

**Privilege Speech of
Deputy Speaker Loren Legarda
On COVID-19 and Biodiversity Conservation
17 February 2020**

Mr. Speaker, distinguished colleagues in Congress:

We are living our days in fear of even casual contact with each other. Events have been canceled, travel plans changed, the public's attention consumed by a threat that the world has just woken up to: the 2019 novel coronavirus (nCoV) – a new strain of coronavirus first identified in Wuhan, Hubei, China in December last year. The latest news reports indicated that the World Health Organization (WHO) has already given this virus an official name: COVID-19.

The Chinese use two characters to write the word “crisis”: one character stands for “danger,” the other for “opportunity”. In a crisis, be aware of the danger, but also recognize the opportunity.

As the courageous workers in our health care system and local governments tackle the dangers, we as Filipinos and human beings must also recognize a historic opportunity to rethink our relationship with nature, and the lifestyles that compel us to kill wildlife to sell and consume as food or medicine.

In a little over two months, the COVID-19 outbreak has infected more than 49,000 people in 28 countries and territories around the world and has claimed the lives of over a thousand people, including a Chinese national who died here in Manila.

Outside China, cases have been reported in Australia, Belgium, Cambodia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Taiwan, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, the UK, the US, and Vietnam.¹

As a country, we offer our prayers to the families who have lost their loved ones amid this health crisis.

But as we continue to stand in solidarity with the international community in containing this outbreak and in ensuring the safety of the Filipino people, we must reflect on the causes of

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<https://www.businessinsider.com/china-virus-everything-we-know-deadly-2019-ncov-wuhan-spread-2020-1>

this outbreak and on ways to avoid and overcome future and interconnected threats.

Mr. Speaker,

Experts from the WHO say there is a high likelihood that the new coronavirus came from the illegal wildlife trade in China and people eating various kinds of wildlife.

According to an online news portal², scientists initially *“suggested that nCoV originally came from bats, a proposal based on the similarity of its genetic sequence to those of other known coronaviruses.”*

It goes on to say that researchers *“have identified the pangolin as a potential source of nCoV, also*

² <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00364-2>

on the basis of a genetic comparison of coronaviruses taken from the animals and from humans infected in the outbreak and other findings. The sequences are 99% similar.”

Humans have cast pangolins as the latest villains in the animal kingdom.

But have you all seen a pangolin? A gentler mammal we will not find, its elongated scaly body simply curling up into a ball whenever it's under attack, nearly defenseless against hunters coveting its scales that are dubiously believed to have medicinal uses.

Pangolin poaching has risen exponentially in the country in the past couple of years, apprehensions of traders even exceeding the records for 17 full years prior. There are even

restaurants already serving pangolin meat in Metro Manila and prices can be up to 14 thousand pesos per animal.

A study by the conservation group World Wide Fund showed that the illegal wildlife trade is worth around 20 billion US dollars per year. It is the fourth biggest illegal trade worldwide and has significantly contributed to a catastrophic decline in the populations of some species.

The Living Planet Index of the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society of London indicate that populations of thousands of animal species around the world have declined 60 percent on average since 1970. Extinction rates are currently ten times faster than in previous extinction events and across animal and plant

taxa, hundreds of times³ up to tens of thousands of times⁴ faster than the background extinction rate.

Moreover, a report last year by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services found that one million species are at risk of extinction. They ranked the main factors as follows: changes in land and sea use; exploitation of organisms; climate change; pollution; and invasive alien species. The intertwined web that sustains humans, plants and animals is at risk of unravelling in a matter of decades.

³ For vertebrates, 100 times the background rate. <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/1/5/e1400253.full>

⁴ For amphibians, 42,000 times the background rate, https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/ from the Center for Biological Diversity

Despite all these, humans continue to extract wildlife from forests at more than six times the sustainable rate.⁵

Wildlife smuggling, trafficking, and poaching remain rampant across many Asian countries. Legal and illegal trade for wild animals are still operational across the globe.

The demise of one species may not be felt directly, but its intricate connection with other species in the wild will reverberate throughout the food chain. Multiple extinctions will lead to ecosystem spasm, where chains of extinctions will leave the ecosystems we depend on gasping for life.

⁵ ¹⁰Sodhi, N.S., Koh, L.P., Brook, B.W. and Ng, P.K.L. 2004. Southeast Asian Biodiversity: An Impending Disaster. *TRENDS in Ecology and Evolution*, Vol. 19 No. 12. 12 December 2004

This ongoing public health crisis is only one of many that will beset us if we continue to ignore warnings of scientists. If we continue on the path to a warming planet as we seem to be doing, we could use this crisis in three ways: as a test of our current coping mechanisms, as a drill for future crises and as a wake-up call to the connection of this public health crisis to the destruction of biodiversity and ecosystems on which we all depend.

Mr. Speaker,

We therefore laud the decision of the Chinese government to temporarily ban the sale of wildlife in all their markets.

But let this temporary ban be only the beginning.

We have an opportunity to make the necessary shift to avoid similar events in the future. To start with, the international community should collectively step up its efforts toward successfully regulating the wildlife trade.

Once and for all, let us end the unsustainable use of wildlife animals for food or for their perceived medicinal value.

In line with this, I call for a whole of government approach, for the Philippines to recognize that overcoming threats like the COVID-19 will require functioning local ecosystems, local sufficiency of prime commodities, avoidance of mass hysteria and the ability to survive lockdowns.

On the international front, I call on the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and other international cooperation and instrumentalities to:

First, reinforce the provisions of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) on transformative change in wildlife conservation and management and in combating wildlife trafficking on all fronts.

CITES should be the primary legal framework for regulating international trade in species of wild animals and plants.

We must note, however, that only through adequate and efficiently enforced national policies can CITES really work.

Hence, member states, including the Philippines, should take decisive steps to ensure effective wildlife trade controls on all fronts.

Second, ensure an ambitious, meaningful, and inclusive post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

This year, the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity will adopt a post-2020 global biodiversity framework as a stepping stone towards the 2050 Vision of “living in harmony with nature.” That phrase sounds like a cliché until nature teaches us hard lessons such as the COVID-19.

Armed with the latest science enriched by indigenous knowledge systems, we must deepen

our understanding of our ecosystems and what levels of change they can sustain. We need to ensure equitable access and benefits associated with biodiversity.

And third, develop improved science-based standards, guidelines and recommendations on disease prevention, detection, and control.

We need to develop international policies on wildlife disease prevention, monitoring, and control that will enable governments to safeguard biodiversity and public and animal health worldwide.

This includes policy frameworks on disease risk management specifically catering to the interface among wildlife, domestic animals, and humans.

Mr. Speaker,

These measures will not only strengthen the international effort to tackle illegal wildlife trade and prevent public health crises, but also contribute to the sustainability of our planet.

At the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, our generation must be accountable to the next ones for our actions, past and present. We must recognize that everything we do here will have an impact on the environment and biodiversity. Awareness is no longer enough. The time for decisive action has come.

We have ignored the laws of nature to our peril. It is time to heed her warnings: do not eat what is not intended for human consumption, do not trade what should not be traded. We must

relearn to coexist with animals, and their habitats.

We have many laws in place already but we need to treat them as measures for survival rather than mere obstacles to the relentless pursuit of an economic future that will be mired in new dangers. We will not survive this and other coming changes unless we value the intricate interrelationships of all life on earth, unless we see that the rules of the game have changed and we need a fundamental shift in the way we live. From what we eat, how we travel, how we manage our discards, to how we do business and treat each other, this august body has to forge new ways to support these changes with policy.

With human creativity and a deeper understanding of our planet, we have the capacity to overcome this.

Thank you very much.