Frankfurt Zoological Society:
Nature conservation during the Corona crisis

The global corona pandemic is changing the world on an unprecedented scale and poses huge challenges for all of us. It is still too early to assess the global and individual consequences in the long term.

For FZS, the health and safety of our employees and all the people in our working environment is a top priority. We are complying with national and regional regulations and working to help prevent the virus from spreading further to avoid overburdening health systems. The situation in the 18 countries where we work is variable and changes from day to day. Our national teams are following these changes very closely and adapting project activities accordingly. Our heads of department are in close contact with them.

At our headquarters in Frankfurt, we have switched to home-based work, which has worked very well so far. Meetings are held by video conference. Many of the previous activities continue: annual financial statements and the annual report are currently being prepared, and communication avenues including the magazine Gorilla, the website and the social media channels continue to run without interruption. The same applies largely to activities such as data analysis, reporting, project planning, applications for funding and much more.

In the 162 years since FZS was founded, mankind has been confronted with major crises time and again. Today, the cooperation between our association and the Foundation has created a stable, crisis-proof structure. With an approach oriented to financial security, we have built up sufficient reserves so that FZS can continue to function for a long time under these new and unprecedented conditions. This also applies to job security. Furthermore, when the crisis is defused, FZS will immediately be fully operational again. We have efficient decision-making processes and uncomplicated administrative systems, so that we can react quickly and flexibly.
Our core approach is to preserve outstanding wilderness areas and thus, far there is no evidence that the virus has a direct impact on natural ecosystems. However, while the goal of our efforts is not directly affected, there are massive indirect effects. For example, areas such as Manu National Park in Peru are now closed so as not endanger the indigenous people living there. This means travel to project areas, excursions, patrols, monitoring of animal populations must be greatly reduced or cancelled. In some places, surveillance by small aircraft or the evaluation of satellite data can be intensified but infrastructure issues such as the construction of ranger posts or protected area border demarcation must be postponed. The biggest cuts are in the areas of sustainable land use development, community support and environmental education. In these important fields we are forced to largely suspend work. Once the situation eases, we will be devoting special efforts to these activities.

We are very concerned about the financial resources available to protected areas. Particularly in the tropical zone, which is so rich in biodiversity, government support was often inadequate even before the crisis. Due to the major challenges facing these countries, this situation will worsen considerably. There will be massive cuts in areas where tourism contributes to the financing of protected areas and is also an important source of income for the population.

At the same time, it is likely that private and state donor funds from economically strong countries will also decrease due to significant capital losses. In addition, major support programmes will need to be set up for the corona-weakened economies. We must hope that the understanding of the critical importance of biodiversity will not be lost during these difficult times. We, as FZS, will do what we can to continue to ensure the functioning and security of the protected areas where we work and support the national authorities to the best of our ability. We are redeploying funds and setting up emergency budgets. We hope that private and government donors will continue to provide financial support for maintaining the world’s biodiversity as a critical investment in the future health of ourselves and our planet.

There are already some early lessons from the Corona crisis:

- Numerous articles and scientific studies point to the link between nature conservation and global health. Many of the novel diseases such as HIV, Ebola, Zika, Sars and now probably Covid-19 have their origin in wild animals of the tropical zone. Human invasions into species-rich wilderness regions, massive increases in the contact zones between humans and animals, the expansion of transport routes from remote regions to urban areas, the trade in live wild animals and the consumption of wild meat – all this helps make a pandemic like the one we are experiencing today possible. This means that we must significantly improve the protection of nature, particularly tropical forests, and stop the trade in live or dead wild animals.

- Protected areas must be financially secure so that the collapse of tourism or other loss of revenue does not leave areas unprotected and under threat. Area-specific, long-term, public-private financing strategies are essential for this purpose.

- The reaction of the global community to the coronavirus crisis demonstrates that massive coordinated action on an unprecedented scale is possible. We must tackle the two other global crises with major long-term effects on human health and prosperity – climate change and the loss of biodiversity – with equal determination.
We at FZS will continue to do everything in our power to protect biodiversity and ensure a future worth living for ourselves and generations to come. Our special thanks go to our staff and our project partners for their outstanding commitment in times of crisis, and especially to the private and state donors who make this commitment possible.

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