Local communities and wildlife consumption bans

To the Editor — A wildlife consumption ban, which China enacted in February as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has been welcomed by most conservationists as a step towards avoiding a future outbreak of zoonotic diseases¹. There are dissenting voices against this ban, arguing that wildlife generates multiple benefits for people who co-exist with wild species². While both schools of thought have their own valid arguments, neither has yet to actively lobby for the free, prior and informed consent or consultation of the people who will be directly affected by conservation decisions related to COVID-19.

Throughout the years, indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) have been seen as either culprits of biodiversity decline or as ‘unseen sentinels’ effectively managing and monitoring their territories, which are often highly biodiverse³. This polarized view of IPLCs signals a prevailing lack of understanding of their way of life, where most of their dependence on nature is on a subsistence level. Wildlife consumption is often an essential part of their diets. A blanket ban on wildlife consumption may, therefore, exacerbate food insecurity in these communities. In other cases, IPLC wildlife consumption is more than just for subsistence. It may also have cultural roots and should be respected in that regard. Calling for education campaigns to ‘discredit engrained cultural beliefs’ that lead to wildlife consumption ignores the dynamics of cultural development and would most likely fail to conserve wildlife or fail to

prevent another zoonotic disease outbreak⁴. What is needed is to craft bottom-up solutions together with the IPLCs directly depending on wildlife and to learn from their nuanced understanding of nature.

Through creating opportunities and spaces for dialogue, governments and institutions can involve IPLCs in setting guidelines for wildlife consumption. They can adopt the dialogue approach employed by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), where IPLCs engage in knowledge exchange with technical experts and government representatives⁵. The dialogue, through parallel contributions of indigenous, local, scientific and practical knowledge, can enhance the understanding of wildlife consumption⁶. Governments and institutions can tap into the network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that closely collaborate with IPLCs and have them facilitate these dialogues. They need to listen carefully to IPLCs, learn from their customary protocols on wildlife use and consumption, and draft laws that could potentially prevent another zoonotic disease outbreak without jeopardizing the livelihoods and well-being of IPLCs. Likewise, IPLCs and civil society can continue to build on processes of self-strengthening and assert themselves in spaces where they can proactively engage in efforts to raise awareness and understanding of traditional wildlife consumption practices. These multiple stakeholders must work together to co-craft potential solutions

to this global yet also very local concern of wildlife consumption and its connection to zoonotic diseases. □

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.