No Evidence of Coronaviruses or Other Potentially Zoonotic Viruses in Sunda pangolins (Manis javanica) Entering the Wildlife Trade via Malaysia

Jimmy Lee,1,2 Tom Hughes,1,2 Mei-Ho Lee,1,2 Hume Field,1 Jeffrine Japning Rovie-Ryan,3 Frankie Thomas Sitam,3 Symphorosa Sipangkui,4 Senthilvel K. S. S. Nathan,4 Diana Ramirez,4 Subbiah Vijay Kumar,5 Helen Lasimbang,6 Jonathan H. Epstein,1 and Peter Daszak1

1EcoHealth Alliance, 520 Eighth Avenue, Suite 1200, New York, NY 10018
2Conservation Medicine, Unit 13H Villamas, Jalan Villamas, 47000 Sungai Buloh, Selangor, Malaysia
3National Wildlife Forensic Laboratory, Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN), Peninsular Malaysia, KM 10, Jalan Cheras, 56100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
4Sabah Wildlife Department, 5th Floor, B Block, Wisma MUIS, 88100 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
5Biotechnology Research Institute, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
6Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

Abstract: The legal and illegal trade in wildlife for food, medicine and other products is a globally significant threat to biodiversity that is also responsible for the emergence of pathogens that threaten human and livestock health and our global economy. Trade in wildlife likely played a role in the origin of COVID-19, and viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2 have been identified in bats and pangolins, both traded widely. To investigate the possible role of pangolins as a source of potential zoonoses, we collected throat and rectal swabs from 334 Sunda pangolins (Manis javanica) confiscated in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah between August 2009 and March 2019. Total nucleic acid was extracted for viral molecular screening using conventional PCR protocols used to routinely identify known and novel viruses in extensive prior sampling (> 50,000 mammals). No sample yielded a positive PCR result for any of the targeted viral families—Coronaviridae, Filoviridae, Flaviviridae, Orthomyxoviridae and Paramyxoviridae. In the light of recent reports of coronaviruses including a SARS-CoV-2-related virus in Sunda pangolins in China, the lack of any coronavirus detection in our ‘upstream’ market chain samples suggests that these detections in ‘downstream’ animals more plausibly reflect exposure to infected humans, wildlife or other animals within the wildlife trade network. While confirmatory serologic studies are needed, it is likely that Sunda pangolins are incidental hosts of coronaviruses. Our findings further support the importance of ending the trade in wildlife globally.

Keywords: Sunda pangolins, SARSr-CoV, Malaysia, COVID-19, Zoonotic viruses, Coronavirus, Wildlife trade

Introduction

The legal and illegal trade in wildlife for consumption as food, medicine and other products is a globally significant threat to