

# Our exploitation of wildlife has exposed us to infectious diseases

**HUMANS** depend on animals for source of food, companion, economic activities and transportation. Animals are an essential part of our ecosystem. Thus, nature will not function efficiently without animals.

Animals are also potentially the cause of zoonotic diseases. The Joint Expert Committee of the World Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) defines zoonosis as diseases and infections that are transmitted between animals and humans.

There are more than 500 zoonosis pathogens — such as viruses, bacteria, fungi, protozoa, parasites of various cells and insects — but infectious diseases that transfer from animals to humans are rare.

The United Nations Education Programme and ILRI (2020) report, titled “Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic Diseases and How to Break the Chain of Transmission”, states that two activities influence the emergence



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*Humans must care for the environment as animals depend on it too.* FILE PIC

of new zoonosis are habitat and biodiversity destruction and wildlife exploitation.

The FAO Global Forest Assessment 2020 reports that the rate of deforestation is occurring at 10 million hectares per year due to rapid population growth that forces human encroachment on natural habitats.

The exploitation of wildlife has exposed humans to infectious diseases. A study of 8,000 rural households

in 24 countries, including in Africa, Latin America and Asia, showed that 39 per cent of households hunt and eat wild meat.

The wildlife include large herbivorous animals, primates, rodents, snakes and other types of reptiles. Aquatic wildlife, including mammals and reptiles such as dolphins, whales, manatees, crocodiles and turtles, are also caught. These are often traded for food, sold as pets or used for

medical purposes.

Clashes between humans and wildlife could lead to new viruses being transferred from animals to humans because the viruses are capable of infecting various species of hosts.

There are many more anthropogenic drivers that encourage the emergence of zoonotic diseases, such as increased demand for animal protein, unsustainable use of natural resources due to urbanisation, land-use changes, increased travel and transportation activities, changes in the food supply chain, as well as climate change.

In Islam, animals are not merely seen as a source of food for humans. They have their own life and values to Allah SWT. In the Quran, chapters are named after animals or insects, and mentioned in the verses. For example, the story of ants and Prophet Sulaiman or the whales and Prophet Yunus.

This demonstrates the high value of animals in Islam. Humans, however, are given certain powers over animals

(al-Baqarah, 2:29; Yaasin, 36:72) but not to exploit animals but to safeguard their welfare (Hud, 11:64; asy-Syu'araa, 26:155-156). In Islam, animal abuse is totally rejected and illegal hunting or hunting animals for recreational purposes is forbidden.

Islam has also specified halal and haram animals for human consumption. If we adhere to the rule and refrain from consuming haram meat, we will abstain from eating or hunting exotic animals, which are host to viruses and diseases.

We must follow the Islamic teachings on kindness to animals. We must also care for our environment because animals depend on it too. By doing this, we can prevent animal-to-human transmission of diseases and future pandemics.

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