

Executive Summary 2020

Miranda Stevenson, Chair of Trustees, summarises an extraordinary year:

Our practical activities were inevitably curtailed in 2020, as the world responded to the emergence of SARS-CoV-2. While the global Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted all our lives through its impacts on health, economic stability and personal freedom, at the same time it has brought the relevance of the work done by Wildlife Vets International (WVI) into sharp focus. A spotlight has been shone on the ever-expanding interface between wildlife, humans and livestock, and the associated risks of emerging disease exploiting increasing opportunities to jump the barriers between species, ourselves included. This is very much the arena in which WVI operates, as we support our conservation partners in the vital task of identifying, treating and mitigating disease threats in the endangered species with which they work.

Although the opportunities for our veterinary partners to work on the ground during 2020 were extremely limited, it has provided us with a chance to further develop our delivery of remote support, and to highlight the importance of what we do in the context of a generally increased understanding of the importance of wildlife health, the protection of biodiversity and the dangers of habitat degradation. It has never been more vital to put quality veterinary science right at the heart of conservation.

Despite the challenges, we have been able to take forward a number of new partnerships this year, including a project with West African Primate Conservation Action in Ghana to evaluate the feasibility of releasing captive-bred white-naped mangabeys – an Endangered monkey – into community-managed forest, in order to boost the remaining wild population. Shortly before borders closed in March, veterinary surgeon Karen Archer and vet nurses Matthew Rendle and Laura Buckley travelled to Ghana and were able to get a good understanding of the facilities on the ground and what help WVI can provide in terms of building local veterinary capacity, carrying out a detailed disease-risk analysis and facilitating the analysis of biomedical samples. Time to reflect in the months that followed has allowed the development of a comprehensive plan for the project, in close cooperation with WAPCA's Programme Manager, Andrea Dempsey, which we will be excited to see implemented as soon as it's possible to get back out on the ground.

Similarly, vet Jessica Bodgener has been waiting to get back out to Nepal, where she will be working alongside local colleagues at the National Trust for Nature Conservation to assess the health of leopards involved in conflict with humans. Being grounded in the UK as a result of Coronavirus restrictions has also given her time to refine her ideas and as part of that process she now plans, for example, to build radio collars using locally available components, helping make the project both more affordable and more sustainable.

The months of lockdown also allowed John Lewis to take forward his plans for the Wild Tiger Health Centre – a unique online resource for all those involved in the conservation of wild tigers around the world. The WTHC is a comprehensive one-stop-hub for tiger specialists looking for up to date advice, not just on tiger disease but on everything from how to deal with conflict animals and field anaesthesia, to clinical diagnostic guidance and rehabilitation

techniques. It's a constantly evolving and regularly updated resource, free to those who need it and designed to build connections between tiger vets and biologists working in the field in all tiger range state, as well as those working in ex situ research. This year, the two most popular search subjects on the website have been tigers and canine distemper virus, and tigers and Covid-19, and just two clicks in will take a user straight to a wealth of invaluable and authoritative information on either.

During a slight relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions in the summer, John was able to travel to Wales to carry out health checks on four captive-bred pine martens, and fit them with radio collards ahead of their release into the wild in July. This is the first stage of a longer term project looking at the joint conservation of pine martens and red squirrels, and complements an initiative WVI was previously involved with, which saw the successful translocation of wild Scottish pine martens to Wales. One of the principle objectives of the new project is to help restore ecological resilience by boosting a predator whose presence is known to typically reduce numbers of invasive grey squirrels. Putting the project in a wider context, better understanding of how captive bred carnivores adapt to life in the wild has the potential to inform future releases of captive-bred animals, which can be an effective way to address a sudden decline in a species in the wild.

Towards the end of the year, vet Richard Harvey was able to build on what had out of necessity been desk-based research and get back out into the field in west Africa, where he has been tracking and collaring Critically Endangered forest elephants. This has given him the opportunity to collect vital samples which will be used to monitor the health of the animals, and will provide the initial material for the establishment of a database to collate information on what diseases the elephants have been exposed to, or which may threaten them in the future. It is always challenging to embark on disease surveillance for a species, or sub species, about which very little is known. It can seem like an overwhelming task. And yet in the long run understanding the disease risks they face can make all the difference in terms of avoiding or mitigating infection, and ultimately to the survival of the species.

Notably, our turtle team of vet Tania Monreal and vet nurse Matthew Rendle continued to do a great job of supporting the rescue centres we work with in the Mediterranean throughout 2020, thanks to relationships that were well established pre-pandemic. They were able to advise remotely on clinical cases, both at ARCHELON the Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece and Fundación CRAM in Spain, while Tania has on occasion been able to visit CRAM in person, as she is based nearby. We have also been able to provide vital supplies of nutritional supplements and specialised vitamins.

With the cancellation of many in-person events and the general economic downturn, fundraising was particularly challenging this year, as it has been for charities generally. Shortly before the first UK lockdown, we were looking forward with great anticipation to a major fundraising initiative by Vets4Pets, who were organising a Swindon to Paris cycle ride in aid of WVI. That of course was not to be, although we hope it will be reinstated in the future. However, we were lucky to have dedicated supporters who fundraised for us individually – notably through a virtual London to Brighton cycle race, and an in-person ultra-marathon.

We also ran a successful online campaign to raise funds to cover the salary of Nepal's top wildlife vet, Amir Sadaula, for a period of six months, in order to maintain wildlife veterinary capacity at a critical time – as the country's first wildlife hospital prepared to open its doors. Species likely to need help include rhinos, tigers, leopards and elephants. This was an exceptional situation, arising as a result of lost tourism revenue, which left his employer, the National Trust for Nature Conservation, temporarily unable to pay his wages and we were glad to be able to step in and support Amir. Vet Jessica Bodgener will be working alongside him and his team on the conflict leopard project in the coming months.

In December, we took part once again in The Big Give Christmas Challenge – which has for some time been our main annual fundraising campaign. Under difficult circumstances, we were delighted to exceed our target of £15,000. The funds raised will be used to support a suite of projects focussing on wildlife disease surveillance, and include the conflict leopard project in Nepal, the white-naped mangabey initiative in Ghana, and the establishment of the elephant disease database. In addition, support will be given to a new project looking at the efficacy of vaccinating wild painted dogs against canine distemper virus, our long-term work to promote species recovery in Mauritius, and the continued development of the Wild Tiger Health Centre.

While the Covid-19 pandemic made the year exceptionally challenging for the veterinary professionals with whom we work and our conservation partners around the globe, the greatest challenge for WVI – and a source of immense sadness – was the sudden death in November of WVI founder and big cat expert, John Lewis, following a short illness. John's death was a great shock to all who knew him, and an unfathomable loss to the world of wildlife medicine and big cat conservation in particular. We are deeply grateful to all those, including WVI's patrons, trustees and veterinary partners, who offered help and practical support, and we are determined to ensure that WVI not just continues John's ground-breaking work but actively builds on his vision and legacy, providing accessible training and mentoring for vets, field biologists and others working on the conservation frontline to save endangered species.

None of what we do would be possible without the ongoing and unstinting support of our patrons and trustees, the generosity of our corporate and individual benefactors, the dedication of our project partners around the globe, or the commitment of our inspirational veterinary partners, who never hesitate to share their considerable skills and expertise. We extend our heartfelt thanks to them all.

Throughout all the challenges of 2020, our vision remains a world where wildlife survives and flourishes, and our mission is to support vets and conservationists in using veterinary science to protect endangered species. At a time when few can be left unaware of the capacity of wildlife pathogens to disrupt our lives and threaten the survival of all species, it has never been more critical to ensure that world-class veterinary science informs our efforts to conserve endangered species. We are therefore both excited and optimistic as we move into 2021 with a good range of planned conservation activities, reasonable funds and an ever-growing supporter base.

Miranda Stevenson PhD OBE