

Testimony

of

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before the

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

U.S. SENATE

on

**“Stopping the Spread: Examining the Increased Risk of Zoonotic Disease from Illegal Wildlife
Trafficking.”**

July 22, 2020

Thank you Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper for the opportunity to testify before the Committee about the relationships between wildlife trade and trafficking and the spread of zoonotic diseases, and particularly the role of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It's always a pleasure to appear before your Committee, and I want to say thank you for the kindness and courtesy you have shown me in years past.

As a former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director and career employee, and as current President and CEO of The Association of Zoos and Aquariums, I applaud your leadership in addressing the trade in wild animals, legal and illegal, that exacerbates the risks of zoonotic disease transmission, and pandemics such as our nation and the world are now suffering. There are available and achievable ways for us to reduce those risks. The key ingredient is leadership, and again, your leadership in convening this hearing is a positive step.

I think I bring a unique set of experience to this discussion. I am a former leader of the nation's principal wildlife trade regulatory and enforcement agency, and now, I represent an organization of 240 accredited members that engage in, and depend upon, legal, sustainable, safe and ethical trade in wild animals.

Founded in 1924, AZA is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring that our 240 member zoos, aquariums, nature centers, and science centers represent the very best in animal care and welfare, conservation, education, science, and guest experience. In 2018, AZA's accredited member facilities welcomed nearly 200 million visitors (more than all professional sports combined), generated more than \$22 billion in economic activity, and supported more than 208,000 jobs across the country. Also in 2019, they contributed \$232 million in direct support for field conservation in 127 countries benefiting 987 species and subspecies, of which 246 are listed under the ESA.

At the heart of AZA is its mandatory accreditation requirement, which assures that only those zoos and aquariums that meet the highest standards can become members. The rigorous, independent, objective, and exhaustive AZA accreditation process includes self-evaluation, on-site inspection, and peer review. Our standards are publicly available and are continuously evolving and improving as we learn more about the needs of the animals in our care. Once earned, AZA accreditation confers best-in-class status, an important message for local, state, and federal government and the visiting public.

AZA and its members are leaders, partners, and participants in species conservation. We work in concert with Congress, the federal agencies, conservation organizations, state governments, the private sector, and the general public to conserve our wildlife heritage. AZA and its member facilities have long-standing partnerships with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Our collaborative efforts have focused on:

- Engaging in endangered species recovery and reintroduction;

- Supporting conservation domestically and internationally through multinational species conservation funds and state wildlife grants; and
- Collaborating on partnership opportunities involving national parks and wildlife refuges, migratory birds, freshwater and saltwater fisheries, national marine sanctuaries, illegal wildlife trade, amphibians, and invasive species.

AZA's Wildlife Trafficking Alliance (WTA) is a joint effort to combat wildlife trafficking around the world. WTA is a coalition of more than 80 private companies, non-profit organizations, and AZA-accredited facilities working together to combat wildlife trafficking by raising public awareness, reducing consumer demand for wildlife and wildlife products, and mobilizing companies to adopt best practices to stop wildlife trafficking.

The Threat is Real, Known, and Preventable

We know that diseases spillover from non-human animals to humans through a process called "zoonosis." In fact, scientific research has concluded that more than 60 percent of emerging infectious diseases in humans are the product of zoonosis, and more than 70 percent of those come from wild animals.

So, it's no surprise that the current COVID-19 pandemic is thought to have emerged from a live animal market in Wuhan, China. And although some have described this as surprising or shocking, it is neither. As the data above show, wild animals are the source of most emerging infectious diseases in humans. Seventeen years earlier, in 2003, another novel coronavirus emerged from the Chinese province of Guandong – causing a disease that we named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS – is believed to have jumped from a horseshoe bat, to heavily traded civet cats and from the civets to humans, killing hundreds.

And this is not just an Asia problem. The infamous "Spanish Flu", the deadliest pandemic in modern history, was not Spanish at all. It was an H1N1 virus of avian origin, and although there is not consensus on where and how it made the jump to humans, many experts believe that happened here, in the U.S., as the first reported cases were in Kansas. Middle East Respiratory Syndrome or MERS is also caused by a novel coronavirus, and likely jumped from bats to camels to humans. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus that causes AIDS, originated in Africa, jumping from chimpanzees to humans through the trade in bushmeat.

So, our current crisis was knowable, predictable and preventable. And unless we learn these lessons and take steps to reduce related risks, the same will be true of the next pandemic, and the next.

And as the world population grows from 7.5 billion toward 10 billion by mid-century, and as we continue disrupting and fragmenting functional ecosystems, and continue expanding trade and trafficking in wild animals, and quite literally keep turning up the heat on this global cauldron, we will see the risk and frequency of zoonosis continue rising.

The Root of the Problem

The root of this problem is unregulated and under-regulated trade in live wild animals, for

human consumption, principally as food, and to a lesser extent as medicine.

Sure, there is risk of disease transmission in every interaction between a human and another animal. We can contract salmonella from a pet gecko; my son asked for one on his 12th birthday, and it lived well past his departure from home to attend college; no one in our family contracted salmonella. We can contract diseases from our companion cats (toxoplasmosis) and dogs (rabies), but our relationships and interactions with geckos, cats, dogs and other animals are largely beneficial, and the disease risks are minimal and manageable.

There are many maladies associated with the global pet trade, and AZA's 240 accredited members suffer, continuously, from the too often abominable record of roadside zoos and transient animal attractions, like we all saw portrayed in the docudrama *Tiger King*. But, these are not significant pandemic risks, and cries to end all trade in live wild animals in the cause of preventing the next pandemic is the kind of solution history has taught us to avoid – neat, plausible and wrong.

Worldwide, the livelihoods and nutritional needs of millions of people are linked to trade in live wild animals. The key to reducing pandemic risk is determining where and how this trade creates significant risks of disease spillover to humans. This threat from commercial trade for human consumption is generally independent of whether or not animals are threatened or endangered, whether or not animals are removed from the wild or bred in captivity, whether their trade is legal or illegal, and whether it is sustainable or unsustainable.

What creates and elevates the risk are the conditions of the trade and sale. From source to market, the supply chain for live wild animals destined for human consumption involves conditions that present a high risk for emergence and transmission of the zoonotic pathogens that are the potential points of origin for future pandemics. The numbers of animals involved; the crowded and unsanitary conditions in transshipment and in markets; the related stresses on, and illnesses in animals; and the mixing of domestic and wild animals, both living and dead, create a super-interface with high-risk for shedding and sharing viruses. These risks are likely elevated in the context of illegal trade.

So, at this moment, our clear priority should be ending commercial trade in live wild animals for human consumption, and AZA is joining with the Wildlife Conservation Society and other partners in campaigns to get this done.

Summary and Recommendation

In a moment when our nation and world is in rapt attention, closeted in our homes, and businesses focused on survival, we need calm, thoughtful and focused action. In this moment, the United States can do what it has historically done best in moments of necessity—lead.

And that leadership should begin by –

1. Amending the Lacey Act to strengthen the government's ability to identify, designate and stop injurious species, including dangerous pathogens from entering the United States, and from moving in interstate commerce if and when they arrive here. The Lacey Act is one of our nation's earliest and most enduring wildlife conservation laws. It should be amended to specifically convey emergency listing authority; explicitly authorizing listing

of human pathogens as injurious species; and authorizing the regulation of interstate commerce in listed injurious species. Amending the Lacey Act in this way will also show the world that the U.S. is not just wagging its finger at the rest of the world. We are taking action to identify and address high-risk domestic trade.

2. To effectively address the global threat of zoonotic disease, we need a global regulatory framework to mitigate this risk. We believe this framework already exists in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which regulates more than 30,000 species of plants and animals through a legally binding permitting system. Rather than pursue another framework to address threats to human or animal health, we believe the right path is to amend CITES to cover these threats, so that we have one over-arching international framework to regulate trade in wildlife. We are working with a new initiative, End Wildlife Crime, on this effort. The United States, can lead the way by building a coalition of like-minded countries to advance this effort. We stand ready to help. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the nation's diplomatic and scientific lead for CITES, and this Committee should encourage and empower the Service to engage the CITES Secretariat to take a leadership role.
3. Continue leading and expanding efforts to control illegal wildlife trade. Because illegal trade, by its nature, must be concealed, it represents heightened risks and uncertainties. For decades, we had been bringing a knife to a gun fight. Under-resourced, too narrowly focused, and without the full set of tools, we were always fighting an unwinnable battle. That began to change in 2013 with President Obama's Executive Order on Wildlife Trafficking, the application of a whole-of-government approach, a holistic national strategy, and commitments from Congress to greatly increase resources. The results came quickly both domestically and internationally, and this holistic approach has continued in this administration. Rather than a focus solely on protected areas and enforcement in consumer countries, we were tackling the entire trade chain, increasing enforcement capacity at home and abroad, treating wildlife crime as serious crime, employing professional demand reduction efforts, and having major diplomatic wins such as China's ivory trade ban in reaction to ivory trade regulation here in the United States.
4. The United States has been a global leader in international conservation for decades, supporting governments by building their capacities in protecting their wildlife and wild places, strengthening wildlife law enforcement, professionalizing wildlife agencies, and empowering local communities to be good stewards of the land and resources on which they depend. We need to continue and expand those efforts, like the Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), remove recently-imposed sanctions and barriers to this assistance, and encourage and support large-scale global initiatives like [Campaign for Nature](#), and the effort to protect 30 percent of nature by 2030.
5. Pressuring and supporting governments around the world to permanently close under-regulated and unregulated wildlife markets, while helping communities and wildlife live a healthier coexistence. We need to remember that wildlife, and wild animal markets are a necessary source of economic and nutritional support for communities globally. We need to help those nations and communities make a transition to more reliable, affordable and sustainable sources of nutrition.

As the committee considers policy solutions to the threat posed by zoonotic diseases and the illegal wildlife trade, AZA and the AZA-accredited facilities in your states stand ready to assist and support you. Our members are experts in the trade, transshipment, care and conservation of wildlife and the safe and healthy interaction of humans and wildlife. We readily share that expertise and stand ready to support and help you as you move this important issue forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important matter, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.