

ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA)

Virtual Caucus Hearing

“Wildlife Trade, Origins of COVID-19, and Preventing Future Pandemics”

18 June 2020

John E. Scanlon AO – oral testimony

Special Envoy, [African Parks](#)

Special Adviser, [Elephant Protection Initiative](#)

Chair, [Global Initiative to End Wildlife Crime](#)

Immediate past Secretary-General, CITES (2010-2018)

Sincere thanks to the Chair, Hon. Nguyen Tuan Anh, for convening this Conservation Caucus and to our good colleagues at the International Conservation Caucus Foundation ([ICCF](#)), for facilitating this virtual hearing. Apologies for my appearance but its close to 4.00 am here in Switzerland!

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us in a devastating way of the interconnected nature of things, most particularly between economies, the environment, human and wildlife health and welfare. However, our international laws, programmes and funds do not yet reflect this reality, which is also largely the case at the national level.

The most likely explanation for COVID-19 is that the virus jumped from bats to humans, perhaps via another animal such as a pangolin, at a wet market in Wuhan. While no firm conclusions can yet be drawn, the links between wildlife and previous epidemics and pandemics are well-knownⁱ, as are the conditions that make spillover from animals to humans more likely. You have just heard from experts on these issues.

The risks are real, and the stakes are high. Risks to public health through wildlife-related zoonotic diseases can come from unregulated, regulated, and illegal wildlife trade. We need to draw on relevant experts to identify the wildlife markets, trade and consumption that poses a health risk, so we can focus our efforts where they are needed most, and avoid any unintended consequences.

The current international regime for regulating wildlife trade and combating wildlife crime is inadequate both for regulating the wildlife trade, markets and consumption that pose a risk to public health, as well as for ending wildlife crime.

Left as it is our system is not going to prevent the next pandemic. It could, in fact, be raising our potential exposure to zoonotic diseases that can spill over from wild animals to people.

These are challenging, global, interconnected, issues. Profound changes are needed, and it will require a collective effort to adequately address them.

Wildlife trade

As regards wildlife trade, CITES is the global legal instrument that regulates international trade. Its decisions are based upon agreed trade and biological criteria. It does not include risks to public health, or animal health, in its decision making, including in listing a species or in approving any trade transactions. For example, pangolins are listed under CITES, horseshoe batsⁱⁱ, along with many other bat species, are not.

CITES trade controls only address overexploitationⁱⁱⁱ, namely whether a trade transaction will threaten the survival of that species. CITES narrow focus on overexploitation was sound when the Convention was negotiated in the early 1970's, but it cannot be sustained in a post COVID-19 world. Today we need to take a '[One Health](#)' approach to wildlife trade.^{iv}

At the present time, some States^v are taking stricter domestic measures to ban certain wildlife trade, markets and consumption, as a precautionary measure, which is to be welcomed. However, to be effective, such measures will need to be applied and enforced across all countries to stave off future pandemics.

To achieve this objective, we need to work within an open, transparent, science-based international legal framework that includes health criteria in its decision-making process. This does not exist today, either under CITES or anywhere else.

As I see it, there are three options at international level to build public and animal health into wildlife trade laws. We can:

- amend [CITES](#);^{vi}
- create a new Protocol under the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#); or^{vii}
- create a new Agreement under the World Health Organisation.^{viii}

I have looked closely at all three options, and in my view, amending CITES will be the fastest, most effective, and cost-efficient route to take in achieving a One Health approach to regulating wildlife trade.

CITES Parties have been creative over many years in how they have interpreted the Convention and they have, through their decisions, enabled the Convention to evolve quite considerably.^{ix} Some people have asked me if we can achieve a One Health objective without having to amend the Convention text itself.

CITES Parties could adopt a suite of new or revised Resolutions and decisions that address health-related issues, establish new cooperative agreements with relevant agencies, and strengthen the implementation of existing agreements, in order to move CITES closer towards taking a One Health approach to wildlife trade.^x

These measures could offer valuable guidance to Parties and support enhanced working relationships with relevant agencies at all levels, but there are limits to what such guidance can achieve, and it could not change the core mandate of the Convention.

If public and animal health is to become an integral part of the legally binding wildlife trade regime under CITES, then the Convention text will need to be amended, along with certain Resolutions, and there is a clear process for doing both.

Wildlife crime

On wildlife crime, we have known for some time now that serious wildlife crime is organised, transnational, is fuelled by corruption, and has a devastating impact on wildlife, local communities, national economies, security, public health and entire ecosystems, but this is now increasingly obvious.

Yet, remarkably, there is no global legal agreement on wildlife crime.

In the absence of any alternative, we have used CITES to crank up the fight against illegal wildlife trade, and with some success. However, CITES was never designed to deal with wildlife crime and its limitations as a trade-related, rather than a crime-related convention, in combating serious wildlife crimes are now clearly evident.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that record levels of illegal trade in pangolins have been recorded over the past two years, despite them being given the highest level of protection under the Convention in 2016.^{xi}

The 2019 UN [IPBES](#) Global Assessment tells us that one million species are at risk of extinction over coming decades if we do not change course. This Report, and others, make it clear that we must look beyond CITES listed species, which accounts for only 36,000, or 0.5%, of the world's eight million species. We must use the law to help countries stop the theft of all their wildlife, both plants and animals, terrestrial and marine, not just those species that are on the brink of extinction.

We must finally grasp the nettle with serious [wildlife crime](#) and put combating such crimes where it belongs. We must embed it into the international criminal law framework, which can be done via a new Protocol to the [UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime](#), as has been done for other serious crimes, such as human trafficking.

Further, with new bans on high-risk wildlife markets and the trade in and consumption of certain wildlife on public health grounds, the need for an effective global enforcement response is greater than ever. If not, such markets and trade may simply move underground, which will exacerbate rather than diminish the health risks.

A new wildlife crime Protocol could, amongst other matters, embed combating wildlife crime into the criminal justice system, enhance cooperation across international borders, facilitate making best use of the tools available under the UN Convention in combating wildlife crime, extend the global scope of wildlife crime beyond the trafficking of species listed under CITES, provide a common definition of wildlife crime and set out what conduct should be criminalised.

Protect wildlife at source

Wherever possible, it is best to take measures to stop the illegal taking, trade and consumption of wildlife before it ever happens, by better protecting wildlife at source and its habitat.

When they have a stake in it, local communities are the best protectors of wildlife, before it ever enters illegal trade, and in doing so they are also helping to avert the next wildlife-related pandemic.^{xii}

We need to focus our collective efforts around large-scale, long-term commitments to wildlife-rich places that are included in protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and that can deliver multiple benefits.^{xiii}

When well-managed, these areas provide security for people and wildlife and bring about stability and law and order, creating the conditions needed to attract tourism, secure carbon, combat poaching, protect biodiversity, and create decent local jobs in remote areas. I've seen for myself across multiple countries, including in the [DRC](#).

Today, we better understand the multiple benefits of nature conservation, yet these benefits are not sufficiently recognised by health, development or security initiatives or their financing. As the benefits of effective nature conservation extends well beyond wildlife, so too must the sources of financing.

Chair, if we manage to take these actions^{xiv}, I believe we will be well placed to avert the next wildlife-related pandemic, but if we do not act boldly now to institutionalise the changes that are needed to laws, funding and programmes, I fear we may find ourselves back in the same place in the not too distant future.

Thank you for the invitation to address you and my brief remarks are supplemented by reference materials that have been provided for you via our good colleagues at the ICCF.

Reference materials

Webinars

['Giant Conversations: Preventing Wildlife and Wildlife Parts Reaching Consumer Markets'](#) Space for Giants Panel Session, June 2020

['Wildlife Trade, Origins of COVID-19, and Preventing Future Pandemics'](#), Oral testimony to the U.K. All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on International Conservation Virtual Caucus Hearing, June 2020 (video available [here](#))

['A fresh look at Global wildlife trade law: can CITES help prevent pandemics?'](#), Is CITES enough or do we need more? Remarks at the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law Webinar Series, May 2020 (video and summary of the event available [here](#))

['End Pandemics: Global Webinar'](#), April, 2020

[‘Wildlife Trade, Origins of COVID-19, and Preventing Future Pandemics’](#), Oral and written testimony to the U.S. Congressional International Conservation Caucus Virtual Caucus Hearing, April 2020 (full set of proceedings available [here](#))

Opeds and media articles

[‘A Crucial Step Toward Preventing Wildlife-Related Pandemics’](#), Scientific American Joint Op-Ed, June 2020

[‘Connecting human and wildlife health key to stave off the next pandemic’](#), Article on personal LinkedIn page, April 2020

[‘Confront illegal wildlife trafficking with international criminal laws, former global trade chief says’](#), The Independent, June 2020

[‘Conservation must not be a COVID victim’](#), The Independent, May 2020

[‘Time to end the scourge of wildlife crime’](#), The Independent, March 2020

Articles

[‘Connecting human and wildlife health key to stave off the next pandemic’](#), Article on personal LinkedIn page, April 2020

[‘To end wildlife crime global responses must move with the times’](#), Article on personal LinkedIn page, March 2020

[‘End Wildlife Crime Event’](#) (House of Lords, London UK, UN World Wildlife Day), Article on personal LinkedIn page, March 2020

[‘A salute to the rangers of Garamba National Park, DRC’](#), Article on personal LinkedIn page, April 2019

[‘The tail does not wag the dog – the post 2020 biodiversity framework’](#), Article on personal LinkedIn page, February 2019

[‘Do we need a wildlife crime convention?’](#) Article on personal LinkedIn page, February 2019

ⁱ Such as HIV-AIDS, Ebola, MERS, SARS and more

ⁱⁱ A likely source of the COVID-19 pandemic.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are some trades that also address a limited number of animal welfare issues, such as for trade in live animals, where Management Authorities must be satisfied it is prepared and shipped to minimise the risk of injury, damage to health and cruel treatment.

^{iv} Which seeks to bring public, animal and plant health and the environment closer together

^v As we have seen in China, Vietnam, Gabon and Bolivia.

^{vi} To include public health criteria for listing species, possibly via a new Appendix, create a new Committee on Public Health, and oblige Management Authorities to take account of public health issues before issuing any certificate or permit.

^{vii} As has been done for [Living Modified Organisms](#) and [Access and Benefit Sharing](#).

^{viii} As has been done for [Tobacco Control](#), which recognises the serious public health consequences of tobacco.

^{ix} This has included adopting Resolutions to:

- establish three committees, including two science committees,

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- create a compliance mechanism,
 - advance the fight against illegal trade in CITES listed species,
 - call for the closure domestic ivory markets in certain circumstances,
 - address certain animal welfare concerns, and
 - support the Secretariat collaborating with other agencies and programmes, as was done with the [OIE](#), the World Animal Health Organisation, in 2015.

^x For example the Parties could adopt decisions to supplement the expertise on its committees, encourage Management Authorities to consider the health aspects of any trade before authorising it, offer better guidance on captive breeding facilities, extend the reach of guidelines on the transport of live animals to cover capture and management prior to transport, and to engage in deeper or new cooperative agreements with public and animal health agencies.

^{xi} Pangolins are also a possible intermediate host of COVID-19.

^{xii} Wildlife-based tourism revenue is a critical part of the financing of nature conservation especially in developing countries. This current loss of revenue, and related jobs, is seriously challenging wildlife protection efforts, and could lead to an increase in poaching, degradation of ecosystems, and instability, thereby increasing the threat posed by high-risk wildlife trade, and exacerbating the effects of climate change. We must find a way to bridge this financing gap, which is addressed in your next session.

^{xiii} The proposed German [Legacy Landscape Fund](#) and the UK's [Biodiverse Landscape Fund](#) both adopt this approach, which is most welcome, but the funding is limited

^{xiv} It's important to also note that to be as effective as possible, all these efforts will need to be complemented by well-targeted demand reduction campaigns, and, where necessary, initiatives to provide alternative sources of protein and livelihoods to people severely affected by any bans. Traditional, subsistence practices use should not be impacted.