The global wildlife trade (which includes all fauna and flora) has been drawing increased attention for several years and was thrust further into the international discourse because of the coronavirus pandemic. On 25 May 2022 online via MS Teams, Northumbria University, in partnership with the [Wildlife Conservation Society](https://www.wcs.org/) (WCS) hosted a webinar about aspects of the pandemic-wildlife trade link titled: [Preventing Planetary Risk from the Next Pandemic: Lessons from the COVID-19—Wildlife Trade Nexus.](https://youtu.be/rsYEcajZz7o) The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded [Professor Tanya Wyatt](https://researchportal.northumbria.ac.uk/en/persons/tanya-wyatt) of Northumbria University to research the [legal implementation of and compliance with](http://drtwyatt.weebly.com/cites-implementation-and-compliance.html) the Convention on International trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES - the main global instrument for regulating trade in listed species of wildlife). This webinar is one of four events funded by AHRC ‘Follow on Funding’ to share the findings of the original research, but also to explore in more depth how wildlife can better be protected[[1]](#footnote-1) as well as how the wildlife trade is connected to larger geopolitical debates such as pandemics.

The webinar began with Dr Christian Walzer of WCS discussing the ‘State of Knowledge: Public Health and Wildlife Trade and Markets’. He highlighted that 70% of Emerging Infectious Diseases (EID) are zoonotic in origin, meaning they originate in non-human animals and are transmitted to humans. Whereas the exact time, space, and mechanism of the spillover of SARS CoV-2 that causes COVID has yet to be definitively determined, it is clear bats are carriers of SARS diseases. Furthermore, there are worrying cases of spillback—where humans have infected non-human animals with COVID-19. White-tailed deer, hamsters, and mink are known to have been infected.

Increased globalisation and rapid changes to our planet caused by humans is why there is an increase in EIDs that pose risks to human as well as non-human animal health. The loss of biodiversity and intact ecosystems combined with “climate change and global inequities in an entangled and tightly coupled globalized world” are critical elements. Dr Walzer emphasised that this is not a surprise—many scientists have been warning for years that such a pandemic was likely to happen. To help prevent future pandemics, WCS advocates the One Health approach to our global society, which “recognizes the intrinsic and inseparable relationships between the health of animals, people, plants, fungi, and the environment”. Dr Walzer proposed that as a global community we must reduce the risk at the interfaces of humans and nature. This means addressing “Climate change; Deforestation; unsustainable extraction of wildlife, timber, and other resources; ecosystem degradation; land-use change for agricultural intensification and other industrial expansion; wildlife trade, wildlife farms, and wildlife markets”. The wildlife-related activities are important because the risk of disease transmission or recombination of diseases accumulates along the wildlife supply chain.

The webinar’s second part consisted of shorter talks highlighting research and approaches around the world at the intersection of COVID-19 and wildlife trade (with focus on domestic uses and trade). Dr Francis Masse of the [Wildlife Trade Futures](http://www.wildlifetradefutures.com) project spoke about “COVID-19 and Wildlife Trade: Understanding the Current Policy Landscape and Identifying Alternative Policy Interventions”. The project has sought to uncover how governments around the world may have altered wildlife policy in response to COVID-19. They found that farmed wildlife and domesticated species gained recognition as risks for spillovers. Part of the impetus behind the project was to challenge calls for banning the wildlife trade because of the presumed unintended consequences bans have on people’s livelihoods and food security, though most responsible organisations have called for closure of markets in live birds and wildlife, and not bans on all wildlife trade In practice, very few countries did ban markets and trade in live wildlife, at least permanently, and those like China which did, have evidence for why this approach is appropriate in that context.

Much of that evidence has been gathered by [Dr Lingyun Xiao](https://www.xjtlu.edu.cn/en/departments/academic-departments/health-and-environmental-sciences/staff/lingyun-xiao) of Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, who spoke about China’s ban of wildlife consumption, farming, and trade of certain terrestrial wild animals, and the motivation behind China’s progressive actions. In particular, she spoke about problems in China’s management system for wildlife trade and that the ban helped to address problems with wildlife farming, the outdated protected species list, and a lack of quarantine protocols. Furthermore, the ban contributes to recognition that wildlife is not an indispensable part of the Chinese diet and closing markets for live wildlife as food might help curtail demand for wildlife.

Two contributors from the [Center for International Forestry Research](https://www.cifor.org/) (CIFOR) to the Wildlife Trade Futures project shared their research on changes to wildmeat consumption in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Cameroon during the pandemic (but did not focus on international trade issues or prevention of spillover). Nathalie van Vliet shared that in DRC the wildmeat supply chains were disrupted by COVID restrictions (e.g., shutdown of transportation and closure of businesses), which were targeted at reducing humans spreading the disease to each other. People’s consumption of wildmeat was also affected by the lack of jobs, which led to an increase in hunting. Overall, most people were not concerned about zoonosis, and this did not play a role in the consumption of wildmeat. Joseph Mbane found similar disruptions to wildmeat consumption and supply chains in Cameroon. Thus, COVID-19 responses in these two contexts do not have appeared to address wildlife trade management, but the pandemic clearly had local impacts on people’s wildmeat consumption patterns. This supports the need to address food security, but it does not seem to address how wildlife trade and markets in these areas link to possible spillover, zoonosis or pandemic prevention.

The final talk of the second part of the webinar was WCS’s Yovana Murillo from Peru. She discussed Peru’s changes to wildlife trade management, including the introduction in July 2020 of the ‘Protocol for the implementation of surveillance measures against COVID 19 in wildlife related activities’. The objectives were to: “Establish surveillance, prevention and control measures to guarantee the health of people closely working with or interacting with wildlife in a variety of facilities/ situations, including activities, to prevent and avoid the transmission of COVID-19 and timely attention to suspected or confirmed cases”. This has not led to a permanent policy to address prevention of pandemics, but there is potential for it to become permanent.

Finally, Dr Susan Lieberman of WCS provided a summary of the talks. She also shared the timeline for consideration by the World Health Organisation of a global convention, agreement, or other international instrument on pandemics, which she made clear needs to be a multilateral, interdisciplinary, multisectoral response that critically cannot only be about preparedness and response, but it must have prevention at source as a key element. Drawing largely on the One Health approach, the World Health Assembly is due in 2023 to produce a progress report for the convention and have it agreed in 2024.

Regardless of what form the World Health Assembly agreement takes, wildlife trade and markets are central to the conversation and to other geopolitical debates on biodiversity and environmental crises. Visit the [British Society of Criminology’s Green Criminology Research Network’s YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/user/ESRCGreenCrime) Channel for a recording of the webinar as well as other videos from the other workshops.

1. The other workshops are: ‘[A Discussion of Tackling Illicit Wildlife Trafficking through an Additional Protocol to the UN Convention on Transnational Organised Crime](https://youtu.be/UOk0D3BDCU0)’ in Vienna, Austria, in partnership with the [Global Initiative to End Wildlife Crime](https://endwildlifecrime.org/) (EWC), and the [Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime](https://globalinitiative.net/) (GI-TOC) on 24 February 2022; ‘Wildlife and the Law: Implications and Ways Forward’ in Portland, Oregon at Lewis & Clark Law School in partnership with the [Global Law Alliance for Animals and the Environment (GLA)](https://law.lclark.edu/clinics/global-law-alliance-for-animals-and-the-environment/) and the [Center for Animal Law Studies (CALS);](https://law.lclark.edu/centers/animal_law_studies/) on 15 April 2022; ‘[Plants and Wildlife Trade: Implications and Ways Forward](https://youtu.be/7LkGycU9x_4)’ in Cambridge, UK in partnership with [TRAFFIC](https://www.traffic.org/) on 17 May 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)