ZSL calls for urgent investment in research to prevent future pandemics

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Covid-19 most likely originated in a species of bat before transferring to people at a wildlife market in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Although the short-term clinical challenge must not be underestimated, in some respects Covid-19 is a warning. Unregulated wildlife trade and humanity's continued overexploitation of the natural world exposes us to some much more dangerous diseases. International conservation charity ZSL (Zoological Society of London) is therefore calling for significant, long-term investment in research to prevent future pandemics.

SARS-Cov-2 (the virus that causes Covid-19) has an estimated case fatality rate of between 1 and 3% but there are other bat viruses that could become human diseases where this has been shown to be 60%, rising to 100% in some outbreaks.

We can mitigate the risk of spill-over occurring by changing human behaviour, but it is impossible to identify which behaviours to change without understanding diseases in wildlife populations and how wildlife and people interact. Once the risk factors have been identified by this ‘wildlife health’ research, steps can be taken to prevent spill-over happening in the first place without adversely affecting wild animals in which the viruses occur naturally.

Dominic Jermey CVO OBE Director General of ZSL says: “One of the tragedies of the current pandemic is that it was both predictable and avoidable. ZSL’s Professor Andrew Cunningham wrote in 2005 on the dangers of human exploitation of, and closer contact with, wildlife, but despite repeated warnings there is still very little research funding available. I am, therefore, proud to launch ZSL's Appeal today, calling for significant, long-term investment in wildlife health research.”

Many of the biggest threats to public health began as zoonoses (infections that transfer from animals to humans). At least 61% of all identified human pathogens (agents that cause disease) are zoonotic, and approximately 75% of all new human diseases are.

Jermey adds: “Because of human behaviour we have seen SARS, MERS, Ebola, Zika and now Covid-19 emerging as major public health threats from wildlife in recent years. How many more warnings do we need?”

Read more about the origins of Covid-19 and the steps we must now take from ZSL’s Deputy Director of Science Andrew Cunningham, Professor of Wildlife Epidemiology here: www.zsl.org/blogs/science/covid-19-the-wildlife-facts

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