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Restoration of Wetlands Key to Reducing Future Threats of Avian Flu

Investments in 'Ecosystem' Health Likely to Pay Dividends in War Against Infectious Diseases

Original Article - (UNEP News Release 2006/24) - Elisabeth Waechter, UNEP Associate Media Officer, on Tel: 254 20 7623088, Mobile: 254 720 173968, e-mail: elisabeth.waechter@unep.org



Nairobi, 11 April 2006 - Restoring tens of thousands of lost and degraded wetlands could go a long way towards reducing the threat of avian flu pandemics a new report today says.

The loss of wetlands around the globe (see notes to editors) is forcing many wild birds onto alternative sites like farm ponds and paddy fields, bringing them into direct contact with chickens, ducks, geese, and other domesticated fowl.

Close contact of wild birds and poultry species is believed to be a major cause behind the spread of avian influenza.

Clearing intensive poultry rearing units from the 'flyways' of migratory birds would also be prudent.

"Intensive poultry operations along migratory wild bird routes are incompatible with protecting the health of ecosystems that birds depend upon. They also increase the risks of transfer of pathogens between migrating birds and domestic fowl," says the study.

The report has been commissioned by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) from a team led by leading Canadian academic Dr David Rapport.

It focuses on the environmental factors underpinning the re-emergence of old diseases and which are likely to be triggering the rise of new ones like highly virulent avian influenza or H5N1.

The report's preliminary findings, announced at a scientific seminar on avian influenza taking place at UNEP's headquarters in Nairobi, concludes that current "heroic efforts" focusing on "isolation, quarantine, culls and medications" are likely to be quick fixes offering limited short term benefits.

It recommends that governments, the United Nations and public health experts back environmental measures in order to counter the spread of diseases like H5N1 over the medium and long term.

Other possibly more controversial suggestions, aimed at reducing contact between wild birds and poultry, include shifting livestock production away from humans and other mammals such as pigs.

The report accepts that in some parts of the world, like South East Asia, separating poultry from people is at odds with generational cultural traditions and practices.

"As unpalatable as this may be, where it is clearly in the interest of preventing future pandemics with potentially catastrophic global effects, it can and should be undertaken," argues Dr Rapport, Honorary Professor of the Ecosystem Health Programme, Faculty of Medicine, University of Western Ontario, and a member of the firm EcoHealth Consulting of Salt Spring Island, British Columbia.

Shafqat Kakakhel, UNEP's Deputy Executive Director and Officer in Charge, said: "These thought-provoking findings will need to be looked at in detail by all those involved in fighting current and future threatened pandemics. However, what this research underlines is that the link between a healthy environment and disease prevention is no marginal topic, but an important component in public health policy particularly in a globalized world".

He said: "There are numerous pressing reasons for conserving and restoring degraded ecosystems like wetlands".



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The services they provide for humankind are vital and of great economic importance. Wetlands are natural water storage features, they filter pollution, help absorb floods and are home to numerous species including fish.

"Their ability to disperse and keep wild birds away from domestic ones is now yet another compelling argument for conserving and rehabilitating them," added Mr Kakakhel.

The two day avian flu seminar, organized by UNEP, the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and the African Eurasian Water Bird Agreement (AEWA), has brought together experts from across the world.

The seminar builds on the work of the international Scientific Task Force on avian influenza established by CMS last August which now comprises experts from 13 UN Bodies, treaty organizations and non governmental organizations.

It was preceded on Sunday by the first World Migratory Bird Day where the main celebrations were organized by internationally renowned author Kuki Gallmann and the Great Rift Valley Trust at the Laikipia Conservancy in Kenya.

The report also comes in the wake of an expert workshop held in Curitiba, Brazil organized by the UNEP Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The experts in Brazil concluded that a far wider range of species including rare and endangered ones may be affected by highly virulent avian flu than has previously been supposed.

These include big cats like leopards and tigers, small cats such as civets, and other mammals like martens, weasels, badgers, and otters.

The CBD workshop also concluded that over 80 per cent of known bird species, including migratory and non migratory ones may also be at risk with members of the crow family and vultures of particular concern.

The experts are also worried that the impact of the highly virulent virus may extend far beyond direct infection of species, including on livelihoods and trade as countries take measures to combat the problem.

Culling of poultry, especially in developing countries where chicken is a key source of protein, may lead to local people turning to 'bushmeat' as an alternative.

This may put new and unacceptable pressure on a wide range of wild living creatures from wild pigs up to endangered species like chimpanzees, gorillas and other great apes.

The CBD experts also expressed concern over the development of a genetic mono- culture of domestic poultry claiming that this makes many domestic fowl less disease resistant.

In late 2005, more than 120 governments endorsed resolutions at a meeting of three key wildlife treaties—AEWA, CMS and the wetlands treaty Ramsar—which recommend strengthening biosecurity in farming; improving global surveillance and research on avian influenza; developing early warning systems and avoiding ineffective or counter-productive 'quick fixes' such as culling migratory birds or destroying their wetland habitats.

Notes to Editors

The draft report: Avian Influenza and the Environment: An Ecohealth Perspective has been submitted to UNEP by David Rapport, EcoHealth Consulting, with contributions from John Howard, Luisa Maffi and Bruce Mitchell. A final version is to be published soon on www.unep.org.

In respect to wetlands, the report says "Wetland depletion has direct implications for migrating wild birds. Wetland habitat world-wide continues to decline (owing to agricultural expansion and urban development), resulting in fewer staging areas for wild migrating birds.



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In these situations, remaining wet areas associated with rice paddies and farm ponds would be expected to be increasingly attractive to wild birds lacking sufficient natural habitat during staging, nesting and migration activities”.

The Avian Influenza Scientific Seminar, Nairobi 10 and 11 April, and World Migratory Bird Day <http://www.worldmigratorybirdday.org/wmbd/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=32>

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species www.cms.int

The Convention on Biological Diversity www.biodiv.org

The African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement www.unep-aewa.org

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands www.ramsar.org

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