

Trade in wild animals is thriving online, despite risk of disease transmission

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Despite COVID-19 restrictions and the risk of animal to human disease transmission, illegal wildlife trade on social media networks has continued, with wild animals sometimes sold as 'lockdown pets'. Researchers from Oxford Brookes University and the University of Western Australia, having analyzed around 20,000 Facebook posts about

wild pet trade, are urging increased governance on social media sites in order to curb potential extinctions and reduce the risk of pandemics.

With the current global pandemic of COVID-19, the role of [wild animals](#) in emerging [infectious diseases](#) (EID) is in the spotlight. Human-animal transmission has been documented in previous virus outbreaks such as SARS and MERS. Several of the early cases of COVID-19 were linked to a wet market in Wuhan, China, although there is, as yet, not enough evidence to conclude how the virus transmitted to humans.

Despite the known risk of animal to human transmission of disease, the researchers found no clear evidence that the online wildlife trade was discouraged or decreased amidst the pandemic. Examining advertisements on Facebook in Brazil and Indonesia, they found thousands of posts advertising wild [animals](#), with a potential audience of over 200,000 people. Indeed, only 0.44% of over 20,000 online wildlife trade advertisements had any COVID-19-related content.

Adverts mentioning COVID-19 can stimulate wildlife trade

Co-author Anna Nekaris, Professor of Primate Conservation at Oxford Brookes University said, "We anticipated that we would see many posts mentioning COVID-19 regarding the potential dangers of wildlife trade or using it as a reason for a temporary cessation of sales. Instead, advertisements mentioning COVID-19 often stimulated wildlife trade, suggesting the pandemic was a great time to buy an exotic pet for companionship, for example."

Strikingly, they found that no traders or consumers discussed the role of wildlife trade in spreading diseases. Instead, discounts were given, home delivery services were provided, and customers encouraged to spend

larger amounts of time due to lockdown with the animals.

Co-author Thais Morcatty, a Ph.D. student at Oxford Brookes University, commented, "Clandestine markets often expand to supply the demand that still exists and in that case, not only does wildlife trade continue, monitoring it becomes nearly impossible."

Co-author Kim Feddema, a Ph.D. student at the University of Western Australia said, "The links between [wildlife trade](#) and infectious disease are very concerning, however, what we find is that purely focusing on the risk of transmission as justification for widespread bans may not be effective on the ground. In order to have meaningful change that protects wild species and humans, it is imperative that we take into account the nuance and complexity of the situations and listen to what the traders themselves are telling us."

More information: Thais Q. Morcatty et al, Online trade in wildlife and the lack of response to COVID-19, *Environmental Research* (2020). DOI: [10.1016/j.envres.2020.110439](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2020.110439)

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