

## Coronavirus

# Coronavirus piles pressure on China's exotic animal trade

Lucrative industry to come under government review following fears it was key factor in outbreak



Civet cats are seized at a train station in Guangzhou in 2004, at the height of the Sars outbreak © Reuters

Sun Yu and Xinning Liu in Beijing FEBRUARY 23 2020

Wang Zhilin used to eke out a living from rice farming in the central province of Jiangxi. Then she switched to a more lucrative trade — feeding China's voracious appetite for exotic animals, the consumption of which many believe is at the root of the [coronavirus](#) outbreak.

“Raising wild animals is more profitable than growing crops,” said Ms Wang. She farms civet cats, a raccoon-like animal, and made a profit of Rmb50,000 (\$7,140) last year by selling 33 full-grown animals — more than twice what she would have made from growing rice.

Parts of China have a tradition of consuming exotic wild animals as food or medicine, despite evidence that some species such as civet cats played a role in the Sars epidemic 17 years ago. Now the animal trade's suspected role in the deadly coronavirus outbreak has put the practice in the sights of China's senior leadership. The executive body of the country's parliament, is expected to review measures to curb the business on Monday.

## Live wild animal markets,

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Andrew Cunningham, Zoological Society of London

PRESIDENT XI JINPING SAID THIS MONTH. THE bad habit of eating wildlife without limits must be abandoned.”

The outbreak is thought to have started in a wet market in the city of Wuhan where animals are slaughtered and traded.

Scientists [believe](#) the virus that has killed more than 2,200 people came from an animal host. Beijing has reacted by issuing a temporary ban on the trade in all live animals.

However, experts question how much any permanent regulatory tightening will be able to achieve. Despite the lack of scientific evidence, there is a widespread belief in China that consuming wild animals or animal parts, including tiger bones and rhino horns, can help strengthen the body and cure diseases. Adherents of traditional Chinese medicine believe eating civet cats, for instance, can help strengthen the body and improve a man's sexual function.

Growing disposable incomes over the past few decades have also resulted in increased demand for wild animals, which are seen as expensive delicacies.

In response to international concerns over endangered species as well as health concerns, Beijing has restricted their trade and in some cases banned hunting them. But it has also encouraged the wildlife farm industry, which has become a growth engine in the countryside.

Wildlife farms generated Rmb56bn in economic output in 2017, according to the China Forestry Yearbook, a fivefold jump from Rmb9.6bn 10 years earlier.

Yet critics say many farms have exploited a lack of official scrutiny to flout laws and increased their stock of restricted animals by capturing them in the wild. “There is no way for wildlife farming to grow so fast in an organic manner,” said a Beijing-based scholar and policy adviser who declined to be named.

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On paper, China allows the farming and trading of 54 wild animals including kangaroos and bamboo rats. In reality, local governments have expanded the list to many other species.

Zhou Jinfeng, secretary-general of the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation, a non-profit organisation, said several hundred wild species — including many rare ones — were up for sale. “There is a general lack of regulation on wildlife farming and trade,” said Mr Zhou.

The policy inertia could stem from potential conflicts of interest. Public records show dozens of retired forestry officials responsible for issuing wild animal farming licences also chair local wildlife conservation associations funded in part by farms.

“How do you expect the forestry authority to strictly enforce animal protection rules when it is financed by the business it regulates?” said Mr Zhou.

While it remains unclear which animal is to blame for the coronavirus outbreak, scientists believe the lack of oversight of China's wildlife industry has helped trigger the epidemic.

“Live wild animal markets, such as the huge wet markets in China . . . are ideal places for zoonotic virus emergence to occur,” said Andrew Cunningham, deputy director of science at the Zoological Society of London, referring to conditions that originate in non-human animals.

However, Chen Changfu, a professor at Central China Agricultural University, said wildlife farming would do no harm so long as there were greater controls over farming conditions.

“A carp fish in a well-kept pond is safer than its peer in a polluted river,” said Mr Chen. “The same is true with wild animals.”

Other academics prefer a ban on wildlife farming altogether, arguing that China lacks the capacity to conduct disease inspection. “The inspection system must cover everything from hunting to farming to transportation to slaughtering,” said

cover everything from hunting to farming to transportation to slaughtering, said one Beijing-based policy adviser. "It is not economically viable."

Nonetheless, wildlife farmers are upbeat about their future. Yuan Jun, another civet cat farmer in Jiangxi, is confident his business will carry on despite the current ban on transportation and wildlife sales that has cost him Rmb1m since the end of January.

"Things will come back to normal when transportation resumes," said Mr Yuan.

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