



April 27, 2020

The Honorable Mark Esper
Secretary
Office of the Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Via e-mail: mark.esper@osd.mil

Dear Secretary Esper,

I am writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and our more than 6.5 million members and supporters worldwide to ask you to stop the crude killing of animals during the annual Cobra Gold military exercise. During Cobra Gold, Marines and survival training instructors in Thailand are seen on disturbing video¹ killing chickens with their bare hands, skinning and eating live geckos, consuming live scorpions and tarantulas, and decapitating cobras and drinking their blood.² These irresponsible actions put troops at risk of contracting zoonotic diseases that can endanger them and the wider public.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in unprecedented changes to global households, economies, hospitals, education, research, and daily life. It is simply not worth the risk of another pandemic to continue business as usual.

Considering the danger zoonotic diseases pose to the troops—and indeed to all humanity—it is imperative that you end the use of live animals in Cobra Gold and instead use more effective and ethical non-animal training methods.

Consumption of Wildlife Poses Real and Present Human Health Danger

Scientists overwhelmingly agree that the COVID-19 pandemic can be traced back to human interactions with wildlife at a Chinese live animal meat market where wild and farmed animals are sold live or dead to be eaten. Similarly, handling and consumption of wildlife has facilitated a "spill over" into humans of deadly novel diseases such as SARS, Ebola, monkeypox and Lassa fever—whereby, during the slaughter, disease carrying fluids from the animals like blood, saliva, and excrement can splash or splatter and be consumed or inhaled

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¹ "Coronavirus: US Marines Learn Jungle Survival in Thailand as Exercises Go Ahead Despite Epidemic," *South China Morning Post*, 4 Mar. 2020 <<https://youtu.be/IJ3MMseHCnE>>.

² Dylan Gresik, "PETA Demands Marines Stop Drinking Cobra Blood, Eating Live Animals," *Marine Corps Times*, 5 Mar. 2020 <<https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/03/05/peta-demands-marines-stop-drinking-cobra-blood-eating-live-animals/>>.

by humans.³ Similarly, the origins of HIV in humans have been tracked back to handling and killing animals for bushmeat (wild animal meat).⁴

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in 1997, outbreaks of the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of bird flu were found in poultry on farms and in live-animal meat markets in Hong Kong, and that same year Hong Kong became the site of the first-ever human infections with H5N1.⁵ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains that most human infections from this virus have occurred through contact with infected birds, and when humans become infected the mortality rate is about 60%.⁶

The CDC warns, "Approximately 75 percent of recently emerging infectious diseases affecting people began as diseases in animals."⁷ The zoonotic disease risk from handling and killing animals is considered so high, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, the acting executive secretary of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, supports the call for a worldwide ban on the types of markets in China where COVID-19 and SARS likely originated.⁸ Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, is encouraging the global community to pressure nations to close down such markets too.⁹ Sixty bipartisan U.S. lawmakers have also written to WHO and other global bodies urging them to protect public health by closing live wildlife markets, and they are also calling for a ban on the international trade in live wildlife when it is not for conservation.¹⁰ Conservation experts have even warned the "exotic" skins trade which butchers species such as pythons, stingrays and crocodiles for fashion also increases the risk of dangerous viruses spreading to humans.¹¹

DOD Precedents Exist for Ending Survival Skills Training on Animals

In 2011, the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center (MCMWTC) suspended its use of live animals in its survival training courses following discussions with PETA.¹² Nearly three decades ago, the U.S. Army's Dugway Proving Ground also canceled a survival skills training course using animals

³ Congress of the United States, Bipartisan letter (Addressed to World Health Organization, World Organisation for Animal Health, and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), 8 Apr. 2020 <https://www.hydesmith.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/040820%20Booker-Graham%20WHO%20Wet%20Markets%20Letter_0.pdf>.

⁴ Sharp PM, Hahn BH. Origins of HIV and the AIDS pandemic. *Cold Spring Harb Perspect Med.* 2011;1(1):a006841. doi:10.1101/cshperspect.a006841

⁵ World Health Organization, "H5N1 Avian Influenza: Timeline of Major Events," 25 Jan. 2012 <https://www.who.int/influenza/human_animal_interface/H5N1_avian_influenza_update.pdf>.

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Sporadic Cases of Asian H5N1 Have Occurred in People," 18 Mar. 2015 <<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/h5n1-people.htm>>.

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "CDC Unveils Redesigned Healthy Pets Healthy People Website," 2 Oct. 2015 <<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2015/p1002-healthy-pets.html>>.

⁸ Patrick Greenfield, "Ban Wildlife Markets to Avert Pandemics, Says UN Biodiversity Chief," *The Guardian*, 6 Apr. 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/06/ban-live-animal-markets-pandemics-un-biodiversity-chief-age-of-extinction>>.

⁹ Joseph Guzman, "Fauci: It's Mind-Boggling That China's Wet Markets Are Still Operating During Coronavirus Pandemic," *The Hill*, 3 Apr. 2020 <<https://thehill.com/changing-america/well-being/prevention-cures/491025-fauci-mind-boggling-that-chinas-wet-markets>>.

¹⁰ Congress of the United States.

¹¹ Jane Dalton, "Coronavirus: 'Exotic' Skins in Shoe and Handbag Fashion Stores Fuel Risk of Further Epidemics, Say Experts," *The Independent*, 11 Apr. 2020 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-wildlife-trade-fashion-shoes-boots-handbag-python-stingray-a9460811.html>>.

¹² Col. Phillip Chandler (then commanding officer of MCMWTC), e-mail to PETA, 31 May 2011.

after PETA asked then–Defense Secretary Les Aspin to intervene.¹³ Clearly, there are precedents for troops to learn food procurement survival skills without having to use live animals in abhorrent training drills that risk the spread of pathogens and disease.

There are numerous food procurement survival skills training methods available that don't involve the use of animals. For instance, in the book *Primitive Wilderness Skills, Applied & Advanced*, the authors—having themselves trained U.S. Army Survival Evasion Resistance Escape (SERE) instructors—explain how to obtain food in nature.¹⁴ In addition, Gretchen Cordy, a former Air Force survival instructor who appeared on the CBS show *Survivor*, hosts an instructional wilderness survival video series titled *Prepared to Survive*.¹⁵ SERE specialists are already using virtual reality to prepare Air Force pilots for worst-case scenarios,¹⁶ and interactive video games that have food procurement components are now on the market. Furthermore, as the *Daily Mail* notes, "There are also vegan options too with the jungle being rich in fruit and other lush, edible vegetation."¹⁷

For the sake of our troops, public health, and animals, we urge you to immediately ban the use of live animals in Cobra Gold and instead use more effective and ethical non-animal training methods.

May we please hear from you? You can contact me via telephone at 757-962-8325 or via e-mail at ShalinG@peta.org. We look forward to your response concerning this important matter. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,



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¹³ Brent Israelsen, "Animals Live Through Survival Course," *Deseret News*, 20 Mar. 1993
<<https://www.deseret.com/1993/3/20/19037988/animals-live-through-survival-course>>.

¹⁴ McPherson, John and Geri McPherson. *Primitive Wilderness Skills, Applied & Advanced*. Prairie Wolf; Reissue Edition, 2001. More information about this book is available on Amazon.com at <<https://www.amazon.com/Primitive-Wilderness-Skills-Applied-Advanced/dp/0967877784>>.

¹⁵ *Prepared to Survive*. Performances by Gretchen Cordy, Doug Ritter, Buck Tilton, and Rich Johnson. LifeView Outdoors, 2005. More information about this video series is available on Amazon.com at <https://www.amazon.com/Prepared-Survive-Gretchen-Cordy/dp/B000AOVQZ4/ref=dp_return_1?ie=UTF8&n=2625373011&s=movies-tv&sa-no-redirect=1&pldnSite=1>.

¹⁶ U.S. Air Force 2nd Bomb Wing, "SERE Specialists Use VR to Prep Pilots for Worst-Case Scenario," *Military.com*, 14 Mar. 2019, <<https://www.military.com/video/sere-specialists-use-vr-prep-pilots-worst-case-scenario>>.

¹⁷ James Gordon, "Welcome to the Jungle: US Marines Drink the Blood of Beheaded Cobras and Chomp on Tarantulas and Scorpions as They Learn Survival Skills During Wargame Exercises in Thailand," *Daily Mail*, 1 Mar. 2020
<<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8063555/US-Marines-war-games-exercise-teaches-survive-Thai-jungle.html>>.