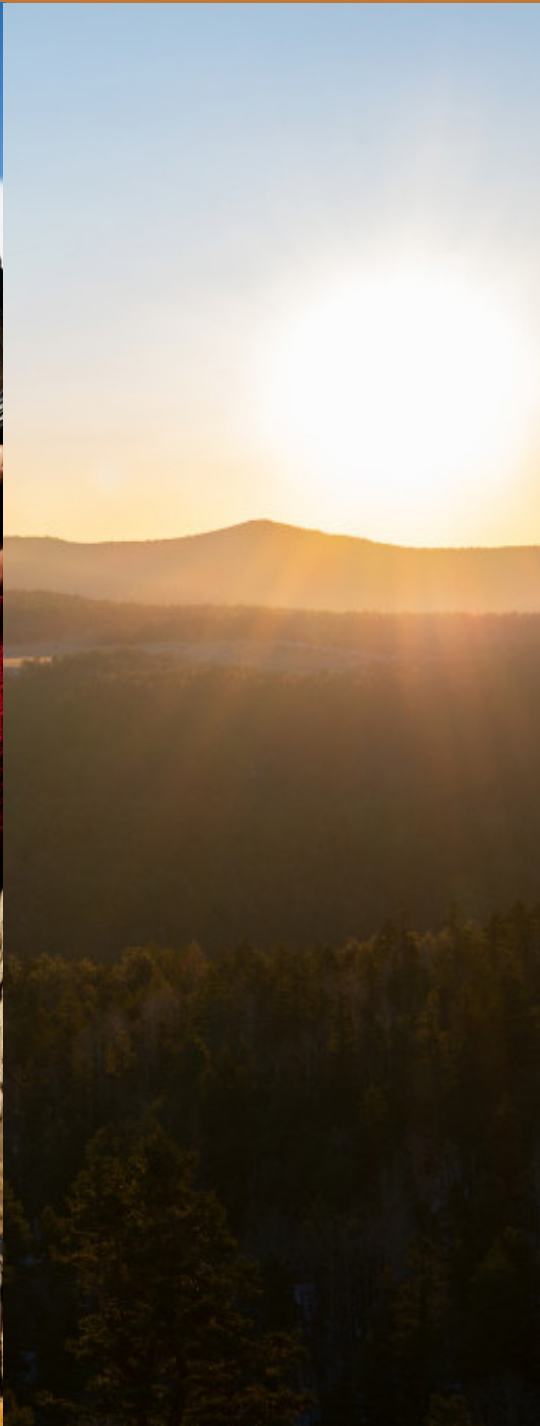


The COVID-19 pandemic and Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities: protecting people, protecting rights

WCS Rights and Communities Team



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OUR MISSION

Wildlife Conservation Society saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature.

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Across the planet **WCS** collaborates with hundreds of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities to achieve a shared vision for a more secure and resilient future, where wildlife remains a visible, thriving, and culturally valued part of the wild places where our partners live and we work.

We work closely with indigenous organizations and local communities to support their efforts to enable grassroots natural resource governance to grow and flourish, benefitting local livelihoods and conservation. Strengthening community rights helps empower local people to protect their resources from being taken by others. By helping communities' benefit from their rights to resources, WCS is supporting strong and lasting constituencies for conservation.

This is a living document that will be updated as our conversations with Indigenous Peoples partners continue and evolve.

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Introduction

Around the globe each day, there are new reports of cases of COVID-19 confirmed among Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs). Both are particularly vulnerable to health impacts, including COVID-19, because of inadequate access to healthcare and underlying health conditions such as diabetes, and respiratory disease. These are often a consequence of historical colonization and ongoing neglect by government agencies and changes in diets and lifeways associated with more frequent interaction with outsiders.

To protect the health of IPLCs during the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent their rights from being taken as governments around the world focus on the use and sale of wildlife for human consumption in an attempt to minimize the risk of future zoonotic disease pandemics, policy makers, civil society and grant makers must do more to engage respectfully with IPLCs. By doing so, they will better understand how to support IPLCs self-determined efforts to protect their health and cultures now and in the future.

Our long-term work on wildlife health and our close and trusted connections with local partners make it clear that it is vital at this time to create space to better understand and highlight the concerns of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, and encourage federal and state government agencies to invest in a One Health approach that will explicitly address their current and future needs. To that end WCS is collaborating with Nia Tero to convene a series of virtual sharing sessions with IPLCs around the world. These will focus on the ongoing proposals to ban commercial trade in wildlife for human consumption in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how these proposals could influence their lives now and in the future. We are planning four initial sessions (North America, Central and South America, Asia and Oceania) to accommodate different time zones and languages (specifically English, Spanish, and Portuguese with translation where needed). We will also explore the feasibility of engaging representatives of IPLCs in Central Africa. Each will offer a forum for community representatives to share their concerns with other IPLCs, and with governments, grant makers and civil society. We expect outputs to identify shared experiences and insights into how regional, national, and global policies can both help and hinder their efforts to ensure local health and security.



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Preventing future zoonotic pandemics

At WCS, we recognize how as a species our sheer numbers, our congregation in ever larger densely packed cities, and our ability to move rapidly by road, fast rail, and planes--from city to city, and from cities to rural communities--have, together, made humans uniquely susceptible to pandemic disease outbreaks. We also feel that, because the COVID-19 outbreak is at such a different scale to previous disease spillovers from wildlife (such as MERS, SARS, and H1N1), we along with the rest of the world need to think hard and fast about how to limit transmission of the next, possibly more virulent, zoonotic disease and help IPLCs effectively disseminate information to communities to respond to the current outbreak and prepare for the next.

As our awareness of the calamitous impacts of this zoonotic pandemic on public health, household economies, and social cohesion grows, there are increasing calls for “stopping all commercial trade in wildlife for human consumption (particularly of birds, bats, primates, rodents, and viverrids such as civets) and closing all wildlife markets.” At WCS we are strongly advocating for this extraordinary move because, with the unequivocal evidence of the wildlife origins of the current pandemic, we must take decisive action now to reduce the risk of the next zoonotic spillover that is then transmitted by secondary infection from human to human and spreads globally to become a pandemic. That said, like our calls for banning commercial whaling and closing domestic elephant ivory markets, WCS understands, in the case of wildlife trade and consumption we are bound to respect the sovereignty of governments and the rights of IPLCs who may, on a country by country basis, require certain exemptions to support existing cultural practices, formulate policy, and enact appropriate legislation.

We are concerned that governments and private sector logging, mining and plantation companies may use the market closures to abrogate the legitimate rights of IPLCs who still depend on wildlife as a vital source of food, income and cultural identity, and whose effective, multi-generational stewardship has maintained most of the planet’s remaining ecologically intact ecosystems. China and Vietnam are already moving to enact legislation to ban trade and consumption of wildlife. As other countries around the world also take steps to minimize the risk of future zoonotic disease outbreaks, it is imperative that IPLCs who likely will be affected by such proposed legislation are actively engaged in these important decisions.

Protecting the health of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

Physically or socially isolated, and the last to receive government supported services including access to quality health care, IPLCs are particularly vulnerable to both the health and economic ravages of a COVID-19 outbreak, as well as to actions being taken by governments in response to the situation. Death of elders, the most susceptible segment of society, risks the irreplaceable loss of traditional knowledge and fluent language speakers, potentially shredding the cultural fabric of a community.

Both during this COVID-19 pandemic, and to help prepare for a future outbreak, WCS suggests seven ways forward to support IPLCs efforts as they act to protect their health and survive this and future zoonotic disease epidemics. How these suggestions are implemented will depend on the local and national context.

1. Governments, civil society and grant makers must mobilize financial, material and technical resources to support IPLCs efforts to monitor and respond to unusual behavior or health and condition of the wildlife they are intimately familiar with and rely on. This

- likely means ensuring that communities have access to training and resources as well as the response networks for early reporting of potentially sick wildlife.
2. Governments, civil society and grant makers must mobilize financial, material and technical resources to support IPLCs efforts to protect their own health and the health of others. This likely means ensuring that communities have access to medical supplies as well as basic health care and critical care services needed to address the COVID-19 pandemic.
 3. Governments must respect and protect the legitimate authority of IPLCs to decide to self-isolate and close outsider access to their territories. For example, the T'simane, Leco and Tacana Indigenous Peoples in lowland Bolivia have already closed their territories in an attempt to prevent the entry of COVID-19 into their communities. First Nations in Canada have issued states of emergency and are restricting access as are Inuit communities.
 4. We must support IPLCs continuing efforts to maintain intact ecosystems within their traditional territories, enabling a One Health approach to maintaining healthy forests, grasslands, tundra, and coastal ecosystems, healthy wildlife populations and healthy people, as recognized in the [Berlin Principles](#).
 5. We must help IPLCs to strengthen their capacity to participate in disease surveillance to detect the presence of high-risk pathogens along wildlife exchange or market chains that are vital to their cultural and economic wellbeing. This information is essential to designing culturally appropriate measures to minimize the risk of pathogen spillover to all people who come in contact with wildlife along the supply chain. This includes addressing risks of spillover from infected outsiders interacting with wildlife (e.g., during live captures for research and as tourists).
 6. We must support IPLCs to actively participate in national Food Safety Systems to identify microbial and chemical hazards in their wildlife food supply. Any hazards detected in the wildlife food supply would require development of a hazard mitigation plan, and any such plan should be conceived with active participation and decision-making by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities.
 7. IPLCs should be supported to ensure that they are able to minimize the disease risks to themselves as they process fresh wildlife for food and trade.

Respecting and protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

Today millions of IPLCs depend on hunting wild animals as a vital source of food, income and cultural identity. For millennia, IPLCs from the Arctic to the tropics to the antipodes harvest a wide diversity of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates for food, clothing, shelter, trade and cultural practices. Wildlife-dependent lifeways are a core foundation of their world views, traditional knowledge systems, legal traditions, and customary and cultural practices. They are also the foundation for their ongoing relationships with the natural world and stewardship of many globally significant areas of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Intact ecosystems that have been maintained through effective governance by IPLCs have been shown to be much less likely locations for wildlife disease spillovers to humans than degraded and fragmented places where many more people are in close proximity to wildlife.

Like the rest of the world, IPLCs are also being asked to make difficult choices and sacrifices to protect our collective health and wellbeing. There are calls for halting all trade in wildlife for human consumption to minimize the risk of future zoonotic disease outbreaks. Though not explicitly targeted at household consumption of wild animals by Indigenous Peoples and Local

Communities, poorly framed national or international policy could undermine the traditional rights of IPLCs to harvest, consume and trade wildlife from their lands and waters.

Respectful discussions with IPLCs are beginning and need to be continued and expanded. That said, there is an immediate need to provide guidance to government policy makers as to how they might protect the rights of IPLCs to self-determination and protect the health of all people. To this end, WCS suggests there are three ways forward:

1. IPLCs must be actively involved in all government decisions to regulate trade in wildlife for human consumption to minimize the risk of future zoonotic disease outbreaks.
2. Support IPLCs to defend against both legal and illegal efforts to encroach on their lands and fragment and degrade their intact territories.
3. Support the legitimate authority of IPLCs to govern access to and use of wildlife on their lands, and to make decisions about sanitary protocols and hunting, based on their rigorous monitoring of wildlife populations and active management.

These interim suggestions will, of course, be revised and updated as our discussions continue with the IPLCs that we collaborate with around the globe.



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