

Covid-19 spread ‘wake-up call’ on illicit wildlife trade—Cimatu

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), which was recently declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), should serve as a wake-up call to unscrupulous individuals who continue to engage in the illegal-wildlife trade.

“The ongoing Covid-19 global outbreak should serve as a stark reminder of the dire consequence for humans of the illegal-wildlife trade, which has been pushing endangered and vulnerable wildlife species toward extinction,” Environment Secretary Roy A. Cimatu said in a news statement.

The DENR recently led the local celebration of World Wildlife Day (WWD) with a renewed call to end illegal wildlife crime amid the spread of Covid-19.

The virus is believed to have originated from wild animals sold at a wet market in Wuhan City, China.

The first cases of infection were traced to the Wuhan market that was reportedly selling meat from a wide range of exotic wild animals, including snakes, bats and pangolins.

Since the outbreak, the Chinese government has banned the trade of wildlife, suspecting that exotic animals infected humans, a move welcomed by wildlife conservation advocates.

Just recently, Chinese researchers claimed they had found a coronavirus in smuggled pangolins that have a 99-percent genetic match to the virus circulating in people.

Environment Undersecretary Ernesto D. Adobo Jr. expressed hope that the findings pointing to pangolin as a “potential” intermediate host for Covid-19 virus would sound the death knell for the commercial trade of the insect-eating mammal and all other wild animals.

“Such findings are very important and the public must be aware of these,” Adobo said. “We should stop patronizing and buying wildlife species,” he said.

Pangolins, also called scaly anteaters because of their preferred diet, are the most trafficked mammal in the world prized for their meat and scales. There is a total of eight species of pangolins in the world and four of them are found in Asia—Chinese, Sudan, Indian and the country’s very own Philippine pangolins (*Manis culionensis*), which are endemic in Palawan province.

All these pangolin species are listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or IUCN, as critically endangered. Other than pangolins, bats are also being suspected as the potential “culprit.”

China’s reported declaration to impose an immediate and comprehensive ban on the trade and consumption of wild animals will drastically cut the demand for exotic animal meat and other animal by-products.

Environment Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon, the concurrent Director of the Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) said in an earlier interview that the move will have a big positive impact on the effort to curb illegal-wildlife trade, not only in the Philippines but in the Asean region.

Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim agrees with his observation.

A former DENR-BMB Director herself, Lim said China’s move is commendable.

“We commend China for issuing such a policy. The closer interaction between wildlife and humans through unabated wildlife collection, consumption, and trade is already

believed to be linked to the increasing occurrence of new and emerging diseases,” she said.

The move by China will not only help prevent future global health issues but, in the long run, also allow the populations of endangered species that are in demand for food, medicine, pets and trophy, such as pangolins and elephants, to recover, and continue to deliver the ecosystem services they are meant to provide, she said.

For his part, Calderon said: “It’s a good development if they will enforce it because of the study, allegedly, that coronavirus is caused by consumption of exotic animals,” he said.

According to Calderon, exotic food, more often than not, are illegally traded.

Both a source and consumer of wild-caught animals, whether they are for food, medicine, or the pet trade, the Philippines continue to struggle to curb the illegal-wildlife trade, especially of its critically endangered species like the Philippine tamaraw or the Mindoro dwarf buffalo, the Palawan pangolin, fruit and insect bats, marine turtles, whale shark, locally called *butanding*, sharks and stingrays.

The DENR-BMB has been focusing its information, education and communication effort to combat illegal-wildlife trade because many Filipinos still hunt exotic animals, either for food, including their consumption, and medicine, and pet trade.

“We discourage eating wild animals because they are not safe to eat. They are not domesticated animals. They are hosts to many bacteria which can be transferred to humans if not cooked properly,” said Calderon.

While he said the Philippines allow trading of wild animals to a certain extent, these are guided by international treaties and agreement, such as CITES, or Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, of which the Philippines is a signatory.

“We allow trading being member of CITES. But others are circumventing the law. No quarantine procedure, no sanitary permit. No meat inspection. No phytosanitary.... This is really unregulated,” Calderon lamented.

Worse, he said, it causes the extinction of species and added that illegal hunting also causes habitat destruction. “Instead of increasing number, illegal hunting cause our threatened species to go extinct, and it also destroys habitats,” he added.

The Philippine celebration of the World Wildlife Day on March 3 highlighted the government’s effort to curb illegal-wildlife trade.

WWD marks the day the landmark Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora was adopted in 1973. This year’s theme is “Sustaining all life on Earth.”

The annual celebration, which started in 2014 following the declaration by the United Nations General Assembly on December 20, 2013, aims to raise awareness on endangered animal and plant species, and ways to fight wildlife crime.

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