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IUCN is the world's largest environmental knowledge network and has helped over 75 countries to prepare and implement national conservation and biodiversity strategies. IUCN is a multicultural, multilingual organization with 1000 staff located in 62 countries. Its headquarters are in Gland, Switzerland.

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IUCN BRIEF - AVIAN INFLUENZA

THE WORLD CONSERVATION UNION URGES GOVERNMENTS TO TACKLE THE ROOT CAUSES OF SHARED ANIMAL-HUMAN DISEASES

Gland, Switzerland, 1 November 2005 (IUCN) - The spread of avian influenza points to the urgent need to tackle the underlying causes of all shared animal-human diseases, rather than reacting exclusively to the current epidemic, says the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

"Much is being done to control the spread of bird flu, but far too little attention is given to the underlying causes of this outbreak. Our modern world is increasing the risk that animal diseases jump over to humanity, and it is only a matter of time before we are hit by the next epidemic if we do not address those issues," says Dr. William Karesh, co-Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Veterinary Specialist Group and Director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Field Veterinary Program.

Some of the critical factors that contribute to the current spread of avian influenza and the risk of other animal diseases infecting humans are the rapid transportation of goods and people, increasing population density, and a growing dependence on intensive livestock production for food. The risk is further increased by human encroachment into formerly isolated areas and a massive trade in wildlife around the world; animal and human populations that were previously separated now are in much closer contact.

"Attempts to cull wild birds in the current epidemic would not only be unethical but also ineffective, interfering with migration routes and dispersing birds over a wider area," says Dr Jean-Christophe Vié, Deputy Coordinator of the IUCN Species Programme. "A comprehensive surveillance system focused on wild birds and their health is needed to help answer the many questions surrounding the role of wild birds in spreading avian flu," he adds.

Experts believe that recent outbreaks of SARS, monkeypox and avian influenza point to the urgent need to address their root causes. The World Conservation Union, in line with other organizations, calls for the following measures based on years of experience and research:

1. Increase knowledge of wildlife biology in particular, migration patterns of wild animals, and of trade routes for wildlife and plants;
2. Increase international cooperation, for instance by establishing formal communications channels between all institutions that deal with human and animal health;
3. Improve regulations for international trade in animal products and wildlife;
4. Monitor wildlife health and increase research into emerging diseases;
5. Educate people working with domesticated and wild animals on the health risks involved and best practice to prevent disease outbreaks.

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The IUCN Species Survival Commission Veterinary Specialist Group
www.iucn-vsg.org

For more information on animal diseases and human health:

Press release on a seminar on animal-human health links, held between the IUCN US Multilateral Office and the US Environmental Protection Agency (on 25 October 2005)
(<http://www.iucn.org/en/news/archive/2005/11/zoonotic.pdf>)

Conservation and Development Interventions at the Wildlife/Livestock Interface: Implications for Wildlife, Livestock and Human Health (<http://www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/pubs/AHEAD.htm>), published by the IUCN Species Survival Commission highlights the important role animal health plays in both environmental conservation and economic development.

For more information on avian influenza:

The Wildlife Conservation Society <http://www.wcs.org/media/file/avian-influenzamigratorybirdsaug2005factsheetupdatev2.pdf>

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals
http://www.cms.int/news/PRESS/nwPR2005/pressrelease_AvianFlu_final_24_10_05.pdf

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations
http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/subjects/en/health/diseases-cards/special_avian.html

BirdLife International
http://www.birdlife.org/action/science/species/avian_flu/index.html

The World Health Organization of the United Nations <http://www.who.int/en/>

Wetlands International
<http://www.wetlands.org/IWC/Avianflu/default.htm>

L'Office international des Epizooties (OIE)
http://www.oie.int/downld/AVIAN%20INFLUENZA_AI-Asia.htm