

#STOPEATINGWILDLIFE: Reducing urban wildlife consumption in Cambodia

In 2020 the world changed, in a story we all know too well. A mysterious virus originating in Wuhan, China – possibly from a wet market – was identified as a novel coronavirus, similar to the 2002–04 SARS epidemic which caused 774 deaths (World Health Organization, 2015). This new disease, SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), quickly overtook SARS in both cases and deaths, and spread rapidly around the globe. With the unprecedented emergence of this pandemic, the talk of the world quickly moved to how to prevent it from happening again. Many politicians and global leaders have discussed strategies for global health and disease prevention, but few have discussed the origins of this pandemic.

COVID-19 is a zoonosis, as are SARS, Ebola, MERS and HIV – a disease caused by a pathogen that has jumped from a non-human animal to a human. SARS and MERS are both coronaviruses that infected humans from bats, with civets and camels as a vector respectively (Yuan *et al.*, 2010; Xu *et al.*, 2004; World Health Organization, 2019). For years, as the illegal wildlife trade continues and natural places are deforested or destroyed for development, scientists have predicted that new zoonoses would emerge.

The poaching of wildlife for trafficking and human consumption is rarely sanitary. Wet markets, with many stressed, wounded and immunocompromised animals forced together, create the perfect conditions for the emergence and spread of novel diseases. COVID-19 was not a chance occurrence, but an inevitability of the wildlife trade.

Wildlife Alliance (www.wildlifealliance.org) has been working in Cambodia to counter the illegal wildlife trade since 2001,

through the use of the Wildlife Rapid Rescue Team, Asia's only full-time counter wildlife trafficking law enforcement unit. Whilst the trade is illegal, an underground black market is thriving. Many animals are poached from the forests using ecologically devastating snares, and then exported to China and Vietnam or consumed in country (Gray *et al.*, 2018).

As shown in a survey conducted by Fauna and Flora International (2018), a large proportion of wildlife consumers in the cities are the richer upper classes. Wild meat is believed to be healthier and to have traditional medicinal properties. It is largely consumed by adult men in social settings to show status, wealth and power.

The above considerations have inspired our #STOPEATINGWILDLIFE social media campaign. We have produced content and a campaign video in Khmer, to educate the urban Cambodian public of the dangers of eating wildlife meat and supporting the illegal wildlife trade. By using Khmer adverts, predominately on Facebook and targeted on urban centres, we can track engagement and modify our content accordingly. Facebook is almost synonymous with the internet in Cambodia, so it is the perfect medium to reach the widest audience. The campaign's goal is for more Cambodians to understand that not only are they increasing the risks of a new novel disease outbreak, but that the unsustainable trade is decimating the biodiversity of Cambodia's forests and pushing many species to the brink of extinction, robbing the country of its natural heritage. The common misconception that wildlife meat is healthy could not be further from the truth, and must be challenged. ■

For references, see next page

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Call for Artists

Stephanie Moran, Art Editor, and Salomón Bazbaz Lapidus, Art Advisor

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Artworks may relate to the Journal’s topic areas (see www.ecologicalcitizen.net/about.html), or be images of animals and other nature including but not limited to: observational drawings, landscapes of all kinds, macro and cosmic perspectives, and animal vision.

We are also looking for artists to respond to written articles with smaller drawings; please contact the Art Editor, via the contact form linked to below, if you would be interested in making work specifically in response to submitted articles.

Artworks must be suitable to place in an online journal format, to fit onto A4 pages, and should be provided in high resolution (300 dpi) at intended size for the A4 page.

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