

Legal wildlife trade needs monitoring to reduce risk of a new pandemic

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Barred Owl Indonesia. Credit: Vincent Nijman

With three out of four newly emerging infectious human diseases originating in animals, there is an urgent need to monitor the legal trade in wildlife, according to new research by Vincent Nijman, Professor in Anthropology at Oxford Brookes University.

Professor Nijman, who has been involved in monitoring and regulating the legal [wildlife trade](#) for over two decades, said: "Covid-19 more than anything else has put a spotlight on emerging [infectious diseases](#) and how this is linked to the trade in wild animals. Few people are aware of its

scale. With literally hundreds of millions of live wild animals being shipped around the world each year, it seems unlikely that diseases are spread through illegal channels only. After all, parasites, bacteria and viruses do not read legal documents or check if they have received the correct stamp."

Dangerous to only focus on illegal wildlife trade

The [illegal wildlife trade](#) is often seen as one of the major gateways to [zoonotic diseases](#), that spread from animals to humans. While the [illegal trade](#) in tigers, ivory, rhino horn, pangolins and primates is of paramount concern for [public health](#), Professor Nijman says the legal wildlife trade should be of equal concern: "Given that in many instances the legal wildlife trade is several orders of magnitude larger than the illegal trade, it is ineffective and possibly dangerous to focus on the illegal wildlife trade only."

Lack of hygiene in wet markets could drive infection transmission

The Covid-19 pandemic threw attention onto wet markets, now associated closely with zoonotic diseases. But in the wet market of Wuhan, the vast majority of non-domesticated animals (crocodiles, bats, civets, bamboo rats) were legally offered for sale. Professor Nijman notes that "a lack of appropriate hygiene conditions (handwashing, sanitation, separation of wildlife and their parts), make wildlife markets drivers for the transmission of infections."

Dr. Chris R. Shepherd, an expert on wildlife trade and the Executive Director of the Monitor Conservation Research Society added: "This study clearly illustrates that there are incredibly serious risks associated with the trade in wildlife, regardless of whether the species involved are traded legally or illegally.

"Clearly the risk of spreading harmful zoonotic

disease must be considered when regulating the trade in wildlife, and much more research and preventative measures are essential if we are to avoid further pandemics."

More information: Vincent Nijman, Illegal and Legal Wildlife Trade Spreads Zoonotic Diseases, *Trends in Parasitology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.pt.2021.02.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pt.2021.02.001)

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