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WCS RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW THE EU BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY
CAN HELP REDUCE THE RISK OF
PANDEMICS OF ZOOBOTIC ORIGIN

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WCS

OUR MISSION

The Wildlife Conservation Society saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature. <https://wcs.org>

OUR VISION

WCS envisions a world where wildlife thrives in healthy lands and seas, valued by societies that embrace and benefit from the diversity and integrity of life on earth.





WHO WE ARE

The **Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)**, a global non-profit organisation, *saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature.* Established in 1895, WCS today maintains on-the-ground conservation work in around 60 countries in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas. WCS is the only international conservation organisation with an embedded health program. With more than 100 years of hands-on veterinary work, disease surveillance and groundbreaking scientific research, WCS has been the pioneer in promoting wildlife health as critical to saving wildlife and wild places. WCS initiated and remains a leader in the One World – One Health interdisciplinary approach. In the last 125 years, WCS has also helped governments and Indigenous Peoples establish and manage 245 parks and reserves protecting nature and has ongoing partnerships with more than 300 Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs). Visit www.wcs.org.

In 2004, with the publication of the Manhattan Principles, WCS launched the modern One Health initiative – calling for recognition of “*the essential link between human, domestic animal and wildlife health and the threat disease poses to people, their food supplies and economies, and the biodiversity essential to maintaining the healthy environments and functioning ecosystems we all require.*” This integrated approach, called **One Health**, has since been adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and others (and sometimes under other names, such as Planetary Health). The Principles, updated in 2019 as the **Berlin Principles**¹, discuss global health challenges at the nexus of human, animal, and ecosystem health. By engaging partners across conservation, public health, agriculture, and beyond, WCS provides critical information that influences policy and action. Visit www.wcs.org/one-planet-one-health-one-future.



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¹www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969720364494



INTRODUCTION

WCS welcomes the European Commission Biodiversity Strategy to 2030, published on May 20th, which provides the foundation for ambitious EU action to tackle the biodiversity crisis. We strongly agree with the statement in the strategy that *“a better protection of natural ecosystems, coupled with efforts to reduce wildlife trade and consumption will help prevent and build up resilience to possible future diseases and pandemics”*.²

Strong EU support for a **global target to protect of 30% of the land and sea** (as currently mentioned in the EU Biodiversity Strategy) will be a vital step in protecting natural ecosystems globally. In addition to establishment of protected and conserved areas, research shows that ramping up efforts to protect ecosystem integrity is an important action to reduce the risk of future pandemics of zoonotic origin.³ We are therefore disappointed by the European Commission proposal for global ambition to *“ensure by 2050, all of the world’s ecosystems are restored, resilient, and adequately protected”*, as this is not quantified or measurable and significantly weaker than the text proposed in the zero-draft of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework (from the

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, CBD). We recommend inclusion of a headline target that is significantly strengthened, to be ambitious and quantifiable and achieve a net gain agenda for biodiversity, for example: ***“By 2030, achieve net gain in the area and integrity of all natural freshwater, marine and terrestrial ecosystems against a 2020 baseline, and no loss in ecosystems with high importance for biodiversity or high ecological integrity, and by 2050 achieve net gain in all natural ecosystems of at least 20%”***.

To ensure the conservation of the most intact ecosystems, we recommend that ecosystem integrity is a core component of any new global target.

We also welcome the draft European Parliament Report on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which stresses that *“the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of the ‘One Health’ principle in policy-making and that transformative changes are needed”*. In particular, we welcome the call in that report for ***“an urgent rethinking of how to align the Union’s current policies with the changes needed”***.

²https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/strategy/index_en.htm

³ www.wcs.org/ecological-integrity-report

WILDLIFE TRADE AND CONSUMPTION

To have a meaningful impact on significant reduction of the risk of future pandemics of zoonotic origin, all efforts must be made to prevent the pathogen spillover in the first place. The EU must promote and assist the global community in **ending the commercial trade and sale in markets of wildlife for human consumption, particularly birds and mammals.** Merely improving the regulation of this trade or closing a few markets, will not prevent a future pandemic of zoonotic origin. Only the closure of commercial markets in live and freshly slaughtered animals for human consumption, and the trade (domestic and international) that provides animals to these markets, will significantly help achieve this goal (whilst recognizing that controls on wildlife farms/captive breeding facilities, for all purposes, is also critical). We are encouraged to see countries such as China and Vietnam now taking steps in this direction, and new bipartisan legislation introduced in the U.S. Congress⁴, and hope that the EU will support and be part of this global effort as a critical component of the new Biodiversity Strategy under its Green Deal and green recovery post-COVID.

The 2020 Workshop Report on Biodiversity and Pandemics of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) concluded that pandemic risk can be significantly lowered by reducing the human activities that drive the loss of biodiversity, by greater conservation of protected areas, and through measures that reduce unsustainable exploitation of high biodiversity regions.⁵



A recent report commissioned by the EP ENVI Committee titled *'The link between biodiversity loss and the increasing spread of zoonotic diseases'* provides various policy options, which includes for example greater sanitary control of wildlife trade and greater regulation of unsustainable wildlife trade. Such measures are, however, grossly insufficient and will only have **a minor effect on preventing future pandemics of zoonotic origin.** We agree with ending all unsustainable wildlife trade; however, the science is clear: if the world is to avoid another COVID-like pandemic, we must close wildlife markets, especially for human consumption, and associated trade (domestic and international, legal and illegal).⁶

Despite the recognition in the new Biodiversity Strategy of the need “to reduce wildlife trade and consumption”, recent communications from the European Commission appear to have shifted in focus and only mention the need to combat the illegal wildlife trade to prevent outbreaks of diseases of zoonotic origin. Whilst we very much **welcome the commitment to renewing the EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking, which is critically needed to address the illegal wildlife trade - this should not be developed and implemented in lieu of meaningful, evidence-based efforts to prevent the next zoonotic spillover, epidemic, or pandemic.**

⁴ www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/8678/text/ih?overview=closed&format=txt

⁵ www.ipbes.net/pandemics

⁶ www.wcs.org/get-involved/updates/wcs-issues-policy-on-reducing-risk-of-future-zoonotic-pandemics

Not all is known of the time, place and mechanism of the COVID-19 spill-over but decision-making must be based on **the best available science and the precautionary principle**. There is clearly no evidence that the risk of pathogen spillover is exclusively related to illegally obtained animals; a virus is indifferent to whether an animal in a market was obtained legally or not.

We fully support efforts to incorporate consideration of **subsistence hunting by Indigenous Peoples and local communities for household consumption**, for whom there are often few or no other sources of high-quality protein and micronutrients. However, this should not be seen as a smokescreen for ignoring commercial wildlife markets and trade for human consumption, all of which pose a serious zoonotic spillover risk. More targeted efforts are needed to support IPLCs, for example, through scaling-up the EU Sustainable Wildlife Programme (SWM), which is explained more fully below.

The establishment and implementation of trans-sectoral, multilateral approaches are essential for securing One Health, as outlined in the Berlin Principles on One Health. An additional example for operationalizing One Health is the new International Alliance to Combat the Health Risks of Wildlife Trade⁷. This new initiative, spearheaded by Germany, includes NGO partners including WCS, and is an important example of the trans-sectoral collaborations that are necessary to significantly reduce the risk of pandemics of zoonotic origin. We encourage the EU and its Member States to sign on to this initiative, as one of the many positive steps forward, toward a world in which we reimagine our global relationship with nature.

⁷ www.bmz.de/en

⁸ WCS has produced a report outlining 5 One Health approaches: [www.wcs.org/get-](http://www.wcs.org/get-involved/updates/wcs-issues-report-on-one-health-in-action)

SUPPORTING THE OPERATIONALISATION OF 'ONE HEALTH APPROACHES' GLOBALLY

We welcome the statement in the external dimension of the EU Biodiversity Strategy that *"the EU will enhance its support to global efforts to apply the **One Health approach**"*. However, the strategy does not indicate how this will be turned into actions such as tracking and improving wildlife health, monitoring and reducing risk of emerging zoonoses and mitigating livestock disease transmission.^{8,9} **The European Commission needs to come forward with a clear, time-bound strategy outlining how it will prioritise funding to the most cost-effective measures with the greatest chance of success.**



[involved/updates/wcs-issues-report-on-one-health-in-action](http://www.wcs.org/get-involved/updates/wcs-issues-report-on-one-health-in-action)

⁹ www.wcs.org/get-involved/updates/wcs-issues-report-on-official-development-assistance

The EU should also significantly step up its **funding for biodiversity conservation globally**. It is a missed opportunity that in contrast to the previous strategy, the EU Biodiversity Strategy does not mention a target for financial support for biodiversity conservation in developing countries. We therefore call on the EU to make additional efforts to reach **at least 10% annual spending on biodiversity** under the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). Such a target would support the implementation of the compromise on the long-term EU budget, adopted on the 10th November 2020, which states that a target of 7.5% annual EU spending should be dedicated to biodiversity objectives from 2024, and 10% from 2026.¹⁰

As highlighted in the recent report commissioned by the EP ENVI Committee, the *“risk of spillover could be reduced if biodiversity is promoted in areas remote to human settlements or if measures are taken to ensure that wildlife lives in areas of enough size that are appropriately interconnected and as far away as possible from human settlements and livestock”*.

In particular, the link between deforestation and emergence of pathogens suggests that a major effort should be done to retain intact forest cover in tropical countries.

Increased support is needed to scale-up locally-produced, sustainable non-wildlife high quality, nutritious food, to enhance food security and reduce dependence on wild meat, particular for Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs), as one of a number of One Health approaches. The EU is already leading efforts in this area through the seven-year **Sustainable Wildlife Management (SWM) Programme**, funded by the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS). SWM is developing innovative, collaborative, and scalable new models to conserve wildlife and improve food security for IPLCs. SWM is being implemented by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD) and WCS.¹¹



¹⁰ [20201106IPR91014_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹¹ www.swm-programme.info



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WCS EU is a Belgian NGO based in Brussels, affiliated to WCS. WCS EU draws on WCS's field-based and scientific knowledge to support the development and implementation of EU policies and programmes, in support of global conservation objectives.



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for
WildlifeSM**



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