

Curbing the commercial wildlife trade prevents cruelty, extinction, and pandemics



Canada must take a precautionary One Health, One Welfare approach

Overview

Covid-19 has revealed the links between the commercial wildlife trade and deadly pandemics. Reports by the UNEPⁱ and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)ⁱⁱ recognize the wildlife trade as a top driver of pandemic risk and biodiversity loss and recent research shows the costs of preventing zoonotic disease outbreaks by preventing deforestation and regulating the wildlife trade could cost as little as 2% of the economic costs of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ

Seventy-five percent of new or emerging infectious diseases over the past decade – including MERS, Ebola, HIV/AIDS, H5N1, West Nile and the current Covid-19 pandemic – originated from animals and principally from wildlife.^{iv} According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the most likely pathway of transmission of the originating virus from bats to humans was through an intermediary host.^v And it is widely acknowledged that this host was likely provided by a wildlife market in Wuhan, China, and the broader wildlife trade which supplied this and similar markets.^{vi vii}

The 2002 SARS outbreak was also linked to a wildlife market^{viii} and likely transmitted to humans through the Himalayan palm civets that were sold there. Had these markets, which were temporarily closed after the SARS outbreak, remained closed, this pandemic might never have happened.^{ix}

On April 12, 2021, the WHO, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) called for a temporary suspension of the trade in live-caught wild mammals.^x While the guidance focused on food markets, it is also relevant for other wild animal uses and emphasized the importance of addressing animal welfare and biodiversity to reduce disease risks.

The current pandemic and previous epidemics are fundamentally linked to the exploitation of wild animals and encroachment on their habitats. Preventing future health crises will require a holistic One Health, One Welfare approach.^{xi}

Canada must help lead efforts at the G20 for an immediate and permanent closure of wild animal markets, and an end to the international trade in wild animals and wild animal products that could contribute to the spread of zoonotic disease. Domestically, Canada must curb the import and domestic trade in these animals and products.

Animal welfare's role in reducing zoonotic disease risks

Wildlife markets typically have a diverse array of wild-caught and captive-bred animals and wildlife products that are sold for various purposes (e.g. luxury meat, traditional medicine, trinkets, exotic pets). The captive circumstances result in stressed animals, whose compromised immune systems make them more infectious and more vulnerable to infections. When different species that wouldn't normally be in contact with each other in the wild are kept in proximity in crowded, stressful, and filthy conditions, it is the ideal breeding ground for the emergence and spread of novel infectious diseases which can then be transmitted to humans. These same characteristics exist throughout the wildlife trade.

A global problem requiring a global solution

In February 2020, China banned the farming and trade of many wildlife species for consumption and offered financial support to farmers to transition to plant-based alternatives. This year they added another 517 species to their list of protected wild animals to prevent pandemics.^{xii} It is vitally important these measures remain in place permanently and be extended to all aspects of the commercial wildlife trade (including capture, farming, and trade of wild animals for traditional medicine and pets) and supported by strong enforcement and initiatives to reduce consumer demand.

However, the problem is not limited to China. Wildlife markets exist around the world and draw crowds of locals and tourists alike across Asia, Africa and Latin America, who can act as vectors and spread zoonotic diseases. Additionally, millions of wild animals are captured, bred and traded every year across the globe, including in Canada, for food, traditional medicine and pets. Zoonotic infections can be spread at every stage of the trade. In fact, a study of the wildlife trade in Vietnam found the risk of transmitting coronaviruses increases significantly as animals are traded up the supply chain.^{xiii xiv}

Governments and scientists are urging global action

Policy makers in Australia^{xv} and the US^{xvi} are calling for a closure of wildlife markets and the associated trade, the Netherlands has expedited a permanent ban on fur farming to prevent further COVID-19 outbreaks, and the German Parliament has agreed to reduce the trade in wild animals for pets, ban the sale of wild caught animals and set up a centralized trade register.^{xvii} In April 2021, Italy, which holds the G20 Presidency, approved a ban on the trade of wild and exotic animals.^{xviii}

A growing number of Canadian animal welfare and wildlife conservation groups, zoonotic disease experts and ecologists are calling on the Canadian government to join the countries supporting a permanent ban on wildlife markets and a curbing of the international and domestic wildlife trade at the G20.^{xix}

"The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted issues with emerging diseases from animals and the ability for new diseases to spread rapidly and devastatingly. Millions of bacteria and viruses remain undiscovered in wildlife, and the more we encroach on their habitats, move them from the wild and move them across the world, the greater the disease risk to people and animals. It's not a matter of 'if' we'll encounter a new disease. It's 'when will the next one occur' and 'how bad will it be'. Whether it's animal health, animal welfare or human health, there are many compelling reasons to restrict the wildlife trade." Dr. Scott Weese, Director of the Centre for Public Health and Zoonoses and professor at the University of Guelph

"History has repeatedly taught us that bringing the public and wildlife into close proximity is a recipe for infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics. Nothing better illustrates this risk than the local and international wildlife trade." Dr. Jason Stull, Assistant Professor at The Atlantic Veterinary College, University of PEI and expert in infectious disease control and prevention at the human-animal interface.

Canada's role in the wildlife trade

- Between 2014 and 2019 at least 1.8 million wild animals were imported into Canada from 76 countries, including from known emerging disease hotspots; 93% were *not* subject to any permits or pathogen screening.^{xx}

- 547,559 live CITES-listed wild animals were imported between 2014-2019.^{xxi} CITES only monitors the trade of 8% of known animal species and only restricts the trade of 687 animal species listed under Appendix I. This is concerning given that the IUCN has identified 14,745 species to be threatened with extinction.
- 75% of the 320,081 wild animals imported in 2019 were not subject to any import restrictions, such as health screening, and approximately 80% were destined for the pet industry.
- An estimated 1.4 million exotic pets are kept in households across Canada, including 27,120 Burmese pythons, 25,091 African grey parrots, and 2,383 tigers.^{xxii}
- 94,756 online ads selling exotic pets in Canada were found on Kijiji in 2020.^{xxiii}
- 150 mobile zoos (Mobile Live Animal Programs – MLAPs), 300 exotic reptile breeders, numerous exotic bird breeders and at least 20 reptile expos have been found across the country; places where large numbers of wild animals are handled, transported, and sold.
- Canadian bears are hunted and traded internationally to meet the demand for bear bile products used in Traditional Asian Medicine (TAM). A recent investigation of 25 TAM shops in the Greater Toronto Area found 4 shops had bear bile products for sale and 2 offered the opportunity to order it.^{xxiv}
- More than 340,000 wild animals are intensively raised on mink and fox fur farms in Canada.^{xxv} This should be of concern given the rapid spread of COVID-19 on mink farms around the world, including Sweden, Lithuania, Greece, Italy, France, Spain, Denmark, the United States and here in B.C. More than a million mink were culled in Netherlands^{xxvi} causing the Dutch Parliament to accelerate the permanent closure of the remaining 128 mink farms.

Canada fuels the supply and demand for wild animals and wild animal products and contributes to the growth in this trade through inadequate domestic regulations. Experts suggest most countries do not comprehensively screen for pathogens at their borders and Canada is no exception.^{xxvii} Access to Information records show significant gaps in data with important information like the origin of the animal, the purpose of the import and whether the animal was wild caught or captive-bred in many cases marked as unknown. Comprehensive data is critical for assessing the risks of the trade and to develop meaningful regulations.

Whether imported or bred within the country, captive wild animals are regulated by a patchwork of inadequate municipal, provincial, and federal laws. No province or territory adequately restricts the breeding, sale, and possession of wild animals for pets to reduce zoonotic disease transmission, let alone for the purposes of safeguarding animal welfare.^{xxviii}

We recommend the Government of Canada

1. Support, and urge an immediate and permanent closure of wild animal markets at the G20.
2. Commit at the G20 to end the international trade in wild animals and wild animal products that could contribute to the spread of zoonotic disease and ask global institutions and bodies and their national parties to put in place mechanisms to develop, facilitate and implement this ban.
3. Curb the import and domestic trade in wild animals and wild animal products that could contribute to the spread of zoonotic disease in Canada.
 - a. Establish and adequately fund a comprehensive and transparent system for tracking and monitoring the import, export and sales of live wild animals and their parts and derivatives in Canada.
 - b. Work with provinces and territories to mitigate inherent risks to public health, animal welfare and our natural environment by harmonizing and strengthening regulations to drastically reduce captive breeding, transport and the physical and online trade in wild animals.

- c. Strengthen enforcement of both the legal and illegal wildlife trade, through better coordination across agencies and federal/provincial/territorial jurisdictions and increased funding and resources.

Canadians support restricting the wildlife trade

A Canadian poll commissioned by World Animal Protection and conducted by Northstar in July 2020 found:^{xix}

- 90% believe the global wildlife trade threatens human health and biodiversity and can cause animal suffering.
- 75% want the Canadian government to support a permanent ban on wildlife markets,
- 70% want the government to support a global ban on the commercial trade in wild animals
- 70% support stronger laws to reduce the trade in wild animals in Canada
- 67% support better tracking and monitoring of Canada's wildlife trade

About World Animal Protection

World Animal Protection (formerly known as the World Society for the Protection of Animals – WSPA) is an international animal welfare charity. For more than 55 years, we have been working to protect animals from cruelty through practical and sustainable solutions that help people and animals alike. We have offices in 14 countries including China, Australia, India, Kenya and Brazil and U.K. We have General Consultative Status with the UN and are members of the Civil Society 20 (C20) that is engaging the G20. We are members of the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) providing input on Canada's Codes of Practice. We have more than 300,000 supporters across Canada and millions globally.

For more information, please contact melissamatlow@worldanimalprotection.ca

For a copy of our joint letter, poll and research please visit: www.worldanimalprotection.ca/CurbTheWildlifeTrade

ⁱ <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/report/preventing-future-zoonotic-disease-outbreaks-protecting-environment-animals-and>

ⁱⁱ <https://ipbes.net/pandemics>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/369/6502/379>

^{iv} https://www.nature.com/articles/nature06536?source=post_page ; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2725831/>

^v <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus/origins-of-the-virus>

^{vi} World Health Organization (2019) Situation report <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf>

^{vii} <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/29/asia/who-wuhan-report-preview-intl-hnk/index.html>

^{viii} <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/302/5643/276.full>

^{ix} <https://www.hsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Wildlife-Markets-and-COVID-19-White-Paper.pdf>

^x <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1089622>

^{xi} The concept "One Welfare" builds on the One Health concept and is a way to recognize the many interconnections between human welfare, animal welfare and the integrity of the environment. See OneWelfare.org and <https://www.ahwcouncil.ca/work-areas/one-welfare>

^{xii} <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/china-adds-over-500-species-wildlife-protection-list-14125056#:~:text=SHANGHAI%3A%20China%20has%20added%20517,trade%20and%20destruction%20of%20habitats>

^{xiv} Nguyen Quynh Huong *et al.*; Coronavirus testing indicates transmission risk increases along wildlife supply chains for human consumption in Viet Nam, 2013-2014. Posted June 17, 2020. <https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.06.05.098590v3>

^{xv} <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-52391783>

^{xvi} <https://www.booker.senate.gov/news/press/booker-introduces-bipartisan-legislation-to-shut-down-commercial-wildlife-markets-which-pose-a-threat-to-global-public-health>

^{xvii} <https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/253/1925345.pdf>

^{xxviii} https://www.lav.it/cpanelav/js/ckeditor/kcfinder/upload/files/files/LAV%20PRESS%20RELEASE_04212021.pdf

^{xix} See www.worldanimalprotection.ca/CurbTheWildlifeTrade; Preventpandemics.org; endthetrade.com;

^{xx} Data obtained from CBSA and CFIA through Access to Information Requests in 2020. The actual number of wild animals imported is likely higher as some importation numbers were recorded as unknown and only electronic records could be provided due to COVID-19.

^{xxi} Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

^{xxii} <https://www.worldanimalprotection.ca/our-work/animals-wild/wildlife-not-pets/report-wildlife-pets-canada>

^{xxiii} World Animal Protection commissioned research by Tech4Pets in 2020.

^{xxiv} <https://www.worldanimalprotection.ca/bear-bile-industry-thriving-despite-pandemic-risks>

^{xxv} <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3210011601>

^{xxvi} <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/17/spain-to-cull-nearly-100000-mink-in-coronavirus-outbreak>

^{xxvii} Kolby, Jonathan. To prevent the next pandemic, it's the legal wildlife trade we should worry about. National Geographic. May 7 2020.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/05/to-prevent-next-pandemic-focus-on-legal-wildlife-trade/>

^{xxviii} World Animal Protection. Risky Business: The unregulated exotic pet trade in Canada. 2019.

https://www.worldanimalprotection.ca/sites/default/files/media/ca_-_en_files/wap_exotic_pets_in_canada_report_final_forweb_oct_3_2019.pdf

^{xxix} This study was conducted by Northstar Research Partners, a global strategic research firm. The survey was conducted online from July 17-July 20, 2020 using an amalgamated group of best-in-class panels. The study was conducted among a nationally representative sample of Canadian residents, aged 18-74 years. Study results are accurate to within +/- 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.