

Wildlife conservation in a time of pandemic

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Wildlife conservation is a type of work without end. It's ongoing. It revolves around time—while racing against it. Pausing amid a global pandemic isn't an option, because that could mean the difference between saving endangered species or not.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed so much in so little time. Preventing the spread of this coronavirus has required a collective commitment to shutdowns and [social distancing](#). For conservationists, it's just yet another time where they must adapt.

FIU's Institute of Environment researchers are stuck in this strange new reality of unknowns. During the past several months, Hong Liu has been closely monitoring China's response to the outbreak, including the recent ban of the trade and consumption of wild animals. A conservation ecologist, Liu has spent the greater part of her career in China. Although she works primarily with endangered orchids, she said successful conservation efforts are closely intertwined with China's wildlife trade.

China is a legitimate producer of millions of farmed "wildlife" for food and fashion. A ban would have detrimental impacts to sustainable trade. In fact, one of the reasons some species aren't extinct today is because they are farmed in China for the wildlife trade, says biologist Matthew Shirley. An example is the Chinese giant salamander—one of the most endangered amphibians in the world. Conservationists rely on farms that produce the salamanders to repopulate and restock wild populations.

With the ban on the wildlife trade in place, officials in China are essentially starting from scratch. They are compiling a new list of animals which can be considered domesticated and farmed for commercial sale. Depending on how "wildlife" is defined has significant implications for conservation. If certain highly [endangered species](#) needing protection don't make the list, people may no longer see them as valuable or worth protecting.

The wildlife trade, though, is only one piece of the larger puzzle.

COVID-19 could have sweeping implications for conservation. That's why Paul Reillo is working today like it's any other day, though he

knows it's not just any other day.

The founding director of the [Rare Species Conservatory](#) in Loxahatchee, Fla. has devoted a lifetime to saving species on the brink of extinction. Recently, he and his team counted eight newborn East African bongo antelopes—bringing the total to 45 bongos at the Conservatory. Eight may not seem like a lot. For an animal as critically endangered as the bongo—about 100 remain in the wild—eight is a stand against extinction and a message of hope.

With social distancing now part of the equation, the team cares for and feeds the hundreds of animals in their care in each morning, many belonging to species that are disappearing around the world including the bongos and rare Amazonian parrots. The rest of the day is dedicated to conversations with long-term partners in Kenya to repatriate more bongos, as well as partners in Dominica to plan for continued monitoring of parrot populations as that country's government responds to COVID-19.

Reillo is also director of the Tropical Conservation Institute (TCI), a collaboration between FIU and the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation. TCI is unlike other academic institutes, Reillo said, and is designed exactly for situations like the one the world is currently in. It unites conservation leaders, students and researchers to conserve and recover critical species and biodiversity-rich ecosystems by integrating conservation zoology, project implementation and professional development. It's about solving problems.

"We don't stop working just because the world shuts down," Reillo said. "If anything, we start working faster."

Throughout his career, Reillo can remember many different world events that interrupted the financial resources and support for

conservation projects. Most recently, the Ebola epidemic that began in 2014 decimated tourism in Kenya and South Africa. Reillo is concerned tourism in developing regions could be impacted once again. Loss of tourism and the overall economic impact means funding models for many conservation programs could be in jeopardy, according to Cristina Gomes, assistant director of the TCI.

"We know travel is going to be severely impacted," Gomes said. "This presents serious problems for [conservation programs](#), especially in developing countries, that depend on tourism to support and fund their efforts."

Mireya Mayor, director of the Exploration and Science Communications Initiative in the College of Arts, Sciences & Education, said she worries about a possible chain reaction as the places richest in biodiversity are often in the poorest countries. If these [local economies](#) that rely on ecotourism suffer, people could grow desperate. Animals that weren't considered food sources before could become food, she said.

The conservationists know it's too soon to really understand the repercussions or outcomes, but it doesn't stop them from thinking about it. They continue their work—hands-on, behind the scenes, in collaboration and reaching out across the world. They know if there is a time when [conservation](#) is needed most, it is now.

"We're going to do everything exactly the same as every other day, because we are a life support system for critically endangered [species](#)," Reillo said. "We just can't afford to have a bad day."

Provided by Florida International University

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