



**ENDANGERED
WILDLIFE TRUST**
Protecting forever, together.

Perspective on Illegal Wildlife Trade and Disease

The Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) mission is to conserve threatened species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

The purpose of this statement is to inform stakeholders, partners, and members of the public on the EWT's perspective on disease transmission in illegal wildlife trade.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential for zoonotic diseases to have significant global impacts on human health and socio-economic stability. It has also made people more aware of the threats to both human health and biodiversity posed by the illegal wildlife trade.

When wild animals are removed from their natural habitat and brought into contact with humans and other animals, under highly stressful conditions and with little regard for their health or welfare needs, the chance of inter-species disease transmission increases. Animals that would usually never interact in the wild are placed in cramped spaces, often stacked in cages, in highly stressful environments. The presence of bodily fluids, such as blood, urine, and faeces, provides conditions in which viruses can transmit between species. As humans encounter wildlife in these environments, or consume them, the risk of transmission increases. These diseases may then spread through human contact and lead to global pandemics, with devastating social, economic, health, and conservation consequences.

Globally, wildlife trade is regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). The aim of this agreement is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. In South Africa, the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act, read with relevant regulations, provides the legal foundation to enforce CITES and to regulate the activities in respect of certain species.

By definition, illegal wildlife trade is conducted covertly and operates outside of the regulatory systems defined by national or international laws. There are no minimum requirements for animal welfare, or health and sanitation measures. As the current COVID-19 pandemic has exemplified, illegal wildlife trade is a conservation crisis with serious socioeconomic consequences and must therefore be urgently addressed in order to safeguard human society and wellbeing globally.

THE EWT'S PERSPECTIVE

The EWT supports a well-regulated wildlife sector, based on the ecologically sustainable use of wildlife resources to the benefit of *bona fide* stakeholders. Under the right conditions, legal and well-regulated wildlife trade can provide conservation benefits and support biodiversity and ecosystem function, bringing benefits to communities and society. Illegal wildlife trade takes place across many platforms and, in the absence of strict regulation and enforcement, threatened species of wildlife, and their body parts are often laundered through legitimate markets.

The EWT focuses on three pillars of conservation impact: saving species, saving habitats, and benefiting people. Illegal wildlife trade is therefore of considerable concern as it poses a threat to all three. The EWT believes that only the legal, ecologically sustainable use of wildlife should be supported, with demonstrated benefits to habitat and species conservation and human wellbeing, and that well-enforced protection measures, including wildlife welfare provisions, are implemented for both people and wildlife involved in the trade.

The EWT recommends that:

1. Existing bans on illegal wildlife trade should be enforced and bolstered. Law enforcement agencies must be capacitated with the skills, resources and tools needed to prevent poaching, smuggling, trafficking, and all illegal use of wild animals.
2. Wildlife trade activities along the whole supply chain should be evaluated with due consideration of how risks to human health, conservation and animal welfare might erode any socio-economic benefits arising from such trade.
3. Tighter regulations on legal markets, especially in the trade of threatened and protected species, should be enforced. The regulations outlined by CITES, as well as regional and national legislation on wildlife trade, should be upheld by all Parties. We also support the cooperative efforts of CITES and the World Animal Health Organisation (OIE), to enhance wildlife trade regulations by developing and disseminating relevant standards on welfare for wild animals in trade.
4. Checks and balances must be put in place to prevent future pandemics, including the implementation of strengthened regulations on hygiene, welfare standards and disease control, and developing early warning and response systems for possible disease outbreaks.
5. Resources should be directed to more effective cross-sectoral reporting on zoonoses and public awareness campaigns around the links between wildlife trade and human health. We would like to see better communication between animal health, human health and conservation organisations.
6. Welfare standards, based on the Five Freedoms, must be integrated into all wildlife trade policy and upheld for all species in trade, including during transport, slaughter, and at point of sale. The humane treatment of wildlife in trade reduces unnecessary losses and therefore helps to conserve biodiversity.
7. Communities that rely on wildlife trade for their livelihoods, such as those living on the periphery of reserves and protected areas, should be involved in decisions that impact their use of wildlife. They should be included in initiatives that seek to improve the wellbeing of traded and consumed wildlife and prevent species extinction. Those whose wildlife use is currently unsustainable and illegal, should be supported with funding, skills development, and other resources as they transition to ecologically sustainable use.

8. Targeted buyer campaigns should be undertaken to encourage responsible, safe, and sustainable use, as well as buyer-beware campaigns to reduce the purchase and consumption of illegally harvested wildlife products and those that might present a disease risk to people.

While the world's attention is on COVID-19, we must not ignore the global health implications of dozens of other zoonotic diseases, which infect and kill millions of people annually. Other viruses, both known and unknown, may yet evolve to spill over from wildlife to humans. We encourage a greater understanding of the causes of zoonoses and threats to biodiversity that arise from unregulated, unsustainable, unsanitary, and high-stress trade in wild animals.

The EWT calls for governments to take urgent, cohesive, and meaningful action to tackle all forms of illegal wildlife trade using evidence-based approaches to minimise risks to conservation, health, and safety. Human health and nature are inextricably linked, and the current COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates a need for enhanced global responses to addressing the illegal wildlife trade.

*The EWT bases its perspectives on the best available information and data available at the time.
Our positions and opinions may change as more information and data become available.*