

WCS Lao PDR Program Position Statement

regarding the recent discovery of SARS-CoV-2-like viruses in bats in Northern Laos

Recent research currently undergoing peer review (Temmam et al., [under review](#)) has discovered the closest viral relatives to SARS-CoV-2 to date circulating in horseshoe bats inhabiting limestone cave systems in Northern Laos. It is suspected that these bat-borne coronaviruses have the same potential for infecting humans as early strains of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus which causes COVID-19 disease).

Although this is new scientific information, it is important to recognize that these viruses are not new to bat colonies, and rather exist in nature in several *Rhinolophus* bat species. SARS-like viruses in *Rhinolophus* bats to date have been detected in southern China, Japan, Cambodia, and Thailand. As more efforts are made to sample from nature and publish results, we will begin to uncover other SARS-like coronaviruses in natural reservoirs like bats and rodents across their transboundary range, as has been demonstrated by this new discovery in Laos. Viruses and their wildlife reservoirs do not respect country borders.

We are gaining new information about viruses that have been circulating in wildlife populations for centuries. But their presence does not lead to an epidemic in the human population. It is our behaviours and activities, disrupting wildlife and placing us in their proximity, that has allowed for spillover events to occur. Encroachment on wild habitats, wildlife trade and consumption, and intensified agriculture in and around natural ecosystems has put us, the human population, at a high risk for the emergence of novel viruses from bats and numerous other wild species which host zoonotic pathogens. To best protect our health and wildlife, and to prevent the next pandemic, we must stop the unrelenting increase in interfaces between humans (and their livestock) and wildlife. We must close commercial wildlife trade markets, restore and protect ecosystems, and preserve biodiversity. WCS states that the fact remains clear — an intact, functioning, and biodiverse environment is the foundation to the health and wellbeing of all.

