild animals is already severely limited in Europe and rescue centres are suffering from a chronic lack of consideration and funding<sup>1</sup>, the pandemic placing additional burdens on struggling facilities.

Rescue centres and sanctuaries rehabilitate injured native wildlife and provide a better life to animals who have suffered in substandard zoos, have been cruelly exploited in circuses, have been abandoned by their owners after them realizing how unsuitable they were as pets, or have been confiscated from illegal and unscrupulous traders. In most cases, these animals cannot be returned to the wild, and so rescue centres and sanctuaries in Europe play a critical role in ensuring that animals are cared for. Supporting Member States' efforts to enforce legislation such as the EU Invasive Alien Species Regulation and their fight against wildlife trafficking, rescue facilities provide housing, veterinary care and rehabilitation for animals, with many directly participating in the seizure and/or confiscation of the animals and their subsequent translocation, often across national borders. Their staff can offer expertise directly to governments in identifying, handling, transporting, housing, and caring for animals, or can train government representatives in these skills. The relevance of proper handling becomes more and more relevant in the light of dealing with zoonotic diseases like COVID-19.

As well as providing day-to-day animal care, rescue facilities also play an important role in educating the public, through their individual stories, about the animals' needs and the negative impact our actions can have on their welfare, engendering a better understanding of and empathy towards animals.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Once an animal is taken into care by a rescue facility, significant costs are involved. These include food, staffing, medicines, veterinary care, habitat construction/maintenance and heating. Where the animal has been placed at the facility by the authorities, it is sometimes assumed that such costs are covered by the State. However, many governments do not provide any funding for the care of animals they place at rescue facilities, with no budget allocated for it.

In reality, rescue facilities in Europe operate primarily to the generosity of private donors and, in some cases, to the tickets sold to their visitors. The current lockdown restrictions adopted across European countries,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.aap.nl/uploads/inline-files/Solving%20the%20European%20Wildlife%20Rescue%20Crisis\\_web.pdf](https://www.aap.nl/uploads/inline-files/Solving%20the%20European%20Wildlife%20Rescue%20Crisis_web.pdf)

have however resulted in staffing and supply shortages, reduced donations due to economic uncertainty, and loss of visitor revenue for those facilities that are open to the public.

The devoted staff of rescue centres are struggling to look after the animals and raise funds for their care, the situation expected to worsen the longer restrictions are in place. They will continue doing their utmost to ensure the welfare of the animals in their care is not compromised, but this comes at a cost and without support these organizations will not be able to hold on indefinitely.

## **EUROGROUP FOR ANIMALS' POSITION**

Rescue centres and sanctuaries urgently need financial support to continue to operate and then provide appropriate care of the animals they host.

Eurogroup for Animals believes that

- Rescue centres and sanctuaries have an important role and **should not be forgotten** during these difficult times. **Emergency financial measures** put in place by governments to support economic activities should also be allocated to animal rescue facilities;
- It is the moral responsibility of countries' governments to ensure **proper funding** and support to rescue centres and sanctuaries in these difficult times.
- Governments **must define veterinary care and animal keeping as 'essential' services during lockdown**. Rescue facilities' staff and volunteers must also be included in the list of 'essential workers', so that they can continue to take care of animals. Without this there are serious concerns for animal welfare.
- Governments should allow the transport of rescued animals to and from rescue centres and sanctuaries, when urgently needed.
- The key role of rescue centres in fighting wildlife trafficking has been highlighted in the EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking<sup>2</sup> which sets out a specific action (Action 19) to "Improve care of seized or confiscated live animals". The **EU should therefore actively call on Member States' governments to financially support rescue centres and sanctuaries.**

## **CONTACT**

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<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/cites/trafficking\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/cites/trafficking_en.htm)