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Global experts call on Chinese Government to revise law to reduce pandemic risk

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128 experts in public health, wildlife conservation and other One Health professions from around the world have today written to China's top law-making body, calling for urgent changes to reduce the risk of another pandemic.

In an open letter published today, the experts advise lawmakers to change provisions which currently permit commercial trade in wild animal species for traditional medicine, ornamental items, pets or fur, even if the species is protected in the wild, or poses a high risk to public health through zoonotic spillover. Instead, they urge the adoption of a 'One Health' approach, prioritising the health of humans, animals and the natural environment, which they contend is the only way to effectively reduce the risk of future pandemics while also protecting biodiversity.

Commercial trade in wildlife is a major risk factor in the emergence of new infectious diseases, particularly where stressed and immunocompromised animals are kept close together – conditions common in wildlife farms and live animal markets. Unsustainable trade in wildlife is also a major driver of biodiversity loss, which the authors note is the second most impactful risk to public health in the coming decade.

"Most human diseases and many associated with key agricultural and wildlife epidemics originate in wildlife trade," said Clifford Warwick PGDip(MedSci) PhD CBiol CSci EurProBiol FRSB, Health Expert of the Emergent Disease Foundation. "Whether for food, pets, medicines, or curios, it is now clear that the only functional approach to preventing further pandemics is precaution and bans on relevant trade."

Following the emergence of COVID-19, authorities in China banned commercial breeding and trade of terrestrial wild animal species for consumption as food in February. This ban has been written into a draft revision of the country's Wildlife Protection Law, on which authorities have invited comments from the public until November 19, 2020.

However, experts are concerned that the revised law would still allow commercial breeding and trade in wild animal species for purposes such as traditional medicine, production of ornamental items, pets or fur.

The experts contend that by legitimising consumption and failing to reduce demand, the law risks exacerbating the threats to endangered species while undermining efforts to protect the public from further outbreaks of zoonotic disease. Their letter states, “the conditions which create a high risk of zoonotic spillover, including high-stress conditions and close contact during the breeding, capture and processing of wild animal species, are likely regardless of whether these animals are intended to be used for food or non-food purposes.”

“Zoonotic diseases such as SARS and COVID-19 emerge either directly or indirectly through people’s interactions with animals, particularly wild animals,” said Professor Laura Kahn MD, MPH, MPP Physician and Research Scholar and Co-Founder, One Health Initiative. “We must ensure food security without unleashing more deadly diseases upon ourselves. We must protect wild animals and their habitats for the health of our planet’s ecosystems, for animal health, and ultimately, for our health.”

The potential public health risks of fur farming have hit the headlines in recent weeks as a reported new strain of COVID-19 has been detected at mink farms in Denmark, with COVID-19 identified in mink farms in the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Italy, the US and most recently Greece. The mink farming industry in China is among the biggest in the world and so represents a major risk to public health. It should be noted in this context that the revised law will also give the authorities ability to issue permits to breed certain wild animal species in captivity as ‘livestock’, and allows the intensive farming and trading of wild animal species irrespective of the conservation status of their populations in the wild. Captive populations of species including mink, fox and racoon dog were re-categorised as ‘livestock’ in May this year.

In addition, the revised Wildlife Protection Law does not ban a thriving domestic trade in body parts of pangolins, leopards, tigers, bears and other species seriously threatened by poaching and illegal trade. Instead, the use of pangolin scales, leopard bone and the bile of farmed bears in traditional medicine would remain legal; so too the sale of rugs made from captive-bred tigers and leopards.

China is due to host the next meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, a major intergovernmental assembly, in May 2021, where decisions will be made on how to tackle the global biodiversity crisis over the next decade. The letter concludes, “Further amending the Wildlife Protection Law to prohibit the breeding, trade and consumption of terrestrial wild animals – at the very least those species which are threatened by trade – for any purpose is essential for China to be seen as a global leader in biodiversity conservation and pandemic prevention, at a time when the world is looking to China for bold leadership.”

The letter endorsed by 128 experts is available in full (in English and Chinese) at:

<https://endpandemics.earth/action-china-wildlife-protection-law.html>

EndPandemics (<https://endpandemics.earth>) is a global alliance and action campaign that strives to reduce the risks of pandemics by addressing the root causes of zoonotic outbreaks – commercial wildlife trade, disruption of wild habitats, and wildlife dependence of poverty-affected livelihoods.

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