

The illegal wildlife trade and Covid-19

What a year 2020 has been! As I write this in August, the early weeks of the New Year seem like a previous life. Full of optimism, we were finalising a new three-year conservation strategy, planning workshops and events with our partners around the world, and discussing ambitious new conservation projects. And we were a little worried about the news of a new zoonotic virus in China.

Jon Taylor | Deputy Director

One of the causes of our excitement was the development of our work in Viet Nam and China. For some years now, we have worked with our wonderful partners TRAFFIC and ENV (Education for Nature-Vietnam) to reduce demand for rhino horn in Viet Nam, trying to identify and reach key audiences, and to challenge traditional ideas with new messages about sustainability and the need for harmony with nature.

And while those efforts remain essential, we were (and still are) keen to broaden our work to include creating and enforcing strong legislation, and we want to support research to increase our understanding of the illegal wildlife markets and the effectiveness of various approaches to ending them.

Of course, back in the 'old days' of six months ago, the illegal wildlife trade was seen primarily as an issue of biodiversity and habitat loss. Then the Covid-19 outbreak became a pandemic, and everything changed. Suddenly the newspapers were full of discussions about illegal wildlife markets, not as a wildlife issue but as a public health issue. People talked with some horror about 'wet' markets, unaware that these are simply fresh food markets in hot Asian countries (the 'wet' refers to melting ice). The virus was said to have come from pangolins (many journalists had to Google 'pangolin'), then bats. Rhino horn was touted as an early potential source of the virus, which is physically impossible; then, more worryingly, as a potential cure for the disease.

Probably in response to internal public health concerns, rather than to the protestations of Western newspapers, the Chinese Government banned the consumption of wildlife as food. The ban did not, however, extend to its use for medicine or for 'exhibition' use in circuses and the like. Viet Nam has more recently followed suit and taken welcome steps to shut down



its own illegal wildlife markets. However, as rhino horn is not eaten (it is used as a status symbol and as an ingredient in traditional medicine), bans on consumption will have little impact on the illicit and destructive rhino horn trade.

It is too early to tell whether the Covid-19 pandemic will have a transformational impact on the illegal wildlife trade in general and on the trade in rhino horn in particular. Certainly, the reframing in people's minds of the wildlife trade as a direct public health threat, rather than an indirect 'environmental' issue, may lead to much louder and more urgent calls for action, and Save the Rhino will be working with all its partners to reinforce those calls with expertise and evidence.

But what the ongoing pandemic does highlight, in a way that the more abstract (though far greater) threats of biodiversity decline, habitat loss and climate change often do not, is our direct reliance on and intimate connection with a world that is healthy, diverse and resilient. This pandemic shows us that 'the environment' is not something elsewhere, about which we can choose to care or not. A world of vibrant forests and clean rivers, of vast savannahs and abundant oceans, and of many, many rhinoceroses, is not a 'nice to have' for those who care about such things, it is a condition of our very survival.