

China temporarily bans wildlife trade in wake of outbreak

January 26 2020, by Sam McNeil, Penny Yi Wang and Elaine Kurtenbach



In this Jan. 9, 2020, photo provided by the Anti-Poaching Special Squad, the exterior of a store suspected of selling trafficked wildlife is seen in Guangde city in central China's Anhui Province. The outbreak of a new virus linked to a wildlife market in central China is prompting renewed calls for enforcement of laws against the trade in and consumption of exotic species. (Anti-Poaching Special Squad via AP)

Chinese authorities temporarily banned the trade of wild animals Sunday following a viral outbreak in Wuhan, saying they will "severely investigate and punish" violators.

Local authorities will "strengthen inspections and severely investigate and punish those who are found in violation of the provisions of this announcement," read the the ban issued by three government agencies.

No wildlife can be transported or sold in any markets or online, according to text of the announcement in state media. Suspected violators will be sent to security services, and their will be properties closed and sealed. Legal breeding centers will be quarantined.

The ban will continue until "the epidemic situation is lifted nationwide" in order to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus and block potential sources of infection and transmission.

The three agencies also opened a hotline where people can report violations, and called on the public to refrain from eating wild animal meat. The agencies are the State Administration of Market Regulation, Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Affairs and the National Forestry and Grassland Administration.

The wildlife ban comes as the new virus accelerated its spread in China with 56 deaths, and 1,975 infections. China cut off trains, planes and other links to Wuhan on Wednesday, as well as public transportation within the city, and has steadily expanded a lockdown to 16 surrounding cities with a combined population of more than 50 million—greater than that of New York, London, Paris and Moscow combined.



In this Jan. 9, 2020, photo provided by the Anti-Poaching Special Squad, police look at items seized from store suspected of trafficking wildlife in Guangde city in central China's Anhui Province. The outbreak of a new virus linked to a wildlife market in central China is prompting renewed calls for enforcement of laws against the trade in and consumption of exotic species. (Anti-Poaching Special Squad via AP)

Demand for wild animals in Asia, especially China, is hastening the extinction of many species, on top of posing a perennial health threat that authorities have failed to fully address despite growing risks of a global pandemic.

In an earlier response to the crisis in Wuhan, China's Agriculture Ministry issued an order for tightened controls on trade in wildlife.

A group of 19 prominent researchers from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the nation's top universities had called for the government in China to crack down on wildlife markets such as the one at the center of the Wuhan outbreak.

Illegal trade flourishes in "loopholes" of the legal wildlife trade in China and increases the probability of an outbreak, the group wrote in an open letter posted on Weibo. "This is the hidden danger for the trade and consumption" of wild animals, the letter read. They advocate vastly increasing on-site inspections and government oversight of all wildlife markets.

The New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, meanwhile, appealed for an end to wildlife markets everywhere, not just in China.



In this Jan. 9, 2020, photo provided by the Anti-Poaching Special Squad, police look at items seized from store suspected of trafficking wildlife in Guangde city in central China's Anhui Province. The outbreak of a new virus linked to a wildlife market in central China is prompting renewed calls for enforcement of laws against the trade in and consumption of exotic species. (Anti-Poaching Special Squad via AP)

Zoonotic diseases, or those contracted by humans that originated in other species, account for a large share of human infectious illnesses. Not all of them come from the wildlife trade: Rabies is endemic across many species and one of the biggest causes of death in the developing world. But mixing species of wild animals increases the risk of diseases mutating and growing more virulent as they spread in unregulated markets, experts say.

The emergence of such diseases is a "numbers game," said Christian Walzer, executive director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's health program.

"If these markets persist, and human consumption of illegal and unregulated wildlife persists, then the public will continue to face heightened risks from emerging new viruses, potentially more lethal and the source of future pandemic spread," he said. "These are perfect laboratories for creating opportunities for these viruses to emerge."

Researchers have not yet identified a definitive source for this latest outbreak, which like many other viruses can infect multiple species.

One of the first measures taken by Wuhan authorities was to close the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, where 41 of the first cases

originated.



In this Jan. 9, 2020, photo provided by the Anti-Poaching Special Squad, police gather outside a store suspected of trafficking wildlife in Guangde city in central China's Anhui Province. The outbreak of a new virus linked to a wildlife market in central China is prompting renewed calls for enforcement of laws against the trade in and consumption of exotic species. (Anti-Poaching Special Squad via AP)

"That's the big black box right now," said Jon Epstein, an epidemiologist with the Ecohealth Alliance.

He was in China following the 2002-2003 outbreak of SARS, or Severe

Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which was traced to consumption of wild animals in the southern city of Guangzhou. Epstein helped the ongoing global effort over nearly two decades to find the wild source of that virus, which sickened more than 8,000 and killed less than 800. SARS has been linked to various animals, including bats and the cat-like masked palm civet.

Bats are known to harbor coronaviruses, but scientists have yet to fully understand the new virus and how it leapt from animals to people.

Epstein said researchers suspect but haven't proven that the Wuhan virus came from bats. Before it infected humans, it likely first jumped to an as yet unidentified mammal.

Researchers don't know which species exactly were sold in the Wuhan market, but Epstein said mammals commonly found in such markets—such as ferret badgers, raccoon dogs or civets—might be involved in the transmission of the new virus to people.



In this Jan. 17, 2020, photo provided by the Anti-Poaching Special Squad, customers line up outside a store suspected by activists of selling trafficked wildlife in Anji city in eastern China's Zhejiang Province. The outbreak of a new virus linked to a wildlife market in central China is prompting renewed calls for enforcement of laws against the trade in and consumption of exotic species. (Anti-Poaching Special Squad via AP)

The crackdown on wildlife trafficking and sales persisted only about six months after the SARS outbreak faded in mid-2003, Walzer said.

"The solution is simple," he said. "In the sense that we know where the problem is."

In cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong, there's little sign of

markets catering to gourmands seeking "ye wei," or "wild flavors."

But in provincial cities and in some parts of Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries, those determined to eat such exotic dishes can find all sorts of creatures for sale: pangolins, badgers, salamanders, scorpions, hedgehogs and even wolf puppies.

A photo of a menu list from a vendor in the Wuhan market called "Wild Game Livestock for the Masses," circulated online, showed more than 110 species for sale.

Court records show that authorities in Hubei, the province where Wuhan is located, investigated 250 cases related to wildlife trafficking and poaching in 2019 alone. According to local media reports, since 2018 an estimated 16,000 wild animals were hunted in the province of more than 60 million people.



In this Jan. 17, 2020, photo provided by the Anti-Poaching Special Squad, items seized from a store suspected of selling trafficked wildlife are seen in Anji city in eastern China's Zhejiang Province. The outbreak of a new virus linked to a wildlife market in central China is prompting renewed calls for enforcement of laws against the trade in and consumption of exotic species. (Anti-Poaching Special Squad via AP)

Hubei is home to Shennongjia, a UNESCO World Heritage nature reserve that is a habitat of great biodiversity with many rare species including the clouded leopard, golden snub-nosed monkey and the Chinese giant salamander.

Video footage filmed by a conservation activist in eastern China's Zhejiang and Anhui provinces, which also have a long tradition of

consuming wild species, showed many wild species laid out for inspection in a market.

In most cases, vendors are registered to sell some unprotected species, usually a limited amount of just a few, such as hares, wild boar and muntjac, a kind of tiny deer.

But enforcement is "not that strict," said Tian Jiang Ming of the Anti-Poaching Squad, a group of volunteers who visit markets are report on illegal wildlife sales. The illegal offerings tend to be kept hidden away in back freezers, he said.

"The vendors are selling illegally poached animals with these licenses in hand," he told The Associated Press.



In this Jan. 17, 2020, photo provided by the Anti-Poaching Special Squad, snakes and other items seized from a store suspected of selling trafficked wildlife are seen in Anji city in eastern China's Zhejiang Province. The outbreak of a new virus linked to a wildlife market in central China is prompting renewed calls for enforcement of laws against the trade in and consumption of exotic species. (Anti-Poaching Special Squad via AP)



In this Jan. 17, 2020, photo provided by the Anti-Poaching Special Squad, police load a cart with items seized from a store suspected of selling trafficked wildlife are seen in Anji city in eastern China's Zhejiang Province. The outbreak of a new virus linked to a wildlife market in central China is prompting renewed calls for enforcement of laws against the trade in and consumption of exotic species. (Anti-Poaching Special Squad via AP)

Only in 2014 did China criminalize consumption of protected species with a law specifying a maximum three-year jail term. But it also has allowed commercial farming of certain species, including tigers—a practice that conservation advocates say encourages illicit trafficking in protected species.

It's difficult to secure prosecution since it's hard to prove animals have been poached, Tian Jiang Ming said.

"The forestry department needs to prove illegal poaching by the sellers but they don't have the investigative resources to find them," he said.

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