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The impacts of Covid-19 on wildlife management policies in China and the preparation of biodiversity COP15

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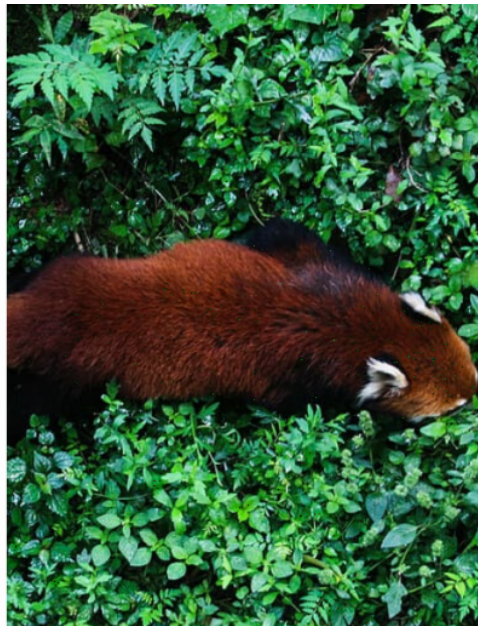
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The Covid-19 crisis has deep roots in how we interact with, manage, and conserve biodiversity. The crisis has shed new lights on wildlife management challenges in China, and has launched new reflections and developments of potential policy responses, including (but not limited to) bans on some forms of wildlife

trade. As a strong symbol, the crisis also happened while China is preparing for the largest multilateral summit it has ever hosted on the environment: COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, initially planned for October 2020 in Kunming. At COP15, countries are expected to adopt a new international framework that should ideally provide a policy response to global biodiversity loss, with a strong and necessary focus on the means of implementation. What are the recent developments in wildlife management policy in China? What are the challenges and opportunities that the Covid-19 crisis has created for the preparation of COP15?

This text briefly summarises the webinar discussion that took place on 24 April 2020. For the recording and the presentations, see [here](#).

Beyond wet markets: understanding the complexity of the wildlife trade issue

In international coverage, much attention has been paid to “wet markets”, portrayed as urban markets where live animals are sold for consumption. However, this misrepresents the reality of most wet markets and fails to reflect the complexity of wildlife breeding and trade in China, and thus the challenges for their regulation. The wildlife breeding industry as a whole is reportedly worth 520 billion RMB a year (nearly 70 billion euros) in China: it is thus far from being a small or anecdotal economic sector, and its reforms, as such, must confront a range of legal, social, ethical, and economic dimensions.

The key regulatory framework on this topic in China is the [Wildlife Protection Law](#). It determines categories of protected species, and includes requirements and mechanisms for wildlife breeding and trade. It authorises trade even in protected species for various uses, requiring anything from specific permits to simply proof of legal origin for the specimens being traded, depending on category of protection. It does not, however, contain a precise definition for the forms “wildlife trade” which may be permitted, and most operative language of the law relates only to protected, terrestrial species. The fact that the law contains authorised mechanisms for trade in threatened wildlife has an effect of legitimising the demand for wildlife products. There is also a lack of transparency and traceability on the origin of some products, despite a labelling mechanism supposed to demonstrate that the product comes from legal sources. For example, despite international commercial trade in leopard and pangolin products being prohibited under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), their use in traditional medicine is still permitted within China. Authorities claim that the specimens in legal trade come from existing stockpiles, but a lack of transparency means concerns remain as to whether the mechanism could be exploited to launder specimens obtained in violation of CITES.

Following the Covid-19 crisis, there have been signs of tighter enforcement of existing rules, and new legal notifications and decisions have been issued. The Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, the highest law-making body in China, has for instance [forbidden](#) the breeding and trade of most terrestrial wildlife species for food consumption. Given the economic importance of the wildlife sector, the question remains as to how permanent this ban will be, how it will be implemented effectively and ethically, and how to support the sector and its stakeholders in transitioning to other forms of revenue generating activities. This latter point is particularly important, because there is a risk of actors moving into black markets if alternative livelihoods are not made available.

The Wildlife Protection Law will be amended this year. The coming amendments could bring clarity and address the multitude of trade practices of concern in a comprehensive way. The law revision could see the consolidation of the precautionary approach reflected in recent policy changes, with more clarity, provide better clarity on bred species that are legal for commercial purposes, a broader definition of “wildlife”, and a more appropriate balance between conservation and use of those species. Meanwhile, the government could support the transition away from commodification of wildlife and promote alternative livelihoods for communities impacted by new regulations to avoid counterproductive effects. However, if the legal revision fails to address trade in threatened wildlife for non-food purposes, the revision could represent another missed opportunity to more comprehensively tackle demand for wildlife parts which is currently driving high levels of poaching and trafficking of many species and providing a means of income generation for organised crime networks.

A multi-stakeholder mobilisation for biodiversity in China

It is important to stress that, as in most countries, the implementation of decisions made by central authorities in China depends on complex multi-stakeholder dynamics. Firstly, the vastness and diversity of China demand oversight at local levels and coordination between central and provincial authorities. Despite some recent exemplary efforts in enforcing and implementing environmental policies, such as advanced investigation techniques employed by Chinese Customs and some local forestry police bureaus, there remain issues with consistent and effective implementation of the Wildlife Protection Law. Beyond changes in regulation, more attention will need to be paid to these concrete issues in practice, for example by ensuring that the necessary human resources are available in agencies involved and resolutely tackling issues with local corruption.

In addition to regulatory changes, stronger implementation, and a just transition in the wildlife sector, specific efforts on the demand side will be necessary. Chinese civil society has been active on these different fronts for years. Some NGOs have played a surveillance role locally, tracking and reporting illegal practices, and some have played an active role since the pandemic outbreak to raise awareness of wildlife trade issues and further push for reducing demand for wildlife products. Many Chinese academics and NGOs are actively [engaging](#) in the amendment of the Wildlife Protection Law. Business and industries also have a strong role to play in promoting its implementation. Certain tech companies, for instance, are currently supporting authorities in the [control of illegal wildlife trade on social media](#). Meanwhile, some experts in traditional medicine have stressed that most traditional medicine products do not include wild animal parts, and that [substitutes are available for the products that do](#).

Effects of the COVID19 crisis on the preparation of COP15

Biodiversity COP15 will be an important moment in the history of international biodiversity governance, and also a moment to provide a policy response to several issues that are at the root of the Covid-19 emergence. Between now and COP15, which could take place in 2021, it will be important to maintain strong mobilisation, at the international level, but also in China.

Following the Covid-19 outbreak, calls have multiplied in China and worldwide for a less consumptive economic model, in order to avoid both ecosystem degradation and associated risk of pandemics outbreaks. As the future host and president of COP15, China could show leadership and set a concrete positive example through the reform of its wildlife management system. At the international level, China could exert leadership by pushing for even more ambition on the implementation chapters of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

Biodiversity finance should also be re-imagined. In light of the economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, public and private finance to protect biodiversity should increasingly be seen as a way to reduce the risk of future

pandemics. A stronger international mobilisation in this regard, in which China would play a key role, will be necessary to make sure the decisions adopted at COP15 are translated into implementation.

The links between pandemics and biodiversity could help highlight the importance of this process, and this broader narrative around planetary health needs to be put forward at the highest level. The next (planned) steps towards COP15 are the meetings of the two subsidiary bodies of the CBD (17-29 August), where technical discussions should recommence. At a more political level, the [Biodiversity Summit at the United Nations General Assembly \(UNGA\)](#), on 22-23 September, is a platform where high level voices should stress the importance of the COP15 outcome for the future of biodiversity and human health.

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