

Open letter to World Health Organisation and United Nations Environment Programme

Dear Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Ms. Inger Andersen,

CC: Achim Steiner, Administrator UNDP
Elizabeth M. Mrema, Acting Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity, CBD
Qu Dongyu, Director General, Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO
Ivonne Higuero, CITES Secretary General
Grethel Aguilar, Acting Director General, IUCN
Michelle Bachelet, UN Human Rights Commissioner
David Boyd, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Environment
David Nabarro, Special Envoy to WHO DG on COVID-19

COVID-19: Holistic, equitable solutions are required to improve human and planetary health and reduce zoonotic pandemic risks

We, the undersigned individuals and organisations, commend the work the UN is doing to tackle the COVID-19 disease pandemic and its socio-economic consequences¹. The recently released UN Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 outlines the importance of shared responsibility and integration². However, more action is required, particularly on the environmental front. Urgent, far-reaching steps must be taken to reduce zoonotic pandemic risks and secure a better future not only for humans but also for nature, which underpins the health and well-being of all humanity³. It is vital that any actions taken are appropriate and lead to socially just outcomes which contribute to – not detract from – the development of economically resilient livelihoods for those hundreds of millions of the world’s most vulnerable who depend on wild resources for their survival.

COVID-19 is inflicting unprecedented social and economic costs on countries and communities, with the poor and vulnerable hardest hit. The virus’s suspected links with a Chinese ‘wet market’ has led to calls to ban wet markets and restrict or end the trade and consumption – for medicines or food - of wildlife⁴. However, indiscriminate bans and restrictions risk being inequitable and ineffective. Wet markets, wildlife trade and consumption, and disease risks are all complex subjects. Wet markets (not all of which sell wild meat) provide invaluable food security; billions of people worldwide trade or consume wild meat and rely on wildlife use for livelihoods, while diseases are transmitted from livestock as well as wildlife.

There is an urgent need to tackle wildlife trade that is illegal, unsustainable or carries major risks to human health, biodiversity or animal welfare. Certain high-risk activities may rightfully necessitate targeted and/or time-bound bans, or severe restrictions (and rigorous enforcement),

¹ www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-working-fight-covid-19-and-achieve-global-goals

² <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/SG-Report-Socio-Economic-Impact-of-Covid19.pdf>

³ https://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/reports/health_rioconventions.pdf

⁴ https://www.bornfree.org.uk/storage/media/content/files/WildlifeMarketClosureLetter_Feb20_FINALV3_1.pdf

but it is vital that any such action is specific, appropriate, and equitable. If those targeted bans or severe restrictions are implemented, they should be accompanied by the meaningful provision of suitable alternative livelihoods for people affected. Furthermore, long-term success will require a holistic approach, including tackling issues like land conversion and industrial agriculture, which are major drivers of pandemic risk as well as biodiversity loss⁵. Any actions must be undertaken in a targeted and socially just manner with due regard for human rights.

We recommend that the WHO and UNEP use their individual and collective expertise to:

1. Work with the appropriate experts to identify areas and activities where wildlife trade and/or use poses high risks to zoonotic disease transmission, biodiversity conservation or welfare, and strengthen or develop tailored, locally appropriate strategies, with suitably improved regulation and enforcement, along the entire supply chain to reduce those risks;
2. Initiate a coordinated response to the risks of pandemic emergence and biodiversity loss through the UN Environmental Management Group to raise intergovernmental awareness of the important role biodiversity plays in underpinning human health, the health risks associated with habitat destruction, and the value of sustainable use of biological resources (in line with Article 1 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and guided by its 2004 Addis Ababa Principles);
3. Build partnerships across WHO, UNEP and other key stakeholders including IUCN, FAO and WTO, to explore how health considerations could be better aligned with trade regulations within the CITES framework, in clear recognition that biodiversity loss, unregulated trade and human health are inextricably linked;
4. Effectively engage with the CBD's ongoing process to develop the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework and associated resource mobilization strategy to ensure biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and wisely used;
5. Support science- and human-rights-based, equitable approaches to conservation, in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, and deliver comprehensive improvements to both human and planetary health.

The reasons for our recommendations are set out in Annexe A, below the signatory list. 300 of the signatories (160 organisational signatories and 140 individual signatories) are shown below – more on online and will continue to be collected:

Organisational signatories

1. !Khaodi // Hoas Conservancy Kunene South, Namibia
2. 1StopBorneo Wildlife, Brunei
3. African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), Kenya/International
4. Afrivet, South Africa
5. Ambrosius A. Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia

⁵ http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/COVID-19_CommuniqueEN.pdf

6. Anabeb Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
7. Asocaiman, Colombia
8. Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, USA
9. Association OKANI, Cameroon
10. Aube Nouvelle pour la Femme et le Developpement (AFND), Democratic Republic of the Congo
11. Balepye Community, South Africa
12. Botswana Wildlife Producers Association (BWPA), Botswana
13. Cameroon Youth Biodiversity Network, Cameroon
14. CAMPFIRE Association, Zimbabwe
15. CIC - International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation, US/international
16. Climate Change Coalition Group, Zimbabwe
17. COMFAUNA (Comunidad de Manejo de Fauna Silvestre en Amazonía y América Latina, Latin America
18. Conservation Alliance International, Ghana
19. Conservation Alliance Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone
20. Conservation Frontlines Foundation, USA/South Africa
21. Conservation Outcomes, South Africa
22. Conservation Through Public Health, Uganda
23. Conservation Visions, Canada
24. Creative Conservation Solutions, Australia
25. Cuma CF Communioty Forest Kavango West, Namibia
26. Custodians of Professional Hunting and Conservation-SA, South Africa
27. Dallas Safari Club, USA
28. Earthmind, Switzerland
29. Eco Ranger Group, South Africa
30. EcoHealth Alliance, USA
31. Ecolife Expeditions, South Africa
32. Ehirovipuka Conservancy - Kunene Region, Namibia
33. Endangered Wildlife Trust, South Africa
34. Environmental Conservation Trust of Uganda (ECOTRUST), Uganda
35. Environmental Foundation for Africa, Sierra Leone
36. Epupa Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
37. Erongo Regional Conservancy Association (North West), Namibia
38. Etanga Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
39. European Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FACE), Belgium
40. European Sustainable Use Group, UK
41. Farm Africa, UK/International
42. Fondation Camerounaise Terre Vivante (FCTV), Cameroon
43. Frankfurt Zoological Society, Germany/International
44. FundAmazonia, Peru

45. Fur Institute of Canada (FIC), Canada
46. Game Ranchers Forum, South Africa
47. Gcatjinga Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
48. Gender CC Woman for Climate Justice, South Africa
49. Geo Wild Consult, South Africa
50. George Mukoya Conservancy Kavango East, Namibia
51. Giraffe Conservation Foundation, Namibia/International
52. Gonarezhou Conservation Trust, Zimbabwe
53. Greenhood Nepal, Nepal
54. Guide Outfitting Association of British Columbia, Canada
55. Hans Kanyinga Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
56. Houston Safari Club, USA
57. Huab Conservancy (Kunene Region), Namibia
58. Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) , Namibia
59. Interdisciplinary Centre for Conservation Science and Oxford Martin Programme on the Illegal Wildlife Trade, UK
60. International Fur Federation, UK/International
61. Ipumbu Ya Tshilongo (North Central), Namibia
62. IUCN Group Sustainable Use and Management of Ecosystems (SUME), International
63. IUCN SSC Bear Specialist Group, International
64. IUCN SSC Caprinae Specialist Group, International
65. IUCN SSC-CEESP Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group (SULi), International
66. IUCN Wildlife Health Specialist Group, International
67. Wildlife Producers Association of Zambia, Zambia
68. IWMC World Conservation Trust, Switzerland/International
69. Jamma International, UK/International
70. Japan Falconiformes Center, Japan
71. Kahenge Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
72. Kapinga Kabwalye Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
73. Kasungu Wildlife Conservation for Community Development, Malawi
74. Katope Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
75. Keystone Foundation, India
76. Kunene Conservancy Association (KRCCA), Namibia
77. Kunene River Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
78. Likwaterera Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
79. Lion Landscapes, Kenya
80. Mahenye Community Committee, Zimbabwe
81. Malagasy Youth Biodiversity Network, Madagascar
82. Marienfluss Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
83. Masoka CAMPFIRE Association, Zimbabwe
84. Masoka Community, Zimbabwe

85. Maurisi Nekaro Conservancy Kavango East, Namibia
86. Mbeyo Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
87. Mbire Rural District Council, Zimbabwe
88. Muduva Nyangana Conservancy (Kavango East), Namibia
89. Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF), Namibia
90. Namibian Chamber of Environment, Namibia
91. Namibian Organisation of CBNRM Support Organisations (NACSO), Namibia
92. Ncamacoro Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
93. Ncaute Community Forest Kavango West, Namibia
94. Ngamiland Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (NCONGO), Botswana
95. Norwegian Pet Trade Association, Norway
96. Okandundumba Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
97. Okanguati Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
98. Okatjandjakozomenje Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
99. Okondjombo Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
100. Okongoro Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
101. Ombazu Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
102. Ombombo masitu Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
103. Ombujokanguindi Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
104. Ongongo Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
105. Ornamental Fish International (OFI), The Netherlands
106. Orupembe Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
107. Orupupa Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
108. Otjambangu Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
109. Otji West Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
110. Otjikondavirongo Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
111. Otjikongo Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
112. Otjimboyo Conservancy (Erongo Region), Namibia
113. Otjindjeresse Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
114. Otjitanda Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
115. Otjombande Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
116. Otuzemba Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
117. Ozondundu Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
118. People for Pangolins, International
119. Puros Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
120. Resource Africa South Africa, South Africa
121. Resource Africa UK, UK
122. Ruaha Carnivore Project, Tanzania
123. Safari Club International Foundation, USA
124. Sanitatis Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
125. Save the Rhino Trust Namibia, Namibia

126. Sesfontein Conservancy Kunene, Namibia
127. Sheya Shuushona Conservancy (North Central Regions), Namibia
128. Sidinda Community Comiittee, Zimbabwe
129. Sikunga Conservancy (Zambezi Region), Namibia
130. Sorris Sorris Conservancy (Southern Kunene), Namibia
131. South African Hunters and Game Conservation Association, South Africa
132. South African Wingshooters Association , South Africa
133. South African Youth Biodiversity Network, South Africa
134. South Asia Reptile Conservation Alliance, International
135. Southern African Wildlife Management Association, South Africa
136. Stellenbosch University, South Africa
137. Support for Women in Agriculture and Environment (SWAGEN), Uganda
138. Sustainable Users Network (SUN), UK
139. Tanzania Natural Resources Forum (TNRF), Tanzania
140. The Conservation Coalition Botswana (TCCB), Botswana
141. The Development Institute, Ghana
142. The Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA), South Africa
143. The Wildlife Society, USA
144. Torra Conservancy Kunene South, Namibia
145. Tsiseb Conservancy (Erongo Region), Namibia
146. Uibasen Conservancy (Southern Kunene) , Namibia
147. Uukwaludhi Conservancy (North Central Regions), Namibia
148. Wild Africa Conservation, Niger
149. Wild Sheep Foundation, USA
150. Wildlife & Environment Society of Southern Africa, South Africa
151. Wildlife Environmental Society of Malawi, Malawi
152. Wildlife Producers Association, South Africa
153. Wildlife Producers Association of Zambia, Zambia
154. Wildlife Ranching South Africa, South Africa
155. WILDOCEANS, South Africa
156. Women Environmental Programme (WEP), Nigeria
157. Women in Conservation (Kunene Region), Namibia
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139. Shibao Wu, South China Normal University, China
140. Mary Wykstra, Action for Cheetahs in Kenya, Kenya

Annexe A

1. Pandemic risk reduction measures must not exacerbate poverty and inequality

Since its inception, the WHO has defined health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being’. Health is inextricably linked to nature, which underpins our physical and mental wellbeing, and to poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than an immediate health crisis: it is also unleashing unprecedented economic and social chaos. It is currently estimated to be costing the global economy US\$1 trillion in 2020 alone⁶, with the International Labour Organisation predicting cutbacks equivalent to nearly 200 million full-time workers in just three months⁷. Marginalised and vulnerable communities are likely to bear the brunt of these impacts, with UNDP warning that nearly half the jobs in Africa could be lost⁸. Worldwide, nearly half a billion more people could be pushed into poverty⁹, with the crisis disproportionately affecting

⁶ www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-cost-economy-2020-un-trade-economics-pandemic/

⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061322>

⁸ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/covid-19-could-cost-millions-of-jobs-in-africa/>

⁹ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/dignity-not-destitution>

women, leading to wide-ranging social impacts including human rights abuses^{10,11}. Over half the global population could be living in poverty after the pandemic, with particularly severe impacts in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and the Middle East⁸.

As the COVID-19 crisis will deepen poverty and damage health, potentially for generations, it is unconscionable that measures aimed at preventing future pandemics should compound this by further disadvantaging the world's most vulnerable people, for instance through indiscriminate bans on food markets, or unnecessary restrictions on wildlife trade. Millions of poorer households, especially in rural areas, are particularly dependent upon using wild resources for livelihoods and as insurance against economic shocks, whilst in urban areas millions more rely upon affordable produce from wet markets for food security. Over a billion people worldwide, including Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs), rely on using and trading wildlife, by selling and consuming wild meat, fish, insects and plants, extracting timber and forest products, and many other activities. Many of these activities are legal, regulated and essential for livelihoods, and pose no significant threat to human health or biodiversity - indeed, when well regulated, wildlife trade can actually be beneficial for conservation. Indiscriminate restrictions risk unnecessarily exacerbating poverty and inequality without commensurate benefits.

2. Wildlife trade must be addressed in a targeted, tailored and effective way

Wildlife trade, particularly in 'wet markets', has become a central part of the discourse around COVID-19, and it has been suggested that banning wet markets, and banning or severely restricting wildlife trade and consumption, could reduce future pandemic risks¹². However, these are complex topics. Wet markets underpin the informal food systems on which millions of urban and rural people depend. They sell a range of fresh produce: fruit and vegetables, fish, livestock and, sometimes, wildlife. Wildlife trade and consumption encompasses a wide variety of species, both common and rare, and a vast array of uses including food, medicines, clothing, textiles, pets and ornaments. Its drivers and dynamics are complex and varied. Even if wildlife trade bans were just focused on food, it is important to note that zoonotic diseases also emerge from domestic species. Focusing on Asian markets also ignores the fact that billions of people, in both the Global North and South, consume wild meat from both common and 'exotic' species. Furthermore, current proposals to ban all wildlife trade undermine both the spirit and efficacy of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which seeks to regulate trade for the benefit of species conservation and enable trade that is legal, sustainable, and supportive of conservation and human livelihoods. It would be more productive for the WHO, UNEP and other stakeholders to work with CITES to align human health considerations with the objectives of the Convention.

Suggestions that pandemics could be avoided by imposing a global ban on wildlife markets or indiscriminately restricting wildlife trade are simplistic and risk enormous unintended

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>

¹¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30526-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext)

¹² <https://www.hsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID19-Open-Cover-Letter-for-White-Paper.pdf>

consequences, including criminalising and further impoverishing countless people. Externally-imposed bans can drive trade underground and enmesh it with other organised criminal activity, as occurred after the 2013–2016 Ebola outbreak¹³. In that situation, regulations would become harder to enforce, with lower standards of hygiene and animal welfare, and higher likelihood of zoonotic disease outbreak. Furthermore, demand may remain if a legal supply is suddenly removed (especially if captive breeding is also banned, as some recommend⁹), risking a rise in black market prices and increased incentives for poaching. This could accelerate the exploitation and extinction of species in the wild. The risks associated with indiscriminate trade restrictions highlight the need for targeted regulation and enforcement tailored to each specific situation, at the appropriate level. This will increase the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes for conservation, health and animal welfare, while reducing unintended consequences for people and wildlife.

3. Holistic, far-sighted solutions are required to improve human and planetary health

This pandemic is a wake-up call with regard to our destructive relationship with nature. Wildlife trade is only one of many factors that must be addressed to reduce zoonotic disease outbreaks, secure biodiversity and improve human and planetary health. Habitat destruction and industrial agriculture play key roles in increasing zoonotic disease transmission from wildlife to humans¹⁴, as people and their livestock come into ever closer proximity to wild species and pathogens. In addition to catastrophic ecological impacts, the destruction of nature, in conjunction with climate change, has long-term, devastating impacts on human physical and mental health.

The role of domestic species in zoonotic outbreaks such as pandemic influenza must also be considered. Disease risks and welfare in farmed-animal supply chains should also be examined robustly, with risk reduction strategies targeted at the highest-risk species, whether domestic or wild. More widely, holistic approaches should be developed which look beyond pandemics, such as limiting antibiotic use in livestock to reduce risks of antibiotic resistance, which poses a major danger to human health. Business as usual cannot continue, and the WHO and UNEP are well positioned to encourage governments and other agencies to fully recognise the interconnected nature of planetary and human health. There is a need for a ‘One Health’¹⁵ coordinated approach both across the UN, including the WHO, UNEP, UNDP and the FAO, and beyond with other relevant organisations including the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). This synergistic approach would help develop and deliver a better, more equitable future for humans and the ecosystems which underpin our society.

Summary

The response to COVID-19 has demonstrated that transformational action is possible if governments and citizens are convinced that the risks of inaction outweigh the costs. We urgently need similar transformational action to safeguard nature, delivering critical long-term benefits

¹³ <https://newrepublic.com/article/156359/better-way-stop-coronaviruses>

¹⁴ <https://ensia.com/features/covid-19-coronavirus-biodiversity-planetary-health-zoonoses/>

¹⁵ <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/one-health>

for both human and planetary health as part of our response to COVID-19. Robust, long-lasting measures must be taken to safeguard and adequately fund the protection of nature and invest in science- and rights-based conservation and restoration. Devastating as the COVID-19 pandemic is, recovery from this crisis provides an unparalleled moment to create a better and more sustainable future. We must change our relationship with nature and develop appropriate strategies to equitably and sustainably manage the biodiversity upon which so many livelihoods depend. Changes must be inclusive, well-considered and socially and economically just, and every care must be taken not to exacerbate poverty and amplify existing inequalities.

The sustainable and inclusive management of nature is recognised throughout the UN as a key element to achieving poverty reduction objectives and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. Indiscriminate restrictions on wildlife trade will devastate livelihoods, cause major harm to human health and well-being and undermine human rights, without significant benefits for biodiversity or health. Strategic, equitable, coordinated and holistic approaches are more likely to reduce pandemic risks, achieve a better future for both human and planetary health, and should be a core component of future WHO/UNEP recommendations.