

## Why ban commercial wildlife markets?

Covid-19 has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths around the world, alongside incredible suffering and economic devastation. This pandemic, believed to have originated in a market in Wuhan, China<sup>1</sup>, is only the most recent disease to have made the jump from humans to animals - this was also the case for SARS, MERS, Ebola and many others<sup>2</sup>. These diseases are transmitted to humans by close proximity with animals. Any environments where many species with potentially novel pathogens are clustered together will create an extremely high risk of the emergence and transmission of new diseases.



A slow loris in a cage. Slow lorises are affected badly by the wildlife trade, which places greater pressure on dwindling wild populations.

Key lessons were missed<sup>3</sup> in the wake of SARS. Action was short-term and limited, the response focused only on civet cats rather than the wildlife trade in general, and the exploitation of wild species was not addressed. These are not just the lessons of hindsight; the Covid-19 pandemic was predictable, as a report EJF published in 2003 demonstrates<sup>4</sup>.

From the UN biodiversity chief<sup>5</sup> to lawmakers<sup>6</sup>, medical professionals<sup>7</sup>, conservation NGOs<sup>8</sup> and people<sup>9</sup> living in countries with many commercial wildlife markets, the message is clear: shut down commercial wildlife markets, the source of this and other pandemics, and stop many more from emerging.

## Why not regulation?

The illegal trade in wildlife is a key driver of extinction<sup>10</sup> and the fourth most lucrative organised crime globally<sup>11</sup>, and in many areas is hard or impossible to deal with while legal channels into which wildlife can be laundered still exist.

The answer is not to regulate commercial wildlife markets under the pretence that both the legal and illegal wildlife trade will somehow become possible to manage – past decades have shown this is not the case – but rather to ban these markets, permanently and globally. Yes, support must be dedicated to those who depend on these markets for food and income; yes, the international community must carry this cost collectively, with wealthy countries paying a fair share; and yes, there will be some short term, localised negative impacts (already being compensated for in some parts of China<sup>12</sup>). But compare these costs to the devastated lives and ruined environments, the cascade of species declines and the spread of killer diseases that these markets make such an awful contribution towards – the answer remains simple, compelling and clear: ban them.

## Commercial wildlife markets and emergent diseases

Commercial wildlife markets are not the only source of zoonotic disease, with habitat loss and deforestation also bringing humans into closer contact with wildlife<sup>13</sup>, but they represent a particularly serious threat because of the high number<sup>14</sup> species found in them. The more species present in a small space, the greater the potential number of novel pathogens. There are also more interactions between species which do not usually mix with one another in the wild. This means a virus has a better chance of finding a transmission route to humans via an intermediary<sup>15</sup>, in cases where it could not have made the jump directly.

## Wildlife markets, wet markets – what's the difference?

In recent coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, the terms 'wet market' and 'wildlife market' have frequently been used interchangeably, but it is important to distinguish them. A commercial wildlife market is where wildlife or wildlife parts are sold on a large scale, bringing a significant risk of emerging diseases. A 'wet market' refers simply to a market where produce is sold fresh, with the 'wet' coming from the fact that water is used extensively to cool perishable items. Most wet markets do not sell wildlife<sup>16</sup> or wildlife products, and so this briefing does not call for a ban on wet markets, or any other place where fresh produce is sold.

75%<sup>17</sup> of emergent diseases have their origins in wildlife. Scientists have been making the case for nearly 20 years that the most appropriate means of preventing future outbreaks is to identify 'reservoirs' and sever links with them<sup>18</sup>. A reservoir is a high-risk environment created when large groups of other species – carrying pathogens humans are not familiar with – are concentrated in a small space. This accurately describes a commercial wildlife market. Because of the high concentration of new pathogens, and the associated risk of a new disease making the jump to humans, these markets are inherently dangerous to human health.

This spread of new diseases, and the opportunity to break the chain to prevent another Covid-19, is the single most important reason to ban commercial wildlife markets. It is self-evident that removing a primary route by which diseases emerge will reduce the likelihood of them doing so.

Further strengthening the case for a global ban on commercial wildlife markets is the fact that it would likely have a significant effect on the consumption of wildlife overall, rather than simply causing people to find alternative sources. In a recent survey<sup>19</sup> of five Asian countries, 93% of respondents said they supported a ban on commercial wildlife markets. 41% of those who said they were likely to buy wildlife products in the future said they would not buy wildlife products from any other source if such a ban were implemented. Closing the high-risk environment that markets represent and significantly reducing the overall quantity of wildlife being consumed, even in the absence of other measures such as direct bans on consumption, would therefore be a strong move towards avoiding future pandemics.



## Commercial wildlife markets and our reliance on biodiversity

Of the hundreds of species traded at commercial wildlife markets around the globe, some are at serious risk of extinction, such as pangolins<sup>20</sup>, the world's most trafficked mammal<sup>21</sup>. Some species of pangolin are estimated to have experienced population declines of at least 85%<sup>22</sup> between 1980 and 2018. While some pangolins sold at commercial wildlife markets are farmed legally, wild-caught pangolins are trafficked into markets<sup>23</sup>, and distinguishing between the two groups is simply not practical<sup>24</sup>. Commercial wildlife markets put an additional strain on wild populations and mean anyone trying to stop the illegal wildlife trade essentially does so with one hand tied behind their back.

While the pangolin is a textbook example of how damaging commercial wildlife markets can be to conservation, it is far from the only case. The global wildlife trade now affects one in five<sup>25</sup> vertebrate species, experts say. Vertebrates are 'on the brink'<sup>26</sup> already, and although such additional pressures are not likely to drive extinctions independently, they certainly make a contribution.

Our dependence on the natural world for everything from a stable climate, to food security, and even medicine<sup>27</sup> is well established. Dr Erin Sills, of NC State University, highlights<sup>28</sup> in reference to the risk of future pandemics arising from the destruction of biodiversity that "we don't know what future issues we won't be able to deal with, because we've lost the species and genetic variation that would have given us the resources to deal with it." A ban on commercial wildlife markets would give wildlife some of the support it needs to start to recover, protecting us all.

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Dr Erin Sills

### The animal welfare case for bans

The stacks of cages of various wildlife species in commercial wildlife markets are not only a breeding ground for diseases but are also sites of significant animal suffering. Cages are frequently small, lower cages are defecated on from above<sup>29</sup>, and animal welfare is not a major consideration<sup>30</sup>. Beyond the markets themselves, Chinese wildlife conservationists have raised concerns<sup>31</sup> about how tigers bred for commercial consumption are frequently kept in cramped conditions, and tens of thousands of bears are kept for their bile, the extraction of which is painful.



Shark fins on sale at a market. The fins are often removed from living sharks, which are then thrown back into the water to suffocate.

## Recommendations

The recent move<sup>32</sup> to outlaw the eating of wildlife in Wuhan for five years is a welcome first step but will not be sufficient to prevent future pandemics. Short of a total ban on commercial wildlife markets, any efforts to reduce pandemic risk – such as the oxymoronic ban on illegal wildlife trading<sup>33</sup> in February – are doomed to failure.

Commercial wildlife markets are an ideal mixing bowl for novel pathogens to come into contact with humans, as well as with intermediaries which can help the emergence of new diseases along. In addition, the illegal wildlife trade, which has serious implications for people living near trafficked species and threatens many species globally, is impossible to tackle while legal trade in the same species continues.

Local communities currently dependent on the wildlife trade should be supported, not left behind. They should be active participants in the dismantling of commercial wildlife markets, the supply chains which fuel them, and the human and ecological damage they cause. For both national governments and international organisations, supporting these communities to transition to more sustainable sources of income is an opportunity. For a minimal cost, it will be possible to avoid the global human and economic hardship the next pandemic will bring.

In a time of unprecedented human-driven extinction, the dangers posed by commercial wildlife markets cannot go unaddressed. EJF therefore adopts the recommendation of medical professionals, global health experts and conservationists, and calls for a ban on commercial wildlife markets. To be effective, it must be permanent, enforced, and global. Banning commercial wildlife markets will not make another deadly pandemic impossible, but it is a first step on the road to making it much less likely.

We have an opportunity to cut the risk of another Covid-19, and the hundreds of thousands of deaths it has caused. We cannot afford to ignore these lessons again.

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A pangolin, the world's most trafficked mammal, commonly found in wildlife markets. Picture credit: Adam Tusk (CC BY 2.0)



