



Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius
EU Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
1049 Brussels

Brussels, 6th October 2020

Dear Commissioner Sinkevičius,

Subject: Urgent efforts needed to address the commercial wildlife trade and consumption to prevent future zoonotic outbreaks

We are pleased to write on behalf of a number of the world's leading conservation and animal advocacy organisations, including the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC), WildAid, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Pro Wildlife, Environmental Investigation Agency UK (EIA), Fondation Franz Weber (FFW), Species Survival Network (SSN), David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF), Born Free Foundation (BFF), Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Humane Society International/Europe (HSI), and Fauna & Flora International (FFI).

We are writing to express our concern that, to date, the European Commission has been failing to support the strong global measures needed to prevent future zoonotic disease outbreaks such as COVID-19.

The science is clear: if the world is to avoid another COVID-like pandemic, we must close wildlife markets, especially for human consumption, and associated trade (domestic and international, legal and illegal). Unfortunately, the current response of the Commission appears to focus solely on tackling the illegal wildlife trade. We, the undersigned organisations, strongly support efforts to combat wildlife trafficking, but these efforts should not be implemented in lieu of meaningful, evidence-based efforts to prevent the next zoonotic spillover, epidemic, or pandemic.

While measures to combat wildlife trafficking are critical, they would not have been able to prevent the COVID-19 outbreak that we are currently battling, which is believed to have initially spread in a legal market, with legally obtained wildlife species. Science shows that the ancestral host of the virus causing the COVID-19 pandemic was a horseshoe bat species; and while the intermediate host may never be confirmed, there is no doubt that the nature of markets that sell live and freshly butchered wild animals create an unacceptable risk. Not all is known of the time, place and mechanism of the COVID-19 spill-over but decision-making must be based on the best available science and the precautionary principle. There is clearly no evidence that the risk of pathogen spillover is exclusively related to illegally obtained animals; a virus is indifferent to whether an animal in a market was obtained legally or not.

The emergence of COVID-19 and its drastic impacts on human health, wellbeing and societies provides a stark demonstration of the dramatic societal and economic costs that can result from the destruction of nature and commercial trade in wildlife. We therefore welcome the European Commission Biodiversity Strategy to 2030, published on May 20th, which provides the foundation for ambitious EU action to tackle the biodiversity crisis. We welcome several actions in the strategy which will assist in reducing zoonotic disease risk, notably, support for global efforts for a 'One Health' approach and a revision of the EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking. We also welcome the acknowledgement in the strategy that "a better protection of natural ecosystems, coupled with efforts to reduce wildlife trade and consumption will help prevent and build up resilience to possible future diseases and pandemics".

Despite this recognition, recent communications from the European Commission (for example, in response to questions from Members of the European Parliament), appear to have shifted in focus and only mention the need to combat the illegal wildlife trade. Additional efforts to close markets and end commercial wildlife trade, specifically for human consumption, which will actually reduce the risk of zoonotic spillover, seem to have been put aside. Ignoring the role of legal commercial trade and markets will not significantly reduce the risk.

To have a meaningful impact on risk reduction, the EU must promote and assist the global community in ending the commercial trade and sale in markets of wildlife for human consumption, particularly birds and mammals, as a key outcome to prevent future zoonotic pandemics. Merely improving the regulation of this trade or closing a few markets, whilst laudable, will not prevent a future zoonotic pandemic, and is short-sighted. Rather, only the closure of commercial markets in live and freshly slaughtered animals for human consumption, and the trade (domestic and international) that provides animals to these markets, will achieve the goal. We recognise that due consideration must be given to subsistence hunting by Indigenous Peoples and local communities for household consumption, for whom there are often few or no other sources of high-quality protein and micronutrients, but their needs should not be seen as a smokescreen for ignoring commercial wildlife markets and trade for human consumption, all of which pose a serious zoonotic spillover risk.

We therefore request that the Commission urgently outlines the next steps the EU will take to effectively address the underlying causes and risks of zoonotic-origin disease emergence,

including the risk of future pandemics, including efforts to address commercial wildlife trade and consumption as a critical component of any strategy to significantly reduce the risk of future outbreaks of zoonotic disease. We are encouraged to see other countries such as China now taking steps in this direction, and new bipartisan legislation introduced in the U.S. Congress, and hope that the EU will support this global effort as a critical component of the new Biodiversity Strategy under its Green Deal and green recovery post-COVID.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide further background information. We also hereby request a meeting with you to further discuss this important issue.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Janice Weatherley-Singh
Director, EU Strategic Relations
WCS EU

Georgina Lamb
Chief Executive
David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF)

Dr. Wes Sechrest
Chief Scientist & CEO
Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC)

Daniela Freyer
Co-Founder
Pro Wildlife

John Baker
Chief Program Officer
WildAid

Will Travers
President
Species Survival Network (SSN)

Staci McLennan
Office Director – European Union
IFAW

Dr. Joanna Swabe
Senior Director of Public Affairs
Humane Society International/Europe (HSI)

Vera Weber
President and CEO
Fondation Franz Weber (FFW)

Zak Smith
Director, International Wildlife Conservation
Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)

Dr Mark Jones
Head of Policy
Born Free Foundation (BFF)

Mark Rose
Chief Executive Officer
Fauna & Flora International (FFI)

Mary Rice
Executive Director
Environmental Investigation Agency UK
(EIA)