

Walking Blindfold Into A Minefield

Epidemiologists and immunologists have known for decades that humans are vulnerable to zoonotic diseases.



By Kevin Childs and Lynn Johnson

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For two decades some of the world's leading scientists have been expecting a pandemic. They knew that humans are vulnerable because the line between them and exotic animals had long been breached, as shown by the origins of coronavirus in China.

And in spite of a regular outcry over the illegal global wildlife trade, the legal trade goes unquestioned and is even clinically sidestepped by the premier conservation organizations.

The result is that out of sight and without any real check a trillion-dollar trade in birds, animals and plants flourishes. According to the United Nations, even before the pandemic this trade was growing at two to three times the rate of the global economy.

Bizarre as it may seem, Oxford University, working with top Chinese scientists knew in 2002 that a disease like coronavirus was going to have a global impact. Yet no one wanted to join the dots and begin to measure the size of the world's legal trade in endangered species, a shocking oversight that can be traced directly to today's lost lives and wrecked economies.

Even more worrying, the massive stepping over the line in the market of endangered species has been parallel with a highly successful campaign to that convinced society that any regulation is inherently bad. Few people could have known before the pandemic of China's 22,000 captive breeding facilities, let alone the thriving market for threatened species in many other countries.

As nations everywhere go on a war footing and watch in horror as their economies implode a relatively inexpensive system of tracking endangered species offers itself as one way to stem possible future pandemics.

All it would take is to set an electronic permit system that would serve as a type of tsunami warning. Without this system there can be no red alert about dire influences in the trade, such as the one that is blamed for the origins of the pandemic.

In an age of high-speed data, the international regulations of this legal trade may be fairly compared to running a global business with an old black Bakelite telephone and a typewriter.

In this, China is a microcosm of the world, for just as its trade in wild animals and birds runs widely and often uncontrolled, so the global trade is not only below the radar, there is no radar. As China surprisingly and candidly finally acknowledges that its loose laws around the wildlife trade are behind this epidemic, the international community should be waking up to vital and compelling evidence of the need for the urgent modernisation of the system monitoring the global legal trade in endangered flora and fauna.

Three years ago, the World Customs Organization put the value of the illicit trade in endangered species at up to US\$258 billion, 80 per cent of the value of the legal trade. A 2016 European Parliament Report says, "The wildlife trade is one of the most lucrative trades in the world. The legal trade into the EU alone is worth US\$112 billion annually". But that is a mere estimate.

The National Geographic reported on 30 January 2020. The Chinese may dine on fried cobra or braised bear paw. The same article states 54 wildlife species are legally bred and sold for eating, including minks, ostriches, hamsters, snapping turtles and Siamese crocodiles.

Four days before this report, the wild animal trade was banned by the Chinese until the pandemic is spent, but seems certain to restart, much as a ban only lasted six months in 2003 during the SARS outbreak.

China is far from alone in this trade. With little fanfare South Africa reclassified lions as farm animals because of the country's scale of commercial breeding and wants another 32 wild species to be similarly reclassified to make commercial breeding and selling easier. Ignored by regulators but known to conservationists is the prevalence of tuberculosis in these lions, which are exported as skeletons to Asia, often to be put immersed in wine in massive tanks

in upscale restaurants for diners to display their status in ordering this drink, or talks of its supposed medicinal properties.

Charged with overseeing the international trade in such animal parts is the feeble Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or CITES. It regulates the trade in nearly 36,000 species.

Tragically, years of study shows that not only does CITES lack any power over national approaches to regulating commercial breeding, it suffers from a three-pronged deficiency: lax regulations, poor monitoring and a lack of enforcement.

CITES has an annual core budget of just US\$6.2 million to monitor a US\$320 billion global trade. Its paper permit system has not been updated since the 1970s and doesn't integrate with customs across the globe. It collects data only once a year, but this is of such poor quality that, in effect, there has been no proper analysis of the trade for 45 years.

When set against the global financial damage of the Covid-19 epidemic (and leaving aside the horrifying human health risks), a first step of spending US\$30million on an electronic permit system, for CITES to globally track the wildlife trade would involve mere loose change.

In a world where big data rules, no major steps have been taken to digitise the trade in endangered species. This lack of regulation puts everyone at risk, sending them blindfold into a minefield.

Kevin Childs is a journalist and author working with e Dr Lynn Johnson, a scientist who heads a not-for-profit, Nature Needs More, which targets the legal and illegal wildlife trade. Both are based in central Victoria, Australia