

Statement from the Wildlife Disease Association on WHO-China Report on SARS-CoV-2

“Wildlife is once again connected to the emergence of a pathogen with serious consequences for human health. We hope that future research and investigations, more than a “blame-attribution” will focus on the importance of protecting wildlife and ecosystem health as an essential premise for a sustainable future. We are in need of a transformative change in the way we use and interact with wildlife and the time to act is now” - Prof. Dr. Carlos das Neves, President of the Wildlife Disease Association.

The World Health Organization has released its China-Mission report, where among several hypotheses behind the origins of SARS-CoV-2, it ranks an animal reservoir as the most likely origin (probably bats and perhaps some other intermediary mammals). The WHO report also focuses on the wildlife trade and wild animal farms as potential elements in the chain of transmission and/or source to this outbreak. Recent outbreaks in mink farms with COVID19 jumping from mink to humans in the Netherlands highlight this issue.

These findings, as with earlier coronavirus epidemics (SARS, MERS), suggest evolution of a virus in an animal population which subsequently infected and adapted to humans before spreading in an epidemic and pandemic fashion. It is evident that SARS-CoV-2 can be transmitted between humans without a separate reservoir species, so it is essential not to blame any given wildlife species, but instead understand how the interface between wildlife, domestic animals and humans promote these kinds of problems. Indeed, there is strong evidence that intact ecosystems aid in preventing these sorts of pathogen spillovers from wildlife to humans (dilution effect). As such, this should serve as an incentive to preserve natural habitats, sustain wildlife health as essential to the restoration of ecosystemic stability, thereby reducing the rate of emergence of diseases leading to a more sustainable and healthy future. Furthermore, it is essential to be reminded that SARS-CoV-2 may also pose a serious threat to the conservation and survival of some wildlife species.

Unsustainable exploitation of the environment due to among others human induced land-use change, intensive agriculture and animal-based food systems, growing trade in and farming of wildlife species and their consumption leads to instabilities in ecosystems and host microorganism dynamics. Increased intimate contact between wildlife, livestock, and people, potentially leads to emerging pathogens. These problems are not restricted to any single species and the viability of even highly resilient natural populations of animals are now at risk. As recently highlighted in a report by Machalaba et al.¹, “the lack of proactive stances for wildlife health require a global transition to health-supporting and disease prevention-focused strategies”. There is no international regulatory framework on wildlife health that monitors, predicts and prevents situations that pose high risk for humans and natural environments. Such a framework would require not only the commitment of international organizations, national and regional authorities, but also cooperation of people everywhere. Increasing education and awareness about environmental and wildlife health should be at the top of all our agendas.

The Wildlife Disease Association is strongly committed to acquiring, disseminating, and applying knowledge on the health of wild animals, to promoting biodiversity, ecosystem health and nature-based solutions to One Health challenges. WDA’s more than 1500 members across the world embody this commitment to support healthy ecosystems, prevent the emergence of infectious diseases, and highlight the importance of healthy wildlife to natural ecosystems, and the critical role of functioning and resilient ecosystems to human health and well-being. These are values that more than ever need to be embraced by society.

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