



PRESS RELEASE

Avian Flu May Prove Big Threat to Biological Diversity

Experts at Convention on Biological Diversity Meeting Call for More Action to Curb Rise in Infectious Diseases

Curitiba, 22 March 2006 - A far wider range of species including rare and endangered ones may be affected by highly virulent avian flu than has previously been supposed.

Experts attending the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) conference say there is growing evidence that the H5N1 virus can infect and harm big cats like leopards and tigers, small cats such as civets and other mammals like martens, weasels, badgers and otters.

There is special concern over threatened species in biodiversity 'hot spot' areas like Vietnam which are also big poultry producers.

Meanwhile, over 80 per cent of known bird species, including migratory and non migratory ones may also be at risk with members of the crow family and vultures of particular concern.

Countries with extraordinary bird biodiversity including Brazil need to be especially vigilant against illegal trade in bird species.

Over reaction to the threat, including culling wild birds and draining resting sites like wetlands, should be avoided as they will cause more harm than good.

The experts are also worried that the impact of the highly virulent virus may extend far beyond direct infection of species as countries take measures to combat the problem.

Culling of poultry, especially in developing countries where chicken is a key source of protein, may lead to local people turning to 'bushmeat' as an alternative.

This may put new and unacceptable pressure on a wide range of wild living creatures from wild pigs up to endangered species like chimpanzees, gorillas and other great apes.

Meanwhile the loss of predators from some habitats, victims of the infection, could trigger an explosion of pests like mice and rats.

There are worries that this may trigger a rise in other human and animal infections as well as damage the prospects for other wildlife.

This may be of particular concern on islands where introduced, alien species, like rats can be a major threat to breeding birds with the pest feeding on eggs and young.

Experts argue that some islands, from Hawaii and the Galapagos across to the Seychelles and Mauritius group, may need to consider bans on imports of poultry and wild birds in order to safeguard their special biodiversity.

Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Secretary of the CBD, said: “We are learning many hard lessons from the threatened pandemic. Firstly that the impact on biological diversity and on species may be far wider and more complex than might have been initially supposed”.

“Secondly that it is in many ways a threat of our own making. For example reduced genetic diversity in domestic animals like poultry in favour of a ‘monoculture’ in the last 50 years has resulted in a reduction of resistance to many diseases,” he said.

“There is also growing evidence that a healthy environment can act as a buffer against old and the emergence of new diseases whereas a degraded one favours the spread of infections. If we are to realize international targets on fighting poverty by 2015 and on conserving biodiversity by 2010, we must urgently address these key links,” said Mr Djoghlaif.

He said it was also vital that all the relevant bodies, conventions and international treaties worked together to avert the threat.

These include the conventions on migratory species and international trade in endangered species, the wetlands agreement Ramsar and organizations like the UN Environment Programme, the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

The findings, including a wide range of suggestions and recommendations from some of the world’s leading animal health, public policy, law and conservation biology, are expected to be raised with governments at the 8th Conference of the Parties of the CBD taking place in Curitiba, Brazil.

Species at Risk

The experts, including a team from the Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Conservation Wildlife Disease Group at the University of East Anglia in the UK, estimate that 13 orders of birds amounting to well over 80 per cent of all bird species may be at risk from H5N1.

These include storks, herons, parakeets, emus, owls, eagles, kites and vultures as well as the largest avian order, the Passeriformes.

This order, which contains 6,000 of the total 9,917 avian species, include scavengers like crows.

Meanwhile some 54 globally threatened or near threatened species are at risk from exposure including 80 per cent of sea and fish eagle species.

Mammals at risk may include domestic rabbits, primates, viverrids which includes civets and genets, mustelids like polecats, stoats, weasels and wolverines and felids which include big cats.

The experts suspect that the highly refined olfactory systems of some mammals may make them particularly susceptible to infection by viruses like H5N1.

The Way Forward

A raft of suggestions and recommendations have emerged from the brainstorming ranging from increased surveillance and monitoring of wild birds and mammals in affected countries with a special focus on Asia where H5N1 has become endemic.

- Other ideas include beefing up the training of wildlife and veterinary staff in developing countries so they can better deal with current and future infections.
- Increased surveillance and possibly tougher penalties for illegal traders in wild birds and mammals.
- Vaccination of rare species at risk both in the wild and in zoos.
- Realistic compensation for owners of culled poultry in poor countries, possibly through increases in overseas development aid.

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