

‘Leave bats, rats and snakes alone’



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As the Philippines braces for the worst impact of the 2019 novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic within its shores, the blame has put weight on where it all started—a wet market in Wuhan City in Hubei, China—where exotic live animals and their meat are openly sold.

Equally placed on the spotlight are some of the most unappreciated and abhorred animals on the planet—bats, rats and snakes.



Even the little known scaly anteater, incidentally one of the most traded animals in the world today, is put on trial.

Before we go on full blast in victim-blaming here, let us trace back where the problem really began—hunting for food, trophy and sports—which later on emerged into a transnational crime, the lucrative illegal wildlife trade, a major driver of biodiversity loss.

Exotic food, medicine, pet trade

Environment Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon said there are scientific studies linking deadly viruses and diseases to wild animals and the illegal wildlife trade.

It is primarily because of human consumption of wild animals, driven either by the love for exotic food or belief that eating certain wild animals' meat or their parts, could lead to a longer life span.



Some people also believe that the meat and parts of certain wild animals have high medicinal value, or have aphrodisiac effects when eaten.

Many of the arrests made by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), in coordination with various law enforcement agencies, Calderon said, can also be attributed to the increasing demand in the illegal pet trade.

“That is why we are strengthening our law enforcement and we are scrutinizing every application for import permits. We get inputs from our research agency, the Ecosystems Research and Development Bureau [ERDB], to determine whether the requested species for importation are not invasive and may cause an environmental problem in the future,” Calderon said.

Lucrative trade

The value of illegal wildlife trade in the Philippines is estimated at P50 billion a year, or roughly over \$1 billion, including the market value of wildlife ecological role and value, damage to habitats incurred during poaching, and loss in potential ecotourism revenues.

Based on the DENR-Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) confiscation records, the top 3 illegally traded species in the country by number of confiscated individuals from 2010 to 2019 are the Palawan pangolin, the common hill myna, and the tokay gecko.

Based on the Bureau of Customs (BOC) records, snakes, monitor lizards and turtles are the most common illegally traded species for export.

On the other hand, assorted spiders, live pigeons, impala, rhinoceros horns, tarantulas, scorpions, elephant tusks and birds' nests are the most common animals and items for import.

Conduit of zoonotic disease

Describing illegal wildlife trade as “a conduit through which coronavirus is transmitted to humans,” Theresa M. Tenazas, officer in charge of the Wildlife Resources Division of DENR-BMB, said hunting for domestic and international wildlife trade continue to threaten the country’s rich biodiversity.

“While hunting animals from the wild are source of food for some communities in the Philippines for generations, the scale of this practice was relatively small and observed to be limited to subsistence consumption in the early years,” she said.

However, as years passed and the trend and behavior changed, she said wildlife began to be traded in wet markets and gained momentum since 1980s when high demand for wildlife species started and went beyond mere subsistence consumption.

“Nowadays, wildlife is not only sold primarily for food, but also for traditional medicine, pets and ornaments,” she said.

Bats as ‘ecological reservoir’

Citing a report published by the World Health Organization on February 21, Tenazas said it was reported that the most likely “ecological reservoir” of the novel coronavirus is bats.

While there are no known record of study or research directly linking human consumption, trade of wildlife and open market sale of wildlife raw meat as causing an epidemic in the Philippines, there are already scientific and research studies that prove that coronavirus is a zoonotic disease, which means that it can be transmitted from an animal host to humans, caused by wildlife trade, she said.

Not food or ‘medicine’

Calderon said, unlike animal livestock or farm animals raised specifically for meat, wild animals are not for human consumption and neither are their parts, nor they are meant to be cure for cancer or lingering illnesses.

“More often than not, these beliefs that animal parts have medicinal value or aphrodisiac effect are untrue,” Calderon said.

He said bats, rats, snakes and other wildlife that are often hunted and killed have important ecosystem functions and they are best left alone in their natural habitats.

“It is best to leave wild animals alone,” he said.

Wet markets’ dilemma

According to Tenazas, wet markets have been identified as ideal places for incubating new diseases and bolstering their transmission to humans.

“The increasing rate of wildlife trade, trafficking and poaching tend to likely increase the spread of global epidemics,” she said.

According to Tenazas, emerging infectious diseases (EIDs), particularly zoonotic ones—diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans—are a significant and growing threat to global health, and global economy and security.

She said it is highly probable that transmission can occur through close contact between humans and wildlife as part of ongoing illegal wildlife trade.

Limiting interaction

TENAZAS, hence, suggested that the best way to avoid a potentially deadly virus: people should limit interaction with wildlife.

“The Philippine is a megadiverse country. Thus, in order to secure sustainable utilization of the country’s wildlife and its resources, and to be able to ensure public health and safety, the DENR, through the [BMB] has long been enforcing Republic Act 9147 and is totally prohibiting the collection, hunting and possession of wildlife, its by-products, and derivatives including trading and transporting,” she said.

‘Slap in the wrist’

Under the Wildlife Act, the penalty is not severe for those caught in illegal wildlife trade. It depends not only on the act but also on the conservation status of the wildlife.

Currently the highest penalties for critically endangered species that can be imposed are six years and one day to 12 years imprisonment, or a fine of P100,000 to P1 million for killing; two years and one day to four years imprisonment or a fine of P30,000 to P300,000 for hunting; and only two years and one day to four years imprisonment or a fine of P5,000 to P300,000 for trading wildlife.

For mere transport of wildlife, the penalty is only six months to one year imprisonment and/or P50,000 to P100,000.

Often, violators get the minimum jail term or fine upon pleading guilty to the crime, hence, getting some sort of reprieve.

Stiffer penalty

The DENR-BMB is now pushing for an amendment to the law to impose the most stringent penalty, possibly, of 20 years imprisonment, for wildlife trafficking.

“This effort to amend [the law] is to ensure effective punishment of wildlife crimes to act as a significant disincentive, together with our incessant effort to regulate import and export of wildlife trade,” she said.

This, according to Tenazas, aims to ensure compliance of the permitting system under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora and the DENR to prevent illegal wildlife trade.

Strengthening law enforcement

Recognizing the indispensability of effective law enforcement, the DENR-BMB is also strengthening partnership with different law-enforcement agencies in the country that man airports, ports and other borders to prevent wildlife crimes and to include other cross-collaborative activities, she said.

On the capacity building side, she said there are 12 workshops lined up for 2020, such as Online Trade Investigation, and the Financial Investigation on Wildlife Crimes Advance Prosecutor and Enforcement Workshop, which are to be conducted in partnership with UNODC, USAID Protect Wildlife Project, BMB-ADB/GEF IWT Project and the United States Department of Justice Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance, and Training Counter Wildlife Trafficking.

“Our effort will include escalation of the campaign to the public to raise awareness of the risks of wildlife consumption, to public security and to public health with the end in view of furthering the enforcement efforts against trafficking of wildlife,” she said.

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