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## Ending illegal wildlife trade post-Covid-19

By [John Leo Algo](#)

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic is not only a health crisis, but also a reflection of the environmental crisis. This coronavirus is widely believed to have originated from the markets of Wuhan, China, and likely transmitted from bats to humans through some of the animals being peddled in the area.



*EXOTIC CONTRABAND Employees of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) confiscated at least four exotic pets from a resident of an exclusive subdivision in Antipolo City during a surprise inspection on May 5. Trade and possession of exotic pets is prohibited by law. PHOTO FROM THE DENR FACEBOOK PAGE*

Covid-19 has placed a spotlight on the issue of illegal wildlife trade (IWT), considered as the fourth most profitable illegal business globally. The Philippines is expected to play an important role in curbing it internationally, while also needing to address the domestic side of this problem.

### **Domestic baseline**

The Philippines is one of the 17 megadiverse countries in the world, home to about 53,000 species of animals and plants, of which more than half are endemic. However, this is also what makes the Philippines a hotspot for IWT. This business is valued at P50 billion a year, which includes the market value and ecological value of wildlife, damage to their habitats due to

poaching, and losses in ecotourism revenues, according to data from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources–Biodiversity Management Bureau (DENR-EMB).

Many areas in the Philippines are afflicted with different stages of IWT, which adds to the difficulty in addressing it. For instance, poaching within the country mostly takes place in the following areas: Pampanga, Palawan, Aurora, Quezon province, Nueva Ecija, Samar, Leyte, Bohol, Agusan del Norte, Bukidnon, Mapun Island and Turtle Islands.

One of the most traded species is the Philippine pangolin, one of the animals frequently linked to transmitting the Covid-19 virus to humans. An estimated 1 million pangolins were smuggled from 2000 to 2013, making them the world's most heavily trafficked mammals.

Another frequently-traded species is the endemic Philippine forest turtle, one of the 25 most endangered turtle species in the world. A creature recently rediscovered in the wild, its preferred habitat of streams in lowland peat swamp forests has almost disappeared in Palawan, having been converted to rice paddy fields. The loss of these forests is also a loss of terrestrial carbon sinks, which is important in addressing climate change.

The mysterious nature of the Philippine forest turtle has also made it a target for IWT, being marketed as pets, traditional medicine and food. A notable incident occurred in June 2015, when nearly 4,000 turtles were seized and prevented from being shipped to China.

Several ports are also identified as points of transshipment, where goods are transferred across ships before being transported to a different destination; these include ports in Cavite, Batangas, Quezon province, Cebu, Negros Occidental, Surigao del Norte and Davao Oriental.

### **Stopping the ‘traffic’**

The legal and policy framework for addressing the IWT in the Philippines already exists. Republic Act (RA) 9147 or the “Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act of 2001” serves as the primary law on addressing criminal acts related to wildlife trafficking in the country.

Under this law, the Environment Secretary must deputize wildlife enforcement officers, who can seize illegally-traded wildlife and arrest violators. They may come from law enforcement agencies or even nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and volunteers, given they have the proper training. Wildlife traffic monitoring units must also be operating in key air and seaports in the country to ensure strict compliance. Concerned citizens may report any illegal activities to these personnel to prevent IWT in their respective areas.

Violators involved in such acts would result in fines and imprisonment, depending on the status of organisms involved. For instance, offenses involving critically endangered species would result in up to P300,000 of fines and imprisonment of two to four years. Meanwhile, acts against threatened species would lead to fines of up to P50,000 and imprisonment of up to six months.

Despite public and private efforts, there remains significant challenges in suppressing IWT in the Philippines. To add to the usual problems of corruption, lack of strict enforcement, resources and manpower, transactions can now happen through social media; this requires new methods for suppressing wildlife trafficking, especially in the post-Covid-19 world.

To help address these challenges, the DENR finished the 2018-2028 Wildlife Law Enforcement Action Plan, which serves as the national roadmap to address IWT. It focuses on enacting stronger policies, strengthening networking and coordination among government agencies, building capacities and educating the public to participate in curbing wildlife trafficking.

To complement this, government agencies such as the DENR-BMB are implementing programs that provide biodiversity-friendly livelihoods and technologies and raise awareness about these issues. With a renewed focus on the environment, expect stronger pushes from both government and non-government entities to enhance its anti-IWT policies and programs, including amending RA 9147 and other biodiversity-related laws.

In the post-Covid-19 world, the Philippines must lead in stopping the illegal wildlife trade. A country is only as healthy and resilient as its biodiversity, a lesson it must uphold in the “new normal.”

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