

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the pressure to close live animal markets and invites your thoughts on the subject.

One positive outcome of the coronavirus could be an end to commercial trade in wild animals. If ever there was a wake-up call, this is it. So much human suffering – plus a global financial bill of trillions of pounds – all because the Chinese eat bats and use them in traditional Chinese medicine. As Humane Society International warns, the coronavirus is a “tipping point that governments must not ignore”.

COVID-19 is believed to have originated in a so-called wet market in Wuhan, China (‘wet’ because of the melting ice used to preserve goods, and the copious amounts of water used to wash away blood from butchered animals). Wet markets are where traders sell fresh produce such as fruit and vegetables, but also countless wild and domestic animals – everything from macaques and iguanas to dogs and snakes. Species that should never meet face-to-face are crammed, alive, into cages and piled on top of one another, under incredibly stressful conditions, making these miserable places a hotbed for pathogens.

Conservation and animal welfare groups have long campaigned for this trade to be stopped. No fewer than 237 of them recently signed an open letter to the World Health Organization, the Office International Epizootologie and the United Nations Environment Programme, demanding a ban. Now they are being joined by politicians from around the world – even the UN’s biodiversity chief, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, has added her support.

Trade in wildlife in wet markets is clearly bad for the welfare of millions

of individual animals. It’s bad for conservation, too, because it is one of the major drivers of species extinction. But what has made everyone finally sit up and take notice is that it’s also very bad for human health. Yet it is still common in China (where commercial trade in wild animals for food, traditional medicines and other uses is worth an astonishing £59 billion per year) and many regions of South-East Asia – and it is happening in Africa and Latin America.

Compelling evidence suggests that COVID-19 originated in horseshoe bats, then jumped the species barrier through an intermediate host (probably a pangolin), where it was refined before making the final leap to humans. It’s by no means the first time this has happened. Indeed, this is the seventh coronavirus to make the

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jump from animals to humans – SARS and MERS among them. Ebola, bird flu and many other diseases have also jumped from animals to people.

Not surprisingly, epidemiologists have been warning about a pandemic timebomb for years. There are countless other viruses in nature – to which we have no immunity – just waiting to be released.

The ideal solution would be a complete ban on wildlife trade. It might be possible to adapt CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) to take public health risks into account. But, ideally, we need an entirely new international agreement. And now is the time, when even politicians and big businesses are suddenly taking an interest in the catastrophic imbalance surrounding our treatment and exploitation of wildlife.

China has temporarily banned the farming, trading and consumption of wild animals, and there are proposals to legalise this ban later in the year. Whether or not this will happen, or be enforced, is anyone’s guess. The fact that a list of recommended treatments for COVID-19 issued by China’s National Health Commission included traditional medicine containing bear bile doesn’t bode well. But one thing is certain – it’s no longer China’s decision alone. The whole world has a stake in what happens next. 🐼

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Crocodiles are among the wild animals found at wet markets.