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An interview with Dr. Peter Daszak on the COVID-19 pandemic, the Wuhan lab lie and the defense of science—Part 1

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Dr. Peter Daszak is a prominent British zoologist and expert on disease ecology, particularly known for his work on zoonotic diseases. Dr. Daszak was the longtime president of EcoHealth Alliance, a non-profit organization supporting global health and pandemic prevention programs. Having served on committees for the World Health Organization (WHO), the National Academy of Sciences and other scientific bodies, for decades he warned about the dangers of zoonotic spillovers, conducting vital research on emerging infectious diseases, including SARS-CoV-1, MERS, Ebola and SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, EcoHealth Alliance was the only US-based organization researching coronavirus evolution and transmission in China, partnering with critical institutions like the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). Following the emergence of COVID-19, Dr. Daszak became a central target of false accusations that he was somehow involved in engineering the SARS-CoV-2 virus in collaboration with Chinese scientists. These lies, concocted by the far right, were amplified by large sections of the corporate media and political establishment, in what has amounted to a modern-day witch-hunt of principled scientists.

From the start, the Wuhan lab lie has been a malicious and politically motivated effort to deflect blame for the catastrophic mishandling of the pandemic and redirect anger towards China. Dr. Daszak and EcoHealth Alliance were formally debarred by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in May 2024, cutting off all federal funding for five years, based on false allegations of reporting irregularities and failing to properly monitor research. Daszak was fired from EcoHealth in January of this year, and the organization has ended its operations, leaving critical research unfunded and unpublished.

Despite the intense focus on the Wuhan lab conspiracy, the scientific evidence consistently points to a natural origin for SARS-CoV-2, likely stemming from the wildlife trade at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan. Epidemiological and genomic data have consistently associated early cases with the market and placed the common ancestor of the virus within the market. Recent research continues to solidify this understanding. Studies have refuted theories of laboratory manipulation, characterizing alleged genetic similarities as simply happenstance or the pattern of restriction enzyme sites as naturally occurring in related bat coronaviruses.

The attacks on scientists like Daszak and the broader assault on science and public health institutions have only made the world more vulnerable to emerging infectious pathogens, hindering vital research and international collaboration needed for pandemic preparedness. Fundamentally, the true source of the social catastrophe of the pandemic lies with the capitalist system, based on national divisions and the prioritization of profit over social needs.

This is the first part of an extensive three-part interview with Dr. Daszak, which was conducted on May 4, 2025, with the World Socialist Web Site *as part of the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, which was initiated to "break through the cover-up, falsification and misinformation that have been deployed to justify policies responsible for the avoidable deaths of millions since the initial detection of SARS-CoV-2." Part 2 can be read here and Part 3 here. We urge our readers to share this interview as widely as possible.*

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Benjamin Mateus (BM): Good afternoon, Dr. Daszak. I would like to first thank you for speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site*. We have closely monitored the COVID-19 pandemic and extensively covered the Wuhan lab leak conspiracy, especially its political implications.

Before the pandemic, few people were familiar with your name or the important work done by you and your former organization, EcoHealth Alliance. However, since early 2020, you've been at the epicenter of a political storm over the origins of SARS-CoV-2, specifically the lab leak theory—which, despite a lack of evidence, has been increasingly legitimized within the US state apparatus.

Despite the farcical, two-year bipartisan investigation led by Brad Wenstrup, chairman of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, the second Trump administration has now officially endorsed the lab leak theory on government websites. Recently, Trump's appointees—National Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard, NIH Director Jay Bhattacharya and HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—have pledged to pursue this narrative further. They intend to shut down all gain-of-function research and impose strict controls over the scientific community.

It's worth noting that the Office of the Director of National Intelligence had previously placed only low confidence in the lab leak theory—meaning no solid evidence existed—and did not endorse the idea that SARS-CoV-2 was a bioweapon. These latest political moves are aimed at advancing an anti-China foreign policy agenda under the guise of "pandemic accountability."

The consequences for public health and pandemic preparedness are dire.

Just last Friday, *Nature* reported that the NIH plans to cut billions in funding to international laboratories and hospitals, threatening thousands of global health projects and clinical trials on diseases, such as cancer.

With that context, I'd like to begin by asking: What does the debarment and dissolution of EcoHealth Alliance mean for long-term global zoonotic disease surveillance, especially considering the ongoing H5N1 bird flu panzootic?

Peter Daszak (PD): Early in the pandemic, as conspiracy theories began gaining traction in the US, I had the sinking feeling that we were merely treading water. In the face of an era where pandemics are becoming more frequent and more severe, our response lacked urgency and direction. Instead of moving forward, we were being dragged backward—toward the next virus already on its way.

False narratives about a lab leak have derailed real progress. These stories don't just distract; they actively undermine global efforts to prepare for and prevent future pandemics. The research is clear: Dangerous pathogens are spilling over from wildlife into human populations with increasing regularity. It's only a matter of time before one with an even greater impact spreads efficiently from person to person.

The debarment and closure of EcoHealth Alliance is a tragic and deeply ironic outcome. We were one of the few organizations focused on preventing the very crisis the world faced in 2020. To shut us down—and attempt to cancel me and the work we were doing—is a reaction straight out of the Dark Ages. It defies logic.

After more than five years of conspiracy theories, complex webs of misinformation and baseless accusations against researchers, we've created a climate of distrust that weakens our ability to respond to the next pandemic. The next time, we may not have a vaccine as quickly—or the public will to use it.

This isn't just personal. Not just to me or to the people who worked at EcoHealth but to all of us. It's a blow to public health, to science and to our collective future. Like climate change, pandemic preparedness is a crystal-clear issue that's been politicized beyond reason. And just as with climate change, we can address it—but only if we stop letting politics get in the way.

BM: You've been an ecologist and president of EcoHealth Alliance for over two decades, yet much of the public remains unfamiliar with the vital work you've led—often viewing it through the lens of political controversy, especially from the far right. Recently, EcoHealth, a highly respected nonprofit with more than 50 years of history, was forced to shut down.

Can you speak to the unique role EcoHealth played in global disease investigation and the scope of its international collaborations? What was the organization's founding mission, and how did that evolve over time? Finally, what key accomplishments would you highlight from EcoHealth's decades of work in pandemic preparedness and zoonotic disease surveillance?

PD: I think it was a unique organization. Most health organizations come out of the understanding that people get sick, and we need to help them. So, you have organizations that do eye surgeries in countries that can't afford it. You have organizations that promote contraception or vaccines coming out of a very human focus. Where the EcoHealth Alliance came from was from the wildlife focus. It started off over 50 years ago as the US branch of the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust. It was part of the international branches; one in Canada and one in the US.

It was Gerald Durrell, the conservationist and writer, who set up the Jersey Zoo (on the island of Jersey in the English Channel) that concentrated on rare and endangered species. He raised funds in the US and needed an organization to manage those funds from here. Those funds were used to do conservation work around the world.

Now, what happened in the 1990s and the early 2000s was the recognition that the things that were affecting conservation priorities that were causing species extinctions, things like land use change and the wildlife trade and deforestation, were also driving health issues directly. When you cut down a forest and burn it, you get respiratory diseases. When you build a road into the forest and start logging, people begin to get sick from new diseases like yellow fever in Brazil or completely new unknown diseases like HIV, monkeypox and others.

A group of us recognized that this health linkage with wildlife conservation was important. We published a paper in *Science* in 2000 where we noted there were very similar parallel processes driving emerging diseases in humans with emerging diseases that affect wildlife and livestock. These things are interconnected. Work by a group in the UK in Scotland showed that about 75 percent of emerging diseases are zoonotic and come mainly from wildlife.

We followed this with extensive work to find out where specifically they come from. How can we get there and stop it? And we proceeded to build a program around these new perspectives. Now that we know what's driving emerging diseases, we know where they're likely to emerge, why don't we get out there and try and stop them? That was the strategy. And that still is the most effective way to deal with future pandemics. However, this also requires doing basic science in the laboratory. We wanted to understand how these pathogens were evolving to make them a threat.

It's like any threat. If we know that there's an earthquake zone, you don't build a high-rise without building special foundations and taking appropriate measures to protect those that live in these zones. Our strategy was to use these same approaches to pandemics. If we know where they're coming from, if we know the types of activities that drive them, such as wildlife trade, for example, if we understand the types of wildlife and the pathogens that are most likely to emerge, then let's get out there, find out where they are, try and work with local communities and local governments to prevent them.

It's a huge benefit for the local country. And it's a huge benefit for us here in the US, because once a disease emerges and starts to travel in the human population it always logically gravitates to the countries that travel the most. And the US is one of those.

BM: You and Drs. Zhi Zhengli and Linfa Wang established a unique relationship, and it was brought together after the 2002-2004 SARS-CoV-1 global epidemic. You identified the important role bats played in harboring potential pandemic pathogens. It was very new in our understanding of how pandemics erupt. Maybe you can speak briefly about this collaboration and the important discoveries you made. Your group had been warning about spillover risks from coronaviruses. Why do you think these findings failed to translate into actionable policy before 2020?

PD: A very good question.

The real work on bats began with the Ebola virus. There were people trying to find out where Ebola came from. Nobody knew. It was a mystery, and to some extent it still is, although we know it's likely to be from wildlife. One of the theories was that bats carry the Ebola virus. The reason for that is that a researcher working in a lab infected many different tissues and cells from various species to see which ones could harbor the virus. And African bats seem to be able to harbor such an infection.

Then in the late 1990s Hendra virus emerged in Australia. A completely novel virus. It infected three people, killing two of them. It was highly lethal, but it killed horses, and it killed a famous racehorse and the racehorse owner, who had won the Cheltenham Gold Cup. It may seem quite obscure, but for Australia it was a big story at the time. No one knew where this thing came from. The national lab there called the Australian Animal Health Laboratory (now Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness), a high security animal health lab run by Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), did some incredible work. They set out to hunt down the origin of the outbreak and

found that it came from fruit bats.

Then Nipah virus emerged in Malaysia, and the same person who worked in Australia on the discovery of Hendra, Dr. Hume Field, who's a good colleague of mine, also worked in Malaysia with the CDC and the Malaysian government. Once more, they found that bats were a reservoir for this virus.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, our notion about bats in the virology world had changed from thinking of them as some obscure animal that flies at night that we don't know much about, to recognizing that they represent a clear and present danger in terms of the viruses they unwittingly harbor and our increasing interactions with them.

When SARS-CoV-1 emerged in 2003, one of the things we started to look at were bats. We knew bats were traded in markets there. Dr. Field then went out to China. I believe Linfa Wang (Duke Global Health Institute in Singapore) was part of that group and found that there were bats in the markets where the first human cases of SARS were identified. Some of these bats had antibodies to SARS, but so did other animals in the market and they weren't certain initially about the animal reservoir. Later they identified civets and ferret-badgers and other species which seemed to be the likely source in the market.

A couple of years later, in 2004, I got a call from Linfa saying that they wanted to look for viruses in bats in China. This started as a collaboration with Australia, the US and China. What we found was clear evidence that bats carry SARS-related coronaviruses. These viruses appeared to be the most closely related pathogens to the virus that caused the SARS-CoV-1 outbreak.

The two key researchers that we were collaborating with were Linfa Wang and Shi Zhengli, a leading virologist at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). I've had significant collaborations with both. I've gotten to know Linfa and Shi Zhengli quite well. It was an excellent collaboration. Three different continents, three countries with a shared goal of finding out where these viruses come from. And we were successful. It was the source of SARS, and this was a major discovery at the time.

BM: This type of work isn't easy. Maybe you can elaborate on the field and laboratory work and resources needed? You spent more than a decade working together. This required significant cooperation with the regulatory authorities in the respective countries. Every aspect of the research needs documenting, and these must be shared at numerous levels. All this is hardly something that can be kept hidden and certainly very difficult to cover up given the number of people and levels of oversight. The extensive literature on the topic over these intervening years also meant that discovery proceeded straight to publication and further discussions within the scientific community on the implication of these discoveries and what must be the next question to address. It was all laid out in the open.

PD: Exactly. Those are important points to appreciate in this climate of innuendos and conspiracies. For people to accuse us of a cover-up, it is ridiculous given the level of information we had made public through dozens of papers, talks and press interviews.

Look, this was a collaboration of almost 15 years before the COVID-19 pandemic. Every aspect of this work is difficult. You have numerous scientists, who are working with their respective regulatory boards in three different time zones. You are constantly on early morning or late-night calls. The field work and laboratory work are arduous and exhausting, as you pointed out. Meanwhile, you are communicating with your counterparts and need translators to communicate complicated scientific jargon. My Mandarin is terrible. I speak about 10 words.

What your readers should know is that China has been changing rapidly. Even during the time that I've been working with collaborators in China, visiting China, it has changed rapidly. But the cultural differences run deep. There is 5,000 years of culture or more there. For example, when you visit with colleagues in China, there are very specific protocols around eating and drinking—you are not supposed to make mistakes or fail to show respect for the person who is hosting the meal. These sorts of things interfere with the collaboration.

Meanwhile the science side of it—the field work—is hard. There are millions of bats in some of the largest caves that run for miles. And there are thousands if not many more of these caves that are spread across hundreds of thousands of square miles in Southeast Asia in remote and geographically difficult places to reach. These areas are hot and humid, and the people there don't really understand why you're there. They don't appreciate some folks turning up and putting on white suits and going into a bat cave that's on their land. There's a lot of sensitivity around that.

Then you've got the political climate around the international perspective. Even though you hear a lot about US-China relationships, these matters inevitably are complex and sensitive. But in science, we're collaborators. It's straightforward. But when you are trying to do this internationally, getting samples to move across borders is not straightforward and in some cases just not possible because of political issues.

And then the actual science itself, it's sophisticated and technically difficult. You're dealing with samples and tissues that could potentially have a pathogen in them. You've got to be careful that you use the right biosafety to make sure that nobody gets infected, and no one's hurt. It costs a lot. It is difficult. It's time-consuming.

But, in the end, it's fascinating. And I think that is the other side of this that people have forgotten—the human side of it. The scientific discovery is fascinating and joyful. It is a deep part of our shared culture and part of our own human psyche to discover the natural world. That's what we discover when we go out there looking for new pathogens in different species.

BM: Going back to the question, why do you think these discoveries that you and your collaborators made in this period failed to translate into any actionable policy before 2020?

And, I'd like to add, you were so vocal on getting the authorities to pay attention to the impact of emerging pandemic, the last thing you really would want to do is cover up your work and the discoveries you were making. It just never made any sense except to say that the entire conspiracy has been premised on the geopolitical opportunity to blame China for the pandemic and divert attention from the public health debacle that has led to the death of tens of millions of people.

PD: Yes, my conscience on this is clear. We tried very hard to get the word out.

People don't understand that scientists operate on a reverse business model even though they want to do interesting research on important issues and make a difference in the world. Their work needs to be published, and this means also the need to raise funds to be able to do that work. We aren't a business that buys and sells and advertises, but we are constrained by our ability to sell ideas—the value of these ideas—about our research and how it impacts the public, public health and conservation, as well as to conserve species. These require access to very limited funds for which we compete.

You need to publish those findings and raise money. You're constantly trying to raise funds to do the work. You're constantly trying to show the impact of the work that you're doing and get the word out to the public. You're doing this work for the public, for public health, or for conservation—to conserve species.

After 2004 and up to the present, we tried very hard to warn authorities about the dangers from these pathogens and their emergence through our connection with the wildlife, the wildlife trade and their introduction in dense populations like in Wuhan. The key reason why we need to do this work is that these viruses are going to emerge again. That is the

fundamental message throughout all our research is that we repeatedly found evidence that these things can infect human cells, can infect humanized mice, are able to cause some sickness in humanized mice, and are in bats all around China and other countries bordering the country—across most of Southeast Asia—where people are in intimate contact with bats and the viruses they harbor.

We are fundamentally connected to that community through travel and trade, which is continuing, and the tariffs aren't going to stop this. Our globalized world will drive the emergence of these diseases. We shouted this loudly from the rafters to anyone who was willing to listen. And I think what went wrong is that the stakeholders—politicians and the financial community—weren't interested.

Preemptive protection is always harder. For instance, think about your car maintenance. If you do it well, nothing happens to it. But you still must pay for it. The essence of what we do in public health is to say, "We've got to prevent these problems because if we wait for them to happen, the cost is way too expensive. Let's spend the money now to prevent it and if we prevent it successfully, nothing horrible happens to people." But the public doesn't see these successes.

From a public relations perspective, the media may be interested in stories about bats and scary viruses. But the work of science is meticulous. It takes a long time, and each step is incremental and sometimes that doesn't translate into the public's interest, and these aren't brought out into general discussion within the media or part of the education curriculum in schools.

The other factor is that the wildlife trade is deeply tied to people's livelihoods across the globe. Whole lifestyles and cultures are tied to the wildlife trade. In China, the wildlife farming industry generates about US$75 billion annually and employs somewhere around 14 million people. Now, once the 2003 SARS outbreak in Fujian and Guangdong occurred, the authorities shut the big markets where the first cases appeared. But then they opened them again because the demand for that food was so high.

Same thing happened during the initial outbreak with COVID-19. China took an unprecedented step which I found remarkable. On February 24, 2020, they announced that they were going to close all wildlife farms and markets in China. I didn't think it was possible; I thought there was no way they'd go through with it. But we do know they closed a lot of farms. We know that they issued directions on how to safely cull animals and dispose of the carcasses. We know they gave compensation to farmers, which is what you would need to do, and trained them to do other activities and other industries.

I don't know what the current situation is, but if we are serious about dealing with pandemics, we are going to need to listen to scientists and heed their warnings. We must confront the fundamental risk like our globalized network of trade and travel, unprecedented deforestation, and not just the legal and illegal wildlife trade, if we're going to make any headway on this question. Closing labs and stopping research is going to have the opposite effect.

One last point on this. There was a horrible racist backlash against Chinese people early on in the pandemic, with people commenting on things like eating bat soups and this general idea that people in China do weird things, and it's disgusting. We are all involved in the wildlife trade. We eat fish; we eat lobster; we eat crab. People hunt deer in the US and eat it. This is eating and consuming wildlife, and there are disease risks associated with all those things.

Additionally, one of the big drivers of the industrialization of the wildlife farms in China was the international fur trade for fashion, which is estimated at $40 billion annually, and that's a predominantly European and North American industry for the wealthy around the world. The only reason is that they flaunt their wealth to show they can afford these rare items. I don't know why we still do this. It's a huge risk for our own health because those fur farms are the ones that stayed open in China because the export industry was so lucrative. And that is the export industry to us; we are the consumers that are driving this.

It is not only damaging for health but also for conservation. We are all part of this, and we can do something to stop it.

Read Part 2 of this interview here and Part 3 here.