

Oryx

Understanding wild meat consumption during the Covid-19 Pandemic

By Aida Cuni-Sanchez and Martin Sullivan, 18th April 2023

Consuming wild meat can increase the risk of zoonotic diseases such as Ebola virus disease and Covid-19. In contrast to rural areas, where wild meat can be the most important source of protein, iron and fat for humans, for urban inhabitants it is often more of a luxury item and status symbol. Urban inhabitants are also more exposed to public health messaging against wild meat consumption, so we were interested in studying wild meat consumption amongst urban residents in Freetown, Sierra Leone, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

With over 4,000 deaths, Sierra Leone was one of the countries most affected by the 2013–2016 Ebola outbreak. During that outbreak, several bans and public health messaging campaigns discouraged urban residents, particularly in the capital Freetown, from consuming wild meat. However, after the Ebola outbreak, wild meat was again sold openly in several markets in the city. Might this be the case during the Covid-19 pandemic? Or did urban residents become more aware of the link between wild meat consumption and the risk of zoonotic diseases?



Road post exemplifying public health messaging discouraging wild meat (locally known as bushmeat)

consumption. Photo: Aida Cuni-Sanchez.

To understand patterns and drivers of wild meat consumption in urban Freetown during the Covid-19 pandemic, we conducted face-to-face interviews of 197 market shoppers (61 men and 136 women) selected randomly whilst visiting four markets in the city.

We found that more men than women consumed wild meat, and that men consumed wild meat more frequently. Forty-six per cent of male respondents said that they consumed wild meat often, which is much higher than in other West African cities. Taste, cultural values and low price were the main reasons for consuming wild meat, and some men also said they would offer wild meat to important guests – indicating the status symbol of wild meat in this city. Respondents cited 15 species being consumed most often, including bushbucks and monkeys (the latter are presumed to carry a high zoonotic disease risk).



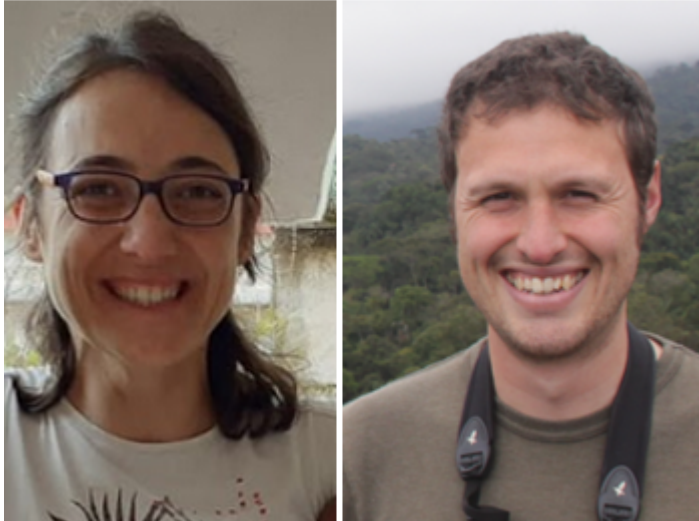
Examples of wild meat sold in open markets of Freetown, with mammals including monkeys sold alongside dried fish. Photos (taken with vendors permission): Fartimah Wusha-Conteh.

The main reasons for not consuming wild meat were lack of availability, high price and cultural values (e.g. some Muslims do not consume wild meat). Although nobody cited health concerns as their main reason for not consuming wild meat, concerns about Ebola were brought up in follow-up questions among some respondents who did not consume wild meat. Contrary to studies in other West African cities, young respondents in Freetown were not less likely to consume wild meat than older people.

Overall, our study shows that wild meat consumption was still widespread in Freetown during the Covid-19 pandemic, and frequently consumed species included monkeys. Previous bans and public health messaging campaigns seem to have had limited effects on discouraging urban residents from consuming wild meat. Thus, instead of top-down approaches, we suggest using participative approaches that engage with wild meat consumer communities, to identify the best pathway towards not just safe but also sustainable consumption of wild meat.

The article '[Wild meat consumption in urban Sierra Leone during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)' is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.

Feature photo: Dominic Chavez/World Bank via Flickr.



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