Although poultry populations can be culled to stop the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza, researchers emphasize that wild birds should not be harmed to mitigate outbreaks. Killing wild birds to prevent further infections would not work because of the huge size and vast ranges of their populations, says Lina Awada, a veterinary epidemiologist at the World Organisation for Animal Health. It could even make the situation worse, because it would disrupt wild-bird movements and behaviours, helping the virus to spread further, she says.

"The same way we shouldn't be shooting bats because of coronavirus, the solution to this is not trying to kill wild birds," Wille says.

Researchers say that what is needed is a holistic approach that considers how avian influenza spreads through wild birds, poultry and people. Collaboration between public-health researchers and animal-health groups is vital for picking up spillover events into people. "If we control this in poultry, we control this in humans, and it's likely that we control this in wild birds, as well," Wille says.

COVID DELAYS ARE FRUSTRATING PLANS TO SAVE BIODIVERSITY

China's pandemic restrictions could defer meeting to finalize global agreement to arrest species extinction.

By Smriti Mallapaty

Researchers are increasingly concerned that the world is running two years behind schedule in finalizing a new global framework on biodiversity conservation. They say that the delay to the agreement, which aims to halt the alarming rate of species extinctions and protect vulnerable ecosystems, has consequences for countries' abilities to meet ambitious targets to protect biodiversity over the next decade.

Representatives of almost 200 member states of the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) were set to meet in Kunming, China, in October 2020, to finalize a draft agreement. The agreement includes 21 conservation targets, such as protecting 30% of the world's land and seas. But the meeting, called the 15th Conference of the Parties, was cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been postponed several times since.

COLLART HERVÉ/SYGMA VIA GETTY

Young caimans captured in Brazil. Illegal hunting is a major threat to biodiversity.

The conference has been tentatively rescheduled for late August or early September, but China — which as the conference president is also the host — hasn't confirmed the date. And now the country's strict COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai and rising cases of the virus in Beijing have put that meeting in doubt, too.

Researchers say the delay in finalizing the agreement is stalling conservation work, especially in countries that rely on funds committed by wealthier nations to achieve the targets. The almost two-year hold-up means that countries will have less time to meet the agreement's 2030 deadline. "We now have eight years to do more, whilst many countries are facing a recession and trying to prioritize economic recovery," says Alice Hughes, a conservation biologist at the University of Hong Kong. "The longer we wait, the more diversity is lost."

A 2019 report estimated that roughly one million species of plants and animals face extinction, many within decades (see go.nature.com/3xofq4g). In the past 2 years alone, the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List has classified more than 100 species as extinct, including the large sloth lemur (*Palaeopropithecus ingens*), the Guam flying fox (*Pteropus tokudae*) and the Yunnan lake newt (*Cynops wolterstorffi*). Sparse monitoring means that the true scale of species and habitat loss is unknown, says Hughes.

On top of that, tropical forests are disappearing fast, especially in Brazil; environmental safeguards have been relaxed in some regions; and researchers have documented escalating poaching of plants, driven by unemployment during the pandemic. "Every year we continue to lose biodiversity at an unprecedented and unacceptable rate, undermining nature and human well-being," says Robert Watson, a retired environmental scientist formerly at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK.

Releasing funds

The importance of a global agreement on biodiversity cannot be overstated, says Aban Marker Kabraji, an adviser to the United Nations on biodiversity and climate change. These agreements spur action — for example, governments might hold off on updating or developing their national strategies until after they are settled. "It is extremely important that these meetings take place in the cycle in which they're planned," says Kabraji.

Global agreements also lead to the release of funds earmarked to help countries to meet their biodiversity goals, for example through the Global Environment Facility, says Hughes. At a preparatory meeting in October 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping committed 1.5 billion yuan (US$223 million) towards a Kunming Biodiversity Fund to support developing countries in protecting their

biodiversity, but details about those funds have yet to be released.

Funding delays will be felt especially in "countries which have the highest levels of biodiversity and the fewest resources to actually conserve it", says Kabraji.

Meeting uncertain

The CBD secretariat in Montreal, Canada, has said that the Kunming conference will take place in the third quarter of 2022, but it is waiting for China to confirm dates. David Ainsworth, information officer for the secretariat, says preparations for the meeting are under way, including plans for how to isolate meeting participants from local residents, similar to the process for the Winter Olympics in Beijing in February. There are provisions for the event to be held in another location if a host has to back out, but Ainsworth says there are no official plans to do that yet.

A decision to relocate the meeting would require China's approval, which it is unlikely to give, say researchers. But sticking to having the meeting in Kunming could delay it further, owing to China's strict lockdowns, which have brought cities to a standstill. The meeting will probably be pushed to after September or even to next year, says Ma Keping, an ecologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences Institute of Botany in Beijing.

Some researchers say that the world should wait for China to host the meeting — whenever that will be — and that its leadership is important for the success of the negotiations. "The Chinese government has worked very hard to prepare such a meeting," says Ma. "It should happen in China."

Others think that it is more important that the meeting happens this year — whether in China or not. Facilities to host such a meeting exist in Rome, Nairobi and Montreal. "Any of these places would be preferable to indefinite further delays," says Hughes.

"A further delay sends a problematic signal that habitat loss and species extinction can somehow wait," says Li Shuo, a policy adviser at Greenpeace China in Beijing.

Regardless of when and where the meeting happens, researchers say what's most important is that the world agrees to ambitious biodiversity goals and delivers on them. The two-year delay has given countries more time to develop the draft framework, but they have yet to agree to many of the terms, or to establish how they will finance and monitor the work. There are "significant disagreements still on just about every aspect of every target", says Anne Larigauderie, executive secretary of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Bonn, Germany. Nations will meet again only once more — in Nairobi in June — before the agreement is expected to be finalized at the summit in Kunming.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been at odds with scientists.

WORRIES OVER DELAY IN REVAMPING MEXICO'S SCIENCE LAW

Researchers fear that a polarizing bill could ruin the chances of overhauling the nation's science system.

By Emiliano Rodríguez Mega

It has been almost a year and a half since Mexico's Congress missed its deadline to approve a bill that would drastically overhaul how science and technology are governed. Worried about the lack of progress since then, researchers fear that political wrangling and a lack of consensus might waste a prime opportunity to boost Mexican science.

A constitutional amendment compelled Congress to pass the legislation by 15 December 2020. But the deadline came and went without lawmakers even discussing the various proposals on the table, or whether to merge them. One proposal that has yet to make its way to Congress, but that was made available for public comment in March, has drawn the ire of some researchers. They say that this bill, developed by the country's science agency, the National Council of Science and Technology (Conacyt), ignores the community's wishes and concentrates decision-making power at Conacyt.

"What they are trying to do is to impose a single vision," says Carlos Arámburo, a neurobiologist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Querétaro. He participated in a series of meetings with Conacyt to express worries about the proposal, but says that the agency did not address many of the community's concerns and suggestions. Conacyt officials did not respond to *Nature*'s queries about criticisms of the proposal.

The wait for a new science law adds to tensions between researchers and Mexico's left-wing president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office in late 2018. His austerity measures and pledges to fight corruption in Mexico have led to debilitating budget cuts for science, as well as accusations of organized crime against scientists. Under his government, scientists have sharply criticized Conacyt for irregular management of funds, unjustified dismissals of early-career researchers from the agency and what they see as disdain for private academic institutions. Conacyt has denied some of these allegations.

Many researchers think that if a bill is passed, it will be Conacyt's version that will win the day. And it has its supporters.

"It seems quite reasonable to me," says Edmundo Gutiérrez Domínguez, a physicist at the National Institute of Astrophysics, Optics and Electronics in Puebla — one of

DANIEL BECERRIL/REUTERS/ALAMY