

END WILDLIFE TRADE

An Action Plan To Prevent Future Pandemics



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If we want to avoid future pandemics, we must fundamentally change our relationship with wildlife and nature. The COVID-19 pandemic's devastating global impact is demonstrating that policy half-measures to protect biodiversity are simply insufficient given the vast economic and human toll of this virus and others like it. The best way to dramatically reduce the likelihood of another pandemic is to significantly curtail wildlife trade, permanently close all live wildlife markets, build global capacity to conserve wildlife and protect nature, and shift to a more respectful relationship with the millions of other species with which we share our planet.¹

Approximately one-quarter of human deaths worldwide are caused by infectious diseases. Of those, 60% are considered zoonotic — meaning they jump from other animals to people — and more than 70% originate with wildlife.² In the past 40 years, the worst global pandemics have all been zoonotic in origin, including HIV, SARS, avian flu, swine flu, Ebola and Zika, and now COVID-19.

As people push deeper into untouched parts of the planet to satisfy the insatiable market demand for wildlife, the likelihood of pandemics will continue to rise.³ A sobering 18% of the planet's terrestrial vertebrate wildlife — more than 5,000 species — are already part of the wildlife trade, with several thousand more species predicted to enter that trade in the coming years.⁴ Climate change will similarly put different species and people in contact, creating new opportunities for disease spillover.⁵ Meanwhile, habitat destruction around the world is accelerating, resulting in staggering declines in the abundance and diversity of wildlife, with over 1 million species facing extinction worldwide, many within decades.⁶

Responses to these pandemics have, unfortunately, been predictable. While we have shown that we can mobilize and act boldly in the midst of a crisis, the world has continued to fail to address the root causes of these outbreaks: wildlife trade and habitat destruction. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the catastrophic consequences of our indifference to, and nescience of, the threats of wildlife trade, the commodification and consumption of wildlife, and habitat loss. To successfully reduce the possibility of another zoonotic disease pandemic, we must take comprehensive action at a scale comparable to the threat posed by another pandemic.



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Cover photo of wildlife trade by Dan Bennett, CC-BY

This action plan outlines a series of steps for decision-makers to end wildlife trade, first at the global level and then within the United States. Because the United States is one of the nations with the highest demand for wildlife — importing more than 224 million live animals and 883 million other wildlife specimens every year — it has the responsibility to assume a leadership role. The U.S. needs to help other nations end wildlife trade and develop alternative livelihoods for people dependent on that trade, and we need to set the right example for all other nations to follow.⁷

1. Implement a Global Crackdown on Wildlife Trade

The global impacts of COVID-19 underscore that our view of wildlife as mere commodities must evolve. While people have hunted wildlife for food and other uses for thousands of years, the mass commodification of wildlife is a relatively recent phenomenon. Combined with economic globalization and the speed at which live wildlife, wildlife products and people can move around the world, we have created the conditions in which future pandemics will continue to wreak havoc if we do not reassess our relationship with wildlife. The following critical actions must be taken by all nations:

- Immediately ban the import and export of all live wildlife, permanently close all domestic live-wildlife markets, and urge all nations to take similar actions.
- Provide support to transition communities to alternative livelihoods so that they no longer need to rely on wildlife trade for their well-being. This financial assistance should include substantial funding for education and training and must be provided by every developed nation to ensure that when communities shift away from exploiting wildlife, their overall security and welfare improve.
- Make ending illegal wildlife trade a top priority for global law enforcement, including prioritizing the investigation and prosecution of wildlife trade crimes, imposing strict sentences and maximum penalties, and building capacity for international law enforcement agencies to address wildlife crimes.
- Strengthen the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) by ensuring that international commercial trade is prohibited in all species that are threatened with extinction and may be impacted by trade, and take steps to drastically improve compliance and enforcement under the treaty around the world.
- Increase capacity for the implementation and enforcement of CITES by other nations by strengthening key environmental statutes and regulations, cracking down on corruption, and supporting law-enforcement activities in biodiversity-rich developing countries. Ensure that importing nations in the developed world are held accountable for their roles in driving and facilitating the destructive trade in wildlife.
- Regulate the remaining legal trade in wildlife products using a precautionary approach based on the best available science in which particular trade activities are only permitted if: (1) the World Health Organization and other scientific bodies determine trade in the wildlife does not pose a risk of spreading zoonotic diseases and there is 100% disease testing, and (2) the trade does not cause declines in the species being harvested and does not degrade or damage the ecosystems from which wildlife is taken.



Photo of squirrel monkeys courtesy pxfuel



Photo of African elephant courtesy Pixabay

2. Strengthen U.S. Conservation Efforts to Fight Wildlife Trade

The United States has some of the strongest wildlife laws in the world, but they have been implemented in ways that have undermined their effectiveness, which in turn has allowed illegal wildlife trade to fester and made it virtually impossible to address the threat it presents. To permanently end illegal wildlife trade everywhere around the world, the United States must show leadership by strengthening its key wildlife laws. We must also thoughtfully evaluate and significantly curtail legal wildlife trade, and develop the tools and information needed to better assess the impacts from legal wildlife trade.

- Using its emergency rulemaking authorities under the Lacey Act and Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should immediately implement a moratorium on the import and export of all wildlife specimens using existing authorities. This moratorium will allow federal agencies to develop a precautionary and comprehensive strategy for wildlife trade in which the risks and benefits can be assessed for each type of trade activity before it is approved.
- Strengthen the Lacey Act to permanently end the import, export and interstate trade of live wildlife within the United States and close all live wildlife markets for human consumption.
- Building upon the Law Enforcement Management Information System (“LEMIS”) database, the Fish and Wildlife Service should lead the development of a robust and transparent global database to track all wildlife trade. To minimize risks of spreading zoonotic diseases or causing invasive species to spread, all import and export data should immediately be made public and accessible in real time.
- Restore the full power and reach of the Endangered Species Act to protect foreign threatened and endangered species at the same level as species found inside the United States.
- Congress should repeal the Trump administration’s regulatory rollback of the Endangered Species Act’s implementing regulations to restore the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service’s capacity to protect imperiled species and critical habitat.
- Strengthen efforts to end illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, which perpetuates illegal wildlife trade, by deploying additional Coast Guard, NOAA and Navy resources to combat illegal fishing, and fully fund all seafood monitoring, traceability, and enforcement programs to deter illegal fishing.

3. Build Capacity to Stop Wildlife Trade

Given the immensity of the conservation challenges posed by global wildlife trade, current federal law enforcement efforts are woefully inadequate. The United States must take a leadership role in conservation and enforcement efforts around the world. Unfortunately the vast majority of U.S. agencies involved in global wildlife conservation and law enforcement are grossly underfunded and have been for decades. Many lack even the most basic resources needed to function properly, including maintaining a sufficient number of trained staff.

At least \$10 billion per year in additional funding is needed to allow federal agencies to increase law-enforcement capacity to combat wildlife trafficking, ensure wildlife trade is not driven underground, and monitor any remaining non-prohibited trade. Furthermore, international assistance is needed to develop innovative programs aimed at curbing habitat loss, changing behaviors around wildlife trade and consumption, developing alternative livelihoods for people, and protecting global wildlife and ecosystems. Specifically, each year for the next 10 years, Congress should invest additional funding in the following areas:

- \$4 billion for the U.S. Agency for International Development to build upon: (1) the sustainable landscapes program, (2) the USAID biodiversity program, and (3) the emerging pandemic threat program. This additional funding is vital to help communities around the world transition away from wildlife consumption and trade to alternative food and income sources.
- \$1 billion in supplemental funding for the World Health Organization specifically targeted toward the mitigation of global health risks caused by zoonotic diseases and to assist governments in efforts to shut down the trade of wildlife and use of live wildlife markets.
- \$1 billion for the Fish and Wildlife Service to combat wildlife trafficking and protect trade-threatened species including: (1) increasing the number of countries with attaché programs to combat wildlife trade, (2) developing recovery programs for foreign-listed species that are in wildlife trade and are potential vectors for zoonotic disease, (3) reducing the consumption of wildlife for food, (4) reducing demand for wildlife products and (5) aggressively enforcing CITES.
- \$1 billion for the National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the U.S. Coast Guard to (1) strengthen and expand the Seafood Import Monitoring Program, (2) ensure compliance with all marine conservation laws and (3) deploy an international ocean law-enforcement program to increase at-sea surveillance and stop illegal seafood harvests.
- \$1 billion for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection to (1) hire and train officers to detect and identify illegally traded wildlife products and (2) expand, modernize and integrate the International Trade Data System to allow for key agencies to screen in real-time import and export data and to use predictive learning to automatically identify high risk shipments in advance of arrival in U.S. ports.
- \$1 billion in assistance to build capacity of state partners and state agencies to address the illegal trade of wildlife and better integrate these efforts with federal actions. State wildlife agencies play a critical role in addressing illegal wildlife trade inside the United States and yet face substantial resource constraints that impede their ability to conduct law enforcement and conservation activities.
- \$500 million for the Department of Justice to bolster its Environmental Crimes division and to build and strengthen capacity, including Wildlife Enforcement Networks around the world.
- \$500 million for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to augment plant and livestock screening to eliminate the inadvertent importation of invasive species and other pathogens carried by agricultural products.

4. Restore and Demonstrate Global Leadership in International Wildlife Conservation

While the United States was once a world leader in the advancement of international wildlife conservation, it now refuses to even ratify international wildlife and biodiversity protection treaties, disengaging from these global efforts. Congress must reestablish the United States' leadership role by providing funding, resources and expertise to strengthen international conservation efforts. Specifically, the United States must:

- Maintain abundant, healthy wildlife populations by establishing additional protected areas in the United States, both onshore and offshore, by protecting 30% of all lands, waters and oceans by 2030, and by protecting 50% of all lands, waters and oceans by 2050.
- Ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention on Migratory Species, and the Convention on the Law of the Sea to ensure the United States is a strong voice advocating for wildlife and habitat in these international efforts. The United States should also rejoin the World Heritage Convention and other international agreements to provide global leadership on all environmental issues that require a global response.
- Strengthen the U.S. Pelly Amendment by (1) authorizing the Secretaries of the Interior and Commerce to certify a nation if its trade activities increase the risk of zoonotic pandemics caused by legal wildlife trade or substantially contribute to illegal trade, (2) conducting annual reviews of each nation known to be part of illegal wildlife trade and initiating certification proceedings if treaty violations are identified and (3) requiring that the Secretary of Treasury shall automatically impose trade penalties based on any positive certification within 90 days unless the president objects.
- Direct the U.S. Trade Representatives to prioritize compliance with existing trade agreements to ensure other nations fully meet their environmental commitments relating to wildlife trade and habitat destruction, and use the World Trade Organization dispute resolution mechanism to penalize non-compliant nations that undermine global efforts to reduce the risk of future pandemics.



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Conclusion

Global pandemics will continue to occur in the future unless the United States addresses the root causes of emerging zoonotic disease outbreaks. Strengthening our conservation laws, investing more financial resources, and reengaging assertively in the global arena are all critical steps to succeed in curtailing the wildlife trade, habitat loss and the spread of zoonotic diseases.

Congress and the administration have the opportunity to not only address the current crisis but to reestablish the United States as a global leader in the effort to foreclose future zoonotic pandemics and conserve wildlife and habitat. We urge Congress and the administration to reflect on the lessons learned from the current pandemic and invest in what is truly needed to make future zoonotic pandemics far less likely to occur. Anything less will likely result in continued disease outbreaks that harm human health and cripple our global society.

Endnotes

- 1 Johnson, C.K., et al. (2020). *Global shifts in mammalian population trends reveal key predictors of virus spillover risk*. Proc. R. Soc. B 287: 20192736. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2019.2736>; Can, Ö. E., D’Cruze, N. & Macdonald, D. W. (2019). *Dealing in deadly pathogens: Taking stock of the legal trade in live wildlife and potential risks to human health*. Global ecology and conservation 17, e00515. Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2351989418302312>.
- 2 Jones, K.E., et al. (2008). *Global trends in emerging infectious diseases*. Nature 451: 7181. Available at <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature06536.pdf>.
- 3 Johnson, C.K., et al. (2020). *Global shifts in mammalian population trends reveal key predictors of virus spillover risk*. Proc. R. Soc. B 287: 20192736. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2019.2736>.
- 4 Scheffers, B.R., Oliveira, B.F., Lamb, I. & Edwards, D.P. (2019). *Global wildlife trade across the three of life*. Science 366: 6461. Available at <https://science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi/10.1126/science.aav5327>.
- 5 Patz, J. A., et al. (1996). *Global climate change and emerging infectious diseases*. Jama 275(3): 217-223.
- 6 Brondizio, E.S., et al. (2019). *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. IPBES Secretariat. <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>.
- 7 Pires, S.F. & Moreto, W. (2011). *Preventing wildlife crimes: Solutions that can overcome the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’*. European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research 17(2): 101-123.