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Joint open letter to:

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25th February, 2020

Live Wild Animal Markets, Human and Animal Health, and Biodiversity Protection

Distinguished Colleagues,

The undersigned 236 organisations and individuals are writing to urge you to strongly encourage governments across the world to introduce and enforce legislation to close wildlife markets, particularly those at which trade in live animals is commonplace, and to introduce mechanisms designed to significantly and demonstrably reduce demand for live wild animals and products derived from them.

Markets selling live wild animals are found in many countries. However, rapidly growing human populations, increased access to even the most remote wildlife areas through changes in land use and infrastructure development, greater disposable income, increasing urbanisation, and the changing nature of demand, has resulted in the rapid expansion and commercialisation of such markets, increasing the risks to global human and animal health, compromising animal welfare, and placing biodiversity under unsustainable pressure.

The current coronavirus epidemic sweeping across parts of China is believed to have originated in wildlife, and may have been transmitted to people via wildlife markets in the city of Wuhan, although the precise source of human infection has not yet been definitively established. At the time of writing, tens of thousands of people are believed to have been exposed, hundreds have died, and the virus is known to have spread to at least 25 countries. It is notable that a group of 19 prominent researchers from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the nation's top universities called on the

government in China to crack down on wildlife markets such as the one at the centre of the Wuhan outbreak. The government responded by announcing a temporary ban on the trade in wild animals and the closure of all wildlife markets across the country, and there have been calls for these measures to be made permanent.

Previous global epidemics have also been associated with wildlife markets. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) which in 2002-2003 resulted in more than 8,000 human cases across 17 countries, and almost 800 deaths, is reported to have spread to humans via wild mammals commonly traded live in Chinese markets. The Ebola virus epidemics in West and Central Africa are thought to have originated from bats, with primates and other wild mammals believed to be intermediate hosts through which people were infected; many such animals are also traded live in wildlife markets in the countries in which the outbreaks first occurred.

The closure of wildlife markets in order to protect human health has precedent. In 2005 the European Union introduced a ban on the importation of most species of live wild-caught birds, primarily to reduce the risk of introducing avian influenza virus. Subsequent reports suggest that this action had a significant impact on the global trade in live birds.

The trade in wildlife not only threatens human health; it is also a major contributor to the global decline in wildlife and biodiversity. According to the Global Biodiversity Assessment published by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) in 2019, nature's decline is "unprecedented in human history" with a million species at risk of extinction. Direct exploitation is identified as the second most important driver of biodiversity loss, behind changes in land and sea use. The report described the current global response to this crisis as insufficient, urged that "transformative changes" are needed to restore and protect nature, and asserted that "opposition from vested interests can be overcome for the public good."

The extraction of wild animals for domestic and international trade forms a significant part of the direct exploitation identified by IPBES. In many countries, animals are taken from the wild to be slaughtered at markets, or traded live in order to supply restaurants, tourist facilities, the vast and expanding international demand for exotic pets, and for other purposes. In some countries domestic animals, including dogs and cats, are also traded live through markets in this way, with associated risks to human health and safety. These activities have severe negative consequences for the welfare of many millions of individual animals.

Addressing the trade in wildlife driven by such markets, and the demand for live wild animals or parts and products derived from them, comes with social, cultural and economic challenges. Nevertheless, we urge you to consider the risk that these same challenges may be far greater should the root cause of epidemics such as the current coronavirus emergency fail to be decisively addressed. Global action to permanently curb the trade will help to significantly reduce the risks of future infectious disease epidemics among both wildlife and people, and go some way to addressing the threat posed to individual animals and wider biodiversity through direct exploitation.

We therefore urge you to commit your organisations to working with Governments across the world, with the aim of ending the exploitation of wild animals for trade, closing markets that trade in live animals, and reducing the commercial demand for live animals for food and other purposes, including from specimens that have been bred in captivity.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue. We look forward to your response.

For and behalf of the following:

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