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THE NEW WAY OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

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Expect More Pandemics If The World Is Unwilling To Fix The Legal Trade In Wildlife

Epidemiologists and immunologists have known for decades that humans are vulnerable to zoonotic diseases, because the line between us and exotic animals has long been breached given the rapid growth in the **legal** trade of wildlife.

Paradoxically, over the timeframe scientists have been preparing for such an outbreak, **the legal trade in exotic species has been encouraged and supported to grow**, increasing the probability of an outbreak even further. A shocking oversight that can be traced directly to today's lost lives and wrecked economies.

Before COVID-19 few people would have known about China's 22,000 legal captive breeding facilities. But China is just a microcosm of the world. Wet markets exist in other regions of the world including throughout Asia, continental Africa and Latin America. And the over-valuation of the sustainable-use model means captive breeding of exotic species is encouraged globally. In 2019, with barely a blip in the media, South Africa reclassified 33 wild species as farm animals, including lions, cheetahs, rhinos and giraffes, to make commercial breeding and selling easier.

All this is happening at the same time as the May 2019 IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) Report confirmed that **the trade in flora and fauna was the second biggest threat to species survival**.

But this issue goes beyond wild meat markets to some of the world's leading luxury brands. For example, Europe is addicted to the trade in wildlife. A 2016 European Parliament Report states: **"The wildlife trade is one of the most lucrative trades in the world. The legal trade into the EU alone is worth EUR 100 billion [US\$112 billion] annually."** Endangered species contribute to the mindboggling value of the luxury market via the personal luxury sector, including clothing and accessories.

As the apparel industry tries to project its good corporate citizen image, via the evolving sustainable fashion mantra, it is handy for them to use the story that **your exotic leather handbag, shoes or belt are just a by-product of the food industry**.

Lynn Johnson of Nature Needs More Ltd, together with collaborative partner Donalea Patman of For the Love of Wildlife Ltd experienced this personally while in Europe last year for CITES CoP18. During the mid-conference break they took the 4 hour drive from Geneva to Milan, to take a look at what was on sale in one of the top fashion destinations in the world. Milan's luxury retail sector was teeming with fur, exotic leather and feathers.

"Our main reason for traveling was to check the sales assistant's knowledge of CITES regulations for listed species." said Dr Lynn Johnson of Nature Needs More. **One pattern of comments, when asking about python and stingray accessories for example, was that the products were made from the by-product of the meat industry and locals in supply-side countries eat the meat.** Luxury fashion brands were happy to use their connection with the exotic meat consumption in Asia as a play to promote their sustainable fashion credentials.

Why is it important to make this link? There is much talk about the trade in wildlife in China being closed permanently, not only temporarily until the world emerges from the COVID-19 health crisis. But will the world's luxury sector give up its supply chain without a fight? According to Bain & Company's Fall–Winter 2018 Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study, the overall luxury market grew 5% in 2018, to an estimated US\$1.32 trillion.

Once we are out of this global health crisis, it is safe to say industry will lobby their governments to re-open the legal trade and supply chains and governments will likely comply with their wishes, on the basis that they need to quickly rebuild economies.

Attention may now be on China, but it is the global business and trade community that has shown no leadership in modernising the system that facilitates and monitors this worldwide legal trade in endangered species – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Given no leadership has been shown at the international level, it is no surprise that individual countries and national governments have not invested in modernising domestic systems and legislation.

Only by investing in and upgrading the inadequate CITES trade permit and management system that facilitates the international legal trade can supply-chains be made transparent to address the future biosecurity risks inherent in any trade in exotic wildlife. This system is still a 1970s paper-based and doesn't integrate with world customs.

In a world where big data rules you have to ask why one of the most lucrative trades in the world is facilitated using a system akin to a fixed line telephone and a typewriter. **“If I took away your mobile phone and laptop and then asked to manage a global trade worth US\$320 billion annually, how effective do you think you would be?”** asked Donalea Patman of For the Love of Wildlife. It would only cost US\$30 million to modernise the system that manages the legal trade in endangered species to enable the supply chain transparency and traceability from source to destination.

Nature Needs More and For the Love of Wildlife are actively lobbying the 183 CITES signatory parties to push for adoption of electronic permitting by 2022, but this also needs a push from industry.

In response to COVID-19 many governments are likely to put in place better domestic regulations to handle the obvious biosecurity risks, but this is insufficient if we don't address the global trade component. The primary purpose of CITES is to ensure that the international legal trade in endangered wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival, **but it is also the only vehicle to address the issues of traceability, risk management, monitoring in the legal trade and shutting down the illegal trade.**

About Nature Needs More

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