
Wildlife Trade: Weakest Link in the Avian Flu Surveillance

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Abstract

The emerging threat of a pandemic avian influenza is currently the subject of vigorous scientific investigation. Although the complex transmission of the H5N1 avian flu still remains to be elucidated, reports have shown that avian migration and human activities such as the trade of poultry have roles to play in the transnational spread of the disease ¹. Unfortunately, the transportation of birds does not solely comprise of legitimate commercial poultry consumption. The illegal trade of exotic birds is a challenge in most existing avian flu surveillance programs.

The exact role of exotic birds in avian flu transmission is controversial. Nevertheless, the capture of H5N1-infected eagles smuggled from Thailand en route to Brussels airport in October 2004 heralds the plausibility of considering exotic birds as contributors to the worldwide spread of the avian flu ². In April 2005, 5,000 to 6,000 migratory water birds in Lake Qinhai, China died as a result of H5N1 infection ¹.

In the Philippines, it is estimated that at least 300 exotic birds are illegally brought into the country yearly from different sources within the Asian wildlife black market ³. In spite of the existing regulatory safeguards against wildlife trade and surveillance of the Philippine Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau, the covert trade of exotic birds is still rampant ⁴.

The Philippines may just be a trivial link in the global trade

of exotic birds, but the problem it represents is not by any means insignificant as the rest of Asia is still very much in the epicenter of an emerging pandemic. Given the impracticality of controlling the migration of birds, we suggest greater vigilance on human activities that can contribute to the spread of the avian flu especially if it concerns unregulated commerce of potentially-infective exotic birds. As it appears, border safety, customs security, and wildlife protection groups have a stake to share in this emerging public health issue that threatens the global community with its repercussions on food supply, trade relations, international travel, and world health.

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