

UK exotic pet markets could harbour next pandemic

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The Animal Protection Agency (APA) is warning the government not to underestimate the pandemic potential of UK wildlife markets. In England, exotic pet market organisers – keen to make up for lost time and business – will reopen their events at the earliest opportunity. This will include the notorious International Herpetological Society ‘show’ at Doncaster Racecourse, at which many thousands of reptiles and amphibians are sold in cramped and stressful conditions.*

A new [article in the Ecologist](#) calls out the complacency of Western governments, acknowledging that China has at least recognised the risks associated with wildlife markets and has vowed to address the problem. Author, Dr Clifford Warwick describes the pandemic risks “loitering in our own backyards” where animals “typically undergo no form of quarantine whatsoever, and can be caught from the wild in an overseas epidemic hotspot then sold at a pet market within days.”

The makeshift nature of wild animal markets causes suffering to many thousands of animals that are frequently confined to takeaway-style tubs, with little or no consideration for their welfare. Animals that are sick and stressed are far more likely to shed pathogens and spread disease and the close proximity of people, including vulnerable groups such as children and pregnant women, make wildlife markets easy environments to spawn catastrophic disease.

APA is among many organisations supporting calls for a permanent, worldwide ban on wildlife markets, which are widely believed to have started the COVID-19 outbreak – as well as avian influenza, SARS, Ebola and other pandemics. Numerous investigations over recent years have shown that UK wildlife markets are commercially driven, and stallholders have been prosecuted for trading animals despite claiming that they are ‘just hobbyists’.

Says article author, Dr Clifford Warwick:

“Western pet markets are another Wuhan hiding in plain sight. Governments internationally are rightly admitting that they should have listened earlier to scientists’ warnings over the selling of wildlife at public places. Local and national governments can no longer rely on luck to prevent another emergent disease, and must act swiftly and decisively to eliminate these markets.”

Says Animal Protection Agency Director, Elaine Toland:

“The UK government has an opportunity at the next G20 summit to take the lead in a worldwide drive to end wildlife markets, but it has to get its own house in order first. Trading in animals at exotic pet markets is already illegal, but continues due to national government complacency and poor local authority enforcement. We urgently need to close down these events for good.”

- For further information or to interview Clifford Warwick, please contact Elaine Toland on 01273 674253 or out of hours on 07986 535024.
- Link to full article ‘Wildlife markets in the west’: <https://theecologist.org/2020/jul/10/wildlife-markets-west>

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*Arena PC, Steedman C, Warwick C (2012). Amphibian and reptile pet markets in the EU: A investigation and assessment, p. 52. Available at: <https://www.apa.org.uk/pdfs/AmphibianAndReptilePetMarketsReport.pdf>

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