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- Illegal wildlife trade encourages spread of zoonotic diseases in Southeast Asia

# Illegal wildlife trade encourages spread of zoonotic diseases in Southeast Asia

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The Southeast Asian's rich biodiversity and increasing demand from outside are making illegal wildlife trade a "lucrative" business, but is allowing the region to be more vulnerable to "zoonotic" diseases, an international biodiversity expert said.

Around two-thirds of known human infectious diseases globally are "zoonotic," arising from viruses and other pathogens in wild or domestic animals then transmitted to humans. Zoonotic diseases, which include coronavirus disease (COVID-19), also represent 75 percent of new and emerging diseases, ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) Executive Director Dr. Theresa Mundita Lim said during a webinar on "Biodiversity and Preventing Future Pandemics" on Wednesday.

Citing an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report, Lim said that around 1.7 million of unidentified viruses may still exist in mammals and water birds that can be potentially passed on to humans.

"COVID-19 may not be the last of our pandemics," she said.

She cited that one of the worst pandemics in history was the Black Plague, caused by a bacteria *Yersinia pestis*, in the 14th century. "In the last few decades, however, there has been an increase in diseases that are of viral origin," Lim said.

Diseases that affected the Southeast Asian region like the Nipah (1999), Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS (2002), Avian Influenza (2003), Reston Ebola Virus (2008), and COVID-19 (2019) all originated from viruses in animals.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA INCREASINGLY VULNERABLE TO ZOONOTIC DISEASES

"Although wild animals have been suggested as the origin of species, most of the zoonotic diseases have been coming from domestic animals. Domestic animals usually act as mixing vessels or disease bridges for otherwise latent or dormant pathogens in wild animal reservoirs. Clearly there is a link to wildlife species," Lim explained.

Humans are at risk from being infected through illegal wildlife trade—an opportunity for contact between humans and wildlife, she said.

"Some of these diseases no longer use domestic species to be transmitted to humans but we are already seeing a possible direct transmission from wildlife, such as civet cats and pangolins, (then) possibly to humans.

Lim cited that the ASEAN Region is only 3 percent of the earth's surface area but 18 percent of all known plants and animals are found in this region. It also has 173,000 kilometers of shoreline that supports a variety of coastal and marine species as well as habitats.

"ASEAN's rich biodiversity and increasing demand from outside the region make illegal wildlife trade a lucrative business. ASEAN is not just a source, but a destination as well and transit point for illegally traded wildlife," she pointed out.

"From poaching, hunting, there are also direct contact with wildlife keeping them as pets, touching/handling them, and consuming them as wild meat," she said.

Lim added that biodiversity is not just about being in contact with the species, but also through management of habitats.

The pressure on ecosystems and habitats, such as encroachment and land use conversion to farms and residential areas, makes people more at risk from being at close contact with wild animals.

Lim noted that at the current rate of deforestation at 40 percent, supposedly untouched primary forest maybe lost by 2022.

Through these pressures, she explained that the "roosting area of animals are being disturbed triggering them to move to human populated areas."

"Coasts and marine pollution, and poorly planned coastal and marine development also increase interaction of human habitation with wildlife, such as waterbirds.

"We are now seeing that the depletion of population may eventually impact on the built up of resistance of these population from emerging infectious diseases that may affect them. Therefore it decreases their capacity to withstand infectious diseases pathogens in the future that may affect humans," Lim said.

"The decline in the number of species can trigger spillover of viruses that are dormant or inactive leading to their transmission to both domestic animals and humans. This grim data should serve as a warning to all of us that the depletion of our wildlife population increases that possibility of virus spilling over to humans," she added.

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