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Disease control effort hurting wild animals

Scientific consensus needed, experts say

KULTIDA SAMABUDDHI



Increased international collaboration among public health, wildlife, and trade sectors is needed to cope with emerging diseases such as avian influenza, mad cow and food and mouth diseases, health experts, veterinarians and economists said.

Speaking at a forum on "Emerging Diseases and Ecosystem", held yesterday during the third IUCN World Conservation Congress in Bangkok, the experts called on IUCN member states to include wildlife biology in decision-making relating to the control of outbreaks of animal diseases.

Wild animals had become "victims" of many governments' outbreak control schemes, which were often portrayed by public health officials as the host of infectious diseases, said William Karesh, co-chair of the IUCN's veterinary specialist group.

"The mass cull of free-ranging wildlife species for disease control must be limited to situations where there is a multidisciplinary, international scientific consensus that a wildlife population poses significant threat to public health," the group said in a draft resolution, to be submitted to the congress

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PROTECTED MARINE SPECIES SEIZED

A forestry police officer holds up a piece of coral which is among 1,000 pieces of coral, sea flowers and scaly giant clams, or hoi mue sua, confiscated from Dusit Pacific Aquarium shop in Klong Toey yesterday. Shop owner Dusit Pimprapaiorn, 46, was charged with possessing and selling protected marine animals. If found guilty, he faces a maximum four-year jail term and/or a 40,000-baht fine. - Sarot Meksophawannakul

next week.

The draft stresses the need for a crackdown on global wildlife trade, which they say is a major cause of infectious animal disease outbreaks. Governments must also warn people against eating exotic animals to avoid contracting animal-borne diseases.

They also warned that changing ecosystems through development can lead to changes in populations of vectors and potential hosts and to new patterns of diseases spread in ways which are often unforeseen and could cause potentially catastrophic effects.

"We have seen a lot of interesting emerging diseases in the past few years. The current outbreaks of bird flu in Asian countries are the most dramatic," said Dr Sonja Olsen, of the US Centers for Disease Control.

"It is interesting that the (H5N1) virus is everywhere now. But why are there very few cases? This maybe because the virus is inefficient in transmitting from poultry to humans.

"We don't know the precise reason (why there have been few human cases), but I would not be surprised if there are more human cases that have not been reported in the region," she said.

The outbreak of avian influenza in Southeast Asia had resulted in economic damage in the range of US\$5-10 billion, while damage caused by livestock disease outbreaks in the past decade cost up to about \$80 billion, according to economist James Newcomb, vice-president of the US-based Bio-Economics Research Group.

"We need a new type of institutional instrument to tackle this emergency," he said.

Nicholas Robinson, chairman of the IUCN commission on environmental law, said a lack of cooperation between agricultural, health, and environmental officials was a major cause of the weakness in infectious disease control systems worldwide.

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