

# Covid-19 pandemic puts illegal wildlife trade in the spotlight

March 23 2020, by Nathan Williams

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Countries around the world are in a state of emergency, with millions of citizens in lockdown, their movements restricted or severely curtailed as a result of the global pandemic unleashed by the novel coronavirus. Economies are facing an historic downturn as the world confronts a crisis unprecedented in peace time. While hundreds of millions currently feel the effects of this virus, just a few months ago the crisis was brewing in the body of just one human, and before that, in a non-human. The virus is thought most likely to have originated in a bat and passed to a human through another, and thus far undetermined, species. Some researchers have proposed the pangolin as a possible vector. The outbreak is thought to have originated in a so-called "wet" market in Wuhan. Wet markets are markets where live and dead animals—domestic and wild—are sold, with some freshly slaughtered on site. This has drawn public attention to the risks posed by illegal and unregulated wildlife trade in which multiple species are transported from around the region for human consumption, providing a perfect conditions for the emergence of new viruses.

In February, in response to the pandemic, China's top legislative body announced tougher measures to restrict the [trade](#) in wild animal species to reduce the risk presented by illegal and unregulated wildlife trade to human health. This included a ban, effective immediately, on the consumption of terrestrial wild animals as food, including animals from the wild and from captive breeding facilities. This was a step Fauna & Flora International (FFI) welcomed and has urged that it is extended to cover all trade in protected species, such as pangolins, including for

medicinal consumption and display.

Then earlier this week Vietnam announced it would press ahead with similar legislation, with the country's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, instructing the ministry of agriculture and [rural development](#) to draft a directive to stop illegal trading and consumption of wildlife. In February, FFI was among 14 conservation organisations that signed an [open letter](#) to the Prime Minister, urging the government to take stronger action to halt all [illegal wildlife trade](#) and consumption, including closing markets and other locations where wildlife is sold illegally. Trading in protected wildlife products, such as pangolins or rhinos, is prohibited by law in Vietnam, but insufficient enforcement means that wildlife traffickers continue to cash in.

While developments in China and Vietnam towards clamping down on illegal wildlife trade are undoubtedly positive steps, it should be noted that conditions in wet markets themselves are not unique transfer points for novel and deadly viruses—animal rearing and handling practices the world over have been responsible for the zoonotic transmission of disease.

Dr. Rebecca Drury, Head of Wildlife Trade at FFI, welcomed the positive move by Vietnam's Prime Minister: "We would like to see stronger action to halt illegal hunting, trafficking and consumption of illegally-sourced wildlife in Vietnam. It is no longer an option to ignore the dangers of illegal and unregulated [wildlife](#) trade and consumption, to human health and to healthy, functioning ecosystems needed for life on earth to thrive. We must ensure that the lessons from Covid-19 pandemic are applied to prevent repeats of this global crisis."

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