

BUSHMEAT : IMPORTING DISEASE and CULTURAL DEGRADATION

Smuggled bushmeat poses disease risk to Britain, says report

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A gorilla head highlights the bushmeat trade's toll on wildlife as well as the risk posed by diseases such as SIV or ebola

At least 11,600 tons of illegal bush meat, including monkey, rat, bat, gorilla, camel and elephant, were smuggled into Britain last year, exposing cattle to a range of infectious diseases, including foot and mouth.

The extent of the illegal trade in meat from Africa, Asia and the Middle East is revealed in an internal government report, which says that the problem is far worse than had been thought.

Almost all of the meat, which is bound for street markets and ethnic restaurants, is hidden in passengers' suitcases and goes undetected by airport security.

The food includes snake and antelope meat, frogs' legs, snails, and cows' nostrils, as well as meat from endangered species such as chimpanzees, antelopes and elephants.

Some of it is infected and could cause epidemics, according to the report from the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

It reveals that the number of seizures of such illegal imports has more than doubled from 7,819 in the year to April 2003 to 15,838 for this year, yielding 185 tons of meat. However, that represents less than one per cent of the Government's estimate of the illegal meat trade.

Opponents of the trade have accused the Government of not doing enough to detect illegal meat at ports. They claim that it goes undetected because there are only six meat sniffer dogs in Britain.

Machines, costing £60,000, that can detect meat are available but none has been installed.

Work on assessing the risk to public health from the trade was carried out by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency on behalf of Defra. It found that while low, there was a risk to British livestock from the illegal imports.

It estimates that 580lb of the smuggled meat every year is infected with Classical Swine Fever, and that it was likely to cause an outbreak every three years.

It also estimates that up to 1,245lb of the bushmeat is contaminated with foot and mouth, though it was likely to cause an outbreak only every 65 years.

The report states: "The total amount of illegal meat entering Great Britain each year is estimated on average to be 11,875 tonnes [11,687 tons].

"The top five contributors to the total flow are Eastern Asia, Near and Middle East, Eastern Europe, Southern Africa, and Western Africa."

John Whittingdale, the shadow agriculture minister, said: "Three years on from the world's worst outbreak of foot and mouth, the UK remains woefully unprotected against the threat of human, animal and plant diseases entering this country through the smuggling of illegal meat. While other countries have installed stringent security measures, we have only **six sniffer dogs** guarding all 110 ports of entry to the UK.

"We remain wide open to further risk of imported disease while a simple and low-cost measure is available now which the Government is choosing to ignore."

The meat detection machines can "sniff" meat in luggage at the start of its journey and send information to UK airports in time to seize the smugglers as they try to enter the country. Customs officials say that they have established four new anti-smuggling teams.

Defra has promised that the number of meat detection dogs and handlers will be increased to 10 by next April.

This will still compare poorly with the efforts of other countries. Australia, for example, has recently increased its number of detector dog teams from 33 to 48.

The consumption of bushmeat, which used to be confined to Africa, Asia and South America, is now on the rise in restaurants across Europe, particularly in London and Brussels.

Its import is alarming because of anecdotal evidence that it carries the risk of HIV infection.

According to the Bushmeat Crisis Task Force, a non-governmental organisation that monitors the trade, SIV infection, the primate equivalent of HIV, has now been reported in 26 species of African non-human primates, many of which are hunted and sold as food. Contact with wild meat can also increase the risk of ebola.

The International Fund for Animal Welfare says that the increase in hunting for the bushmeat trade also threatens the livelihood of millions of people living in forest communities who depend on wild meat for food.