UK imports wild animals from known disease hotspots to fuel demand for exotic pets

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00:01 BST 22 September 2020 Millions of live wild animals are being legally imported into the UK from emerging disease hotspots to be sold as exotic pets - risking another public health crisis according to a report from global animal welfare charity World Animal Protection. Animals including African pygmy hedgehogs, snakes, lizards and tortoises are transported to the UK from Africa, Latin America and Asia to fuel this cruel trade.

The study, which used data obtained via a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), found that from 2014 to 2018, 2,492,156 amphibians, 578,772 reptiles, 150,638 mammals, and 99,111 birds were imported into the UK for commercial purposes including the exotic pet trade, from 90 countries including in regions identified as emerging disease hotspots. Countries such as Singapore, Ghana, Indonesia, El Salvador, Cameroon, Nicaragua and Madagascar, annually exported thousands of reptiles and amphibians to the UK over this five-year period.

Seventy percent of all zoonotic emerging infectious diseases are thought to originate from wild animals[1] and over 35 infectious diseases have emerged in humans since 1980[2], including COVID-19, SARS, Ebola and MERS. Importing animals in such numbers risks the spread of such diseases, caused by harmful viruses, bacteria, fungi and parasites introduced into new environments.

Public attention is typically focussed on illegal wildlife trade, for example species threatened by extinction that are protected by CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), but this is dwarfed by legal trade into the UK that takes place outside these regulations, despite the public health risk it presents and the cruelty and suffering it causes.

Peter Kemple Hardy, World Animal Protection, Wildlife Campaign Manager said: “This evidence shows that the legal wildlife trade into the UK is causing suffering to millions of animals and risking another public health crisis. We must not overlook the dangers this poses; harmful and deadly pathogens can be transmitted to humans regardless of a wild animal’s legal status. In a post-COVID world, we should demand nothing less than a global and permanent ban on the commercial wildlife trade, to protect wild animals, human health and the planet.”

The wildlife trade is a lethal hotbed of disease because it brings wild animals with immune systems weakened by the stress of captivity and transport in unnatural proximity to other animals, into close contact with people, often in unsanitary conditions. The current global pandemic is widely believed to have originated in these conditions, in a ‘wet’ market selling wildlife in Wuhan, China.

Public health risks associated with wild animal imports into the UK:

- **Reptiles** imported from tropical countries have a high possibility of carrying potentially dangerous pathogens., It is thought that reptiles act as vectors for diseases that affect human health (such as Q fever and Lyme disease) and are responsible for some of the UK’s reported human *Salmonella* cases.
- **Amphibians** have the potential to act as vectors for zoonotic disease transfer, for example they can be responsible for human cases of bacterial infection such as *Aeromonas* spp., *Mycobacterium marinum*, and *Salmonella* spp. Although it is not a threat to human health, chytridiomycosis (a highly contagious fungal disease among amphibians thought to have contributed to the decline or extinction of at least 501 amphibian species across six continents) was confirmed in a breeding population of bullfrogs in the UK in 2006. Bullfrogs are not native to the UK, their presence is the result of escaped exotic pets, and risks introducing this disease to UK native amphibians.
- **Mammals**: trade records show that the UK imported at least 150,638 mammals (75% of which were rodents) from 51 countries across seven global regions over the five-year study period. Countries including Czech Republic, Italy and Spain, were identified as of particular concern for exporting large volumes of mammals to the UK. Most emerging human diseases are thought to originate from mammals and their import represents a prominent public health concern. An outbreak of monkey pox in the USA during 2003 was linked to the import of rodents from Ghana for the exotic pet trade. It prompted domestic and international trade restrictions to control transmission.
- **Bats** (of which 81 were imported to the UK between 2014-2018, 69 from Madagascar and

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remaining from Czech Republic and Guyana) have been implicated in the transmission of COVID-19, Ebola, Hendra, Marburg, SARS-coronavirus, Nipah, and various rabies-related viruses.
- **Birds:** the UK imported at least 74,829 parrots from 20 countries in the period 2014 – 2018. In 2007, a permanent import ban on wild caught live birds was imposed to prevent the spread of avian influenza, but this did not extend to captive bred specimens. Bird-associated diseases in humans including histoplasmosis, Q fever, allergic alveolitis, salmonellosis, campylobacteriosis, and giardiasis associated with captive sourced bird imports remains an on-going potential public health concern.

World Animal Protection is calling on the UK government to champion a global wildlife trade ban and end the import and export of wild animals into the UK at the G20 meeting of leaders in November. Sign the petition here.

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[1] Can et al., 2019

[2] Karesh et al., 2005

Notes to Editor

- For any questions or to arrange an interview with a spokesperson please contact George White on georgewhite@worldanimalprotection.org.uk or Emily Cunningham on emilycunningham@worldanimalprotection.org.uk.
- Full Study here
- Images and infographics here
- Regions considered hotspots for emerging infectious disease in this study is based on a study by Jones et al. (Jones, K.E., Patel, N.G., Levy, M.A., Storeygard, A., Balk, D., Gittleman, J.L., Daszak, P., 2008. Global trends in emerging infectious diseases. Nature 451, 990–993).
- Wild animals refer to species which are non-domesticated; animals may be wild whether they are wild-caught or bred in captivity. We have excluded from the FOI data Columbiformes (pigeons) and Galliformes ('game birds') as these species are not generally recognised as part of the wildlife trade.

Key findings

- World Animal Protection requested data on the volume of *non-CITES listed live wild vertebrates (excluding fish) for commercial purposes*. The **total number of non-CITES listed wild animals imported into the UK between 2014-18 was 3,411,021**.
- According to the APHA trade data, between Jan 2014 and December 2018, non-CITES listed live wild animals were imported into the UK from nine different regions and from **90 different countries** globally (including Taiwan and Hong Kong).
- This is **nearly half (46%) of all the countries in the world**. 193 countries are recognised by the United Nations, plus Taiwan, Palestine, Kosovo and Holy See Vatican. Hong Kong is also reported as a separate territory in this data.
- The volumes of non-CITES listed wild animals imported into the UK were as follows (volumes of CITES listed wild animal imports included for comparison):

Total numbers of non-CITES listed wild animals imported between 2014-2018

Singapore	225,785 (all but 12 amphibian)
Ghana	87,028 (3,162 were insectivore mammals, presumed to be African pygmy hedgehogs and the rest reptiles and amphibian)
Indonesia	68,231 (all but 39 reptiles and amphibians)
El Salvador	14,475 (all reptiles)
Cameroon	21,376 (all reptiles and amphibians)
Nicaragua	13,088 (all reptiles and amphibians)
Madagascar	10,070 (113 mammals and the rest reptiles and amphibians)

- The top 10 exporting countries into the UK between 2014-18 were as follows

Top 10 exporting countries to UK between 2014-18 by number of animals

1.	USA	2,320,343
1.	Singapore	225,785

1. Czech Republic 163,491
1. Ghana 87,028
1. Vietnam 77,234
1. Indonesia 68,231
1. Spain 61,117
1. Uzbekistan 59,524
1. Italy 53,037
1. Hong Kong 36,069

- Those countries identified as exporting large volumes on an annual basis from regions that are emerging zoonotic diseases hotspots:

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Public health risk

Table. Example zoonotic diseases associated with taxonomic groups. Terms marked with an Asterix represent *Diseases identified as found in the UK by Public Health England.

Source taxa	Zoonotic disease
Amphibians	Campylobacteriosis*; Endemic relapsing fever; Gastroenteritis; Mycobacteriosis/Tuberculosis; Salmonellosis*; Streptococcosis*; Yersiniosis; Vibriosis; Leptospirosis*; Hepatitis-A; Western Encephalitis; West Nile virus; Coccidiomycosis; Cryptococcosis; Septicaemia
Reptiles	Campylobacteriosis*; Endemic relapsing fever; Gastroenteritis; Mycobacteriosis/Tuberculosis; Salmonellosis*; Streptococcosis*; Yersiniosis; Q-fever*; Vibriosis; Leptospirosis*; Western encephalitis; West Nile virus; Coccidiomycosis; Cryptococcosis; Septicaemia
Birds	Campylobacteriosis*; Gastroenteritis; Mycobacteriosis/Tuberculosis; Salmonellosis; Yersiniosis; Septicaemia/general infection; Pneumonia; Dermatitis; Psittacosis*; Q-fever*; Vibriosis; Leptospirosis*; Western encephalitis; Avian influenza*; Newcastle disease; Cryptococcosis; Septicaemia; Histoplasmosis
Mammals	Campylobacteriosis*; Endemic relapsing fever; Gastroenteritis; Mycobacteriosis/Tuberculosis; Salmonellosis; Yersiniosis; Septicaemia/general infection; Bartonellosis; Pneumonia*; Psittacosis*; Q-fever*; Brucellosis Leptospirosis*; Hepatitis-A; West Nile virus; Herpesvirus simiae-B; Monkeypox; Molloscum contagiosum; Measles; Rabies*; Haemorrhagic fever; Newcastle disease; Cowpox*; Coccidiomycosis; Streptothricosis*; Candidiasis; Ringworm*; Histoplasmosis

Data Source

World Animal Protection obtained the data in this study via a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA). APHA is an executive agency sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of the UK government. APHA is the management authority of the ‘Trade Control and Expert system’ (TRACES) an online management tool for animals imported into European Union (EU) countries. It is used for recording all trade of live animals, germplasm and other animal-derived commodities into or through Member States territories.

About World Animal Protection

World Animal Protection seeks to create a world where animal welfare matters, and animal cruelty has ended. Active in more than 50 countries, we work directly with animals and with the people and organisations that can ensure animals are treated with respect and compassion. We hold consultative status at the Council of Europe and collaborate with national governments and the United Nations.

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