

Peter Daszak and the scientific verdict on the origins of COVID-19

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In 2003, Dr. Peter Daszak appeared on “60 Minutes” and described what he feared most was a zoonotic pathogen possibly harbored in bats in the caves of southern China, crossing into the human population through the wildlife trade and igniting a global pandemic. In that report, Daszak told Scott Pelley, “What worries me the most is that we are going to miss the next emerging disease, that we’re suddenly going to find a SARS virus that moves from one part of the planet to another, wiping out people as it moves along.” He had spent his career building the scientific infrastructure to prevent exactly that. Then, nearly two decades later when that moment arrived, the United States government had the audacity to accuse him of causing it.

The dominant narrative surrounding the origins of COVID-19 has been manufactured by right-wing political forces and endlessly amplified by the corporate media, popular books, and reactionary politicians. What Americans have been forced fed is a politically engineered fiction centered on Chinese culpability, the Wuhan “lab leak,” and a supposed cover-up orchestrated by figures like Daszak and Dr. Anthony Fauci. Under the second Trump administration, this conspiracy theory has been fully codified into official state doctrine. The White House replaced its evidence-based public health website with one explicitly promoting the lab-leak narrative, declaring it the “true origin of COVID-19” without offering a single shred of direct scientific evidence.

Furthermore, this assault on public health and objective truth has been institutionalized at the highest levels under Trump’s appointees, particularly Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Jay Bhattacharya—a co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration who has publicly claimed a lab origin is “certain.” The depth of that institutionalization was on full display recently when on March 20, 2026—the same day a new *Cell* study delivered the most technically rigorous genomic refutation of the lab-leak theory yet—Bhattacharya inaugurated the NIH’s new “Scientific Freedom” lecture series with a conversation featuring Matthew Ridley, a British hereditary peer and former journalist with no scientific credentials, promoting his book *Viral*, which has been widely condemned by working virologists and evolutionary biologists for its factual inaccuracies and misrepresentation of the scientific literature on COVID origins.

The choice of Ridley is not incidental and certainly calculated. By hosting a lab-leak advocate inside the NIH’s own Masur Auditorium, under the banner of “Scientific Freedom,” Bhattacharya has used the institutional prestige of the world’s largest biomedical research funder to grant a discredited narrative the appearance of scientific legitimacy. The label “Scientific Freedom” is itself a gross misrepresentation—implying that the overwhelming peer-reviewed consensus for natural origin is a form of suppression rather than the product of years of independent, multi-disciplinary scientific investigation. It is beyond shameful that the director of the NIH has spent taxpayer dollars to platform, in the halls of American science, a conspiracy theory the science published today directly demolishes.

The tragic irony is that a coherent and overwhelming body of peer-reviewed scientific evidence sharply contradicts the lab-leak narrative, pointing conclusively to a natural zoonotic spillover at the Huanan Seafood Market—precisely the kind of event Daszak spent his career working to predict and prevent. That body of evidence has grown substantially in the past year. Three major peer-reviewed studies—Pekar et al. in *Cell* in May 2025, the WHO SAGO report submitted in June 2025, and Havens et al. in *Cell* this month—have each added a distinct and decisive layer of proof. Notably, the peer-reviewed Havens study arrived nine months after SAGO had already closed its deliberations, confirming that the science has continued to accumulate independently of any single institutional assessment. Taken together, they represent an unbroken, multi-disciplinary scientific consensus. Meanwhile, the political and media witch-hunt has effectively destroyed Daszak’s career and dismantled the global surveillance networks he built—the very infrastructure the new science confirms was essential.

In May 2025, the scientific journal *Cell* published “The Recency and Geographical Origins of the Bat Viruses Ancestral to SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2,” authored by an international team led by Jonathan E. Pekar and including Dr. Michael Worobey and Dr. Joel O. Wertheim. The study systematically dismantles key pseudo-scientific pillars of the lab-leak conspiracy theory.

The recency and geography of bat ancestors. A central argument of lab-leak proponents is the claim of “missing decades” in the virus’s evolutionary timeline—that because the closest known bat virus relatives appeared to diverge from SARS-CoV-2 decades ago, the virus must have been engineered or incubated in a laboratory. Pekar et al. shattered this assertion. By performing recombination-aware evolutionary analyses—breaking genomes down into non-recombinant regions (NRRs)—the researchers demonstrated that both SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2 descend from bat sarbecoviruses whose closest inferred ancestors circulated just years before emerging in humans. Specifically, the closest inferred ancestor of SARS-CoV-1 circulated just one to two years before its emergence, while the closest inferred ancestor of SARS-CoV-2 circulated between five and seven years before the pandemic began—well within the range of natural viral evolution, not decades of laboratory incubation. These ancestors circulated within *Rhinolophus* (horseshoe) bat populations in western China and northern Laos.

Movement, spillovers, and the role of the wildlife trade. The study’s phylogeographic reconstruction revealed a striking anomaly. Bat sarbecoviruses generally spread at diffusion rates matching the natural dispersal of their hosts—horseshoe bats that forage within a two- to three-kilometer radius of their roosts. Yet the viral lineages leading to both SARS-CoV-1 in Guangzhou and SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan moved at exceptional velocities, emerging in human populations over a thousand kilometers from where their closest bat virus ancestors circulated. The authors concluded it is highly improbable that these lineages reached Guangdong and Hubei provinces through the natural dispersal of bat

reservoirs alone. This geographic leap points to the massive wild and farmed animal trade—utilizing intermediate hosts such as palm civets and raccoon dogs—as the most likely mechanism transporting the pathogen from rural bat caves to dense urban centers, and ultimately to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market.

This month, a second major study in *Cell* delivered the most technically direct refutation of the lab-leak theory yet. “Dynamics of Natural Selection Preceding Human Viral Epidemics and Pandemics,” led by Jennifer L. Havens, Sergei L. Kosakovsky Pond, and Joel O. Wertheim—alongside Dr. Worobey and Dr. Kristian G. Andersen—utilized a recombination-aware, genome-wide selection analysis (the RELAX framework) to map the selective pressures on viruses across three phases: in their animal reservoirs, along the “stem branches” immediately preceding zoonotic emergence, and during early sustained human transmission.

By analyzing natural spillovers including the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, the West African Ebola epidemic, Marburg virus, and the 2022 mpox outbreak, the scientists established a consistent pattern: The intensity of natural selection on stem branches leading up to human emergence was indistinguishable from that within animal reservoirs. Viruses show detectable changes in selection only after sustained human-to-human transmission begins—not before.

The 1977 H1N1 pandemic and signatures of laboratory passage. To establish what laboratory manipulation actually looks like in a viral genome, the study provided a rigorous “positive control”: the 1977 H1N1 influenza pandemic, the “Russian flu.” This virus was a bizarre anomaly—virtually identical to strains from the early 1950s, lacking a quarter-century of expected evolutionary change, and long suspected to be the product of a laboratory accident or vaccine trial escape. When Havens et al. applied their framework to 1977 H1N1, the results were unambiguous: the stem branch preceding its re-emergence showed a significant relaxation of natural selection, consistent with a virus frozen in a lab and passed in an artificial environment, in the absence of normal host immune constraints. The researchers confirmed this signature across multiple known lab-passaged viruses—the WSN33 influenza strain, attenuated measles and mumps vaccine strains, MHV cell-culture passage, and a ferret-passaged H5N1 gain-of-function strain. All exhibited the same tell-tale unnatural evolutionary signatures.

Implications for SARS-CoV-2. SARS-CoV-2 showed none of these signatures. The evolution on its stem branch was indistinguishable from the natural evolution of related coronaviruses spreading from bat to bat, perfectly matching the evolutionary profile of other natural zoonotic events. As Wertheim stated directly: “From an evolutionary perspective, we find no evidence that SARS-CoV-2 was shaped by selection in a laboratory or prolonged evolution in an intermediate host prior to its emergence.” The framework is clear: If a virus had been extensively passed in a laboratory, the evolutionary record would show it. In SARS-CoV-2, that signal is entirely absent.

These findings are corroborated and extended by the WHO’s Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO), which submitted its comprehensive 3.5-year independent assessment to the WHO Director-General in June 2025. Twenty-three of the original 27 SAGO members subsequently published a summary of their findings in *Nature* earlier this year, titled, “COVID’s Origins: What We Do and Don’t Know.”

Distinct from the individual research by Pekar and Wertheim, the SAGO report represents a WHO-coordinated global synthesis of all available data, formally incorporating the spatial and genomic analyses of Worobey and Pekar from 2022, Pekar’s 2025 phylogeographic work, a preprint by Havens and colleagues on natural selection dynamics submitted ahead of its eventual publication, and the extensive metagenomic evidence from the Huanan market—including the landmark work of Dr. Florence Débarre and

colleagues, who identified raccoon dogs, Malayan porcupines, and hoary bamboo rats co-occurring with SARS-CoV-2 RNA in environmental samples taken from the market in early 2020. The full peer-reviewed publication of the Havens study in *Cell* arrived in March 2026—nine months after SAGO had submitted its report—as independent, subsequent confirmation that the science continued to accumulate even after the WHO’s own advisory group had closed its deliberations.

On the central question, the SAGO scientists concluded that most of the peer-reviewed scientific evidence supports the hypothesis that SARS-CoV-2 has a zoonotic origin—that it came from an animal, not a lab—and that the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market had a significant role in the early transmission and initial spread of the virus.

On the question of deliberate laboratory manipulation—hypothesis four in the SAGO framework—the scientists were unequivocal: they found no evidence to suggest that SARS-CoV-2 resulting from experimental manipulation was a more likely scenario than it emerging from naturally occurring mutations or recombination events. On the separate question of an accidental lab leak—hypothesis three—the report held that the hypothesis could neither be confirmed nor ruled out, citing China’s failure to release additional laboratory records.

However, this position requires examination, because the framing of Chinese reticence as a simple transparency failure obscures a more complicated political reality.

China’s conduct before and at the outset of the pandemic was not that of a government concealing a laboratory accident. Chinese scientists sequenced SARS-CoV-2 and shared the genome with the world within weeks of the outbreak—the foundational act that made every subsequent vaccine and drug treatment possible. For fifteen years prior to the pandemic, Chinese researchers collaborated openly with EcoHealth Alliance and international partners on exactly the bat coronavirus surveillance work that the new studies vindicate. China notified the WHO, declared a public health emergency, and—despite an already poisonous political climate—allowed the WHO joint mission into Wuhan in early 2021, with Daszak himself among its members. The WHO gained access and SAGO conducted its assessment.

What China declined to do was hand over additional biosafety records and staff health data to an international body operating in a political environment in which those same records were being sought not for science but as instruments of geopolitical prosecution—to justify sanctions, economic decoupling, and military buildup explicitly demanded by the Heritage Foundation and codified into US government policy. Under those conditions, China’s decision to limit further cooperation is comprehensible as a political response to a political assault. SAGO’s insistence that the accidental lab leak hypothesis remains formally open is a dereliction of scientific principle: It provides a cover of legitimacy for a conspiracy theory the available science has not sustained, subordinating scientific verdict to the institutional requirement of formal neutrality.

Every available scientific measure already points overwhelmingly away from any laboratory origin. The report is silent, moreover, on the transparency failures of the United States, including the White House propaganda website, the Heritage Foundation blueprint, the show trial that destroyed Daszak, the defunding of EcoHealth on grounds the same agency had repeatedly found baseless. None of that registers as a failure of transparency in the SAGO framework. The SAGO scientists’ claim of neutrality is refuted by their own actions, as they are pressing Beijing on one hand while extending institutional deference to Washington on the other.

Still, what the report does state plainly is decisive. “Most of the scientific reviews we assessed support the zoonotic-origins hypothesis and find no conclusive evidence for a lab leak.” And on the intelligence assessments sustaining the lab-leak narrative, the scientists were unusually blunt: those reports deliver their conclusions “seemingly on the basis of

political rather than scientific arguments.”

It is the SAGO report’s treatment of the DEFUSE grant proposal that most directly addresses Daszak’s persecution. DEFUSE—a 2018 grant proposal submitted to DARPA by EcoHealth Alliance in collaboration with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Wuhan Institute of Virology—was seized upon by the congressional witch-hunters, the Heritage Foundation and the corporate media as the smoking gun of Daszak’s alleged culpability. The proposal was deliberately misrepresented as evidence that EcoHealth had engineered or enabled the creation of SARS-CoV-2. This misrepresentation formed the central charge used to defund EcoHealth Alliance, debar Daszak from federal research, and ultimately end his career. What the accusers consistently omitted is that DEFUSE was not a bioweapons program or a dangerous gain-of-function experiment. It was a pandemic prevention proposal—designed to vaccinate bat populations to reduce their coronavirus load and lower the risk of exactly the kind of spillover that Daszak had spent two decades warning about. The SAGO scientists demolished the conspiracy on three grounds:

- The project was never funded or executed. The \$14.2 million application was rejected by DARPA, and the proposed experiments were never carried out.
- The proposed technology could not cause an outbreak. The proposal aimed to vaccinate bats using recombinant proteins or subunit antigens incapable of replicating or spreading—there was never any intention to use live, spreading coronavirus-derived vaccine vectors.
- It is scientifically impossible for SARS-CoV-2 to have originated from this proposal. The genome elements discussed in the grant do not belong to the same viral clade as SARS-CoV-2.

The inversion is deliberately cruel. Daszak was destroyed using a pandemic prevention proposal as evidence that he caused a pandemic. The SAGO report brings a measure of institutional justice to this fraud, formally establishing that DEFUSE was what Daszak always said it was, a scientific effort to protect humanity from the very threat that materialized.

Independent scientific investigations across multiple disciplines—phylogenetics, phylogeography, selection dynamics, epidemiology, and environmental metagenomics—conducted between 2022 and March 2026, all converge on the same conclusion: the COVID-19 pandemic began as a natural spillover driven by the wildlife trade, completely devoid of laboratory manipulation.

Consider what this body of evidence represents in evidentiary terms. On one side stands a years-long, multi-disciplinary, peer-reviewed scientific record: phylogenetic analyses, phylogeographic reconstructions, genome-wide selection studies, environmental metagenomics, and epidemiological mapping, produced independently by dozens of scientists across multiple institutions and countries, all reaching the same conclusion.

On the other side stands a set of classified intelligence assessments of “low” to “moderate” confidence, political declarations by congressional committees that had predetermined their verdict, and a conspiracy theory traceable to fascist operative Steve Bannon, accepted without scrutiny and codified into official government policy. In any court of law, the prosecution’s case would have been thrown out before trial.

The evidence for a lab leak has never met the threshold of proof required in science, in law, or in basic logic. Yet it is Peter Daszak—the scientist whose life’s work the evidence vindicates—who lost his career, his organization and his livelihood. The question is not whether the science supports his innocence. It does, overwhelmingly and on every available measure. The question is whether the proceedings that destroyed him bear any resemblance to justice—or whether they were, from the outset, a kangaroo trial in which the verdict preceded the evidence.

The right-wing political establishment has systematically attempted to falsify this scientific record. Its primary target has been the foundational March 2020 *Nature Medicine* paper *The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2*.

As documented in our WWSWS reporting, Dr. Anthony Fauci explicitly encouraged Dr. Kristian Andersen’s team to rigorously examine the genomic data and write a peer-reviewed paper if the evidence supported a lab leak. Andersen’s team initially harbored suspicions about the furin cleavage site and receptor-binding domain; applying the scientific method, those suspicions receded as the group worked through the known diversity of sarbecoviruses, structural biology, and recombination patterns. In a cynical reversal of reality, congressional hearings and media attacks by Republican politicians—building on conspiracy theories pioneered by fascist ideologue Steve Bannon—twisted this normal scientific process into a manufactured “Fauci-ordered cover-up.” The conclusions of *Proximal Origin* have withstood years of rigorous scrutiny; the political witch-hunt has produced no evidence whatsoever of a laboratory leak.

Foremost, the corporate media has played an indispensable role in sustaining this fiction. Even the *New York Times* coverage of the recent *Cell* studies frames the pandemic’s origins as an “ongoing debate,” giving equal rhetorical space to figures like Jay Bhattacharya, who falsely claimed a lab origin is “certain,” and Robert Redfield, who asserted the virus was “engineered.” This *false* balance serves a clear political function. The lab-leak narrative was codified as official US policy through the July 2024 Heritage Foundation “blueprint” demanding that the US “hold the Chinese Communist Party accountable,” subsequently laundered through the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, whose December 2024 unanimous, bipartisan report institutionalized the conspiracy as a national security assessment.

There is an inextricable connection between the networks that violently opposed every measure to mitigate the pandemic, and the promotion of the lab-leak lie. The same political forces that demanded the normalization of mass infection now promote the Wuhan conspiracy smear to redirect blame away from capitalist production while gutting public health systems and pandemic response capacities.

The right-wing political establishment, aided and abetted by the corporate media, has orchestrated a vicious campaign to portray Dr. Daszak as the central figure in a manufactured Wuhan “cover-up.” The suspension of EcoHealth Alliance’s federal grants, the multiple aggressive congressional investigations, and Daszak’s eventual firing as the organization’s president do not represent a legitimate response to scientific misconduct. They are the milestones of a calculated, fascist political witch-hunt. As documented in recent WWSWS interviews and Christian Frei’s documentary film *Blame*, Daszak has endured death threats requiring police protection, extreme public vilification, the loss of his livelihood, and ostracism from sections of the scientific community cowed by the political climate.

The premise of the anti-Daszak witch-hunt is fundamentally destroyed by the latest scientific literature. Because SARS-CoV-2 completely lacks the evolutionary signatures of laboratory passage and perfectly fits a natural-origin, wildlife-trade-mediated model, the entire basis for congressional hearings investigating EcoHealth is a monumental fraud. The virus whose origin is being pinned on Daszak is, by every available genomic and epidemiological measure, the product of the same wildlife trade dynamics his work was specifically designed to monitor and disrupt.

Daszak’s core scientific program—mapping bat coronaviruses in rural habitats, tracing the vast wildlife trade, and identifying spillover hotspots—is precisely what the studies by Pekar, Havens and the WHO now confirm is essential to understanding and preventing zoonotic emergence. Long before these papers were written, it was Daszak who stood before a national television audience and described, with scientific precision, the threat that would become COVID-19. He could not have realized then that when that threat arrived, the politics of the pandemic would charge him with the very catastrophe he had spent his life trying to prevent. A scientist working at the critical interface of ecology, virology, and public health—who had built the global surveillance infrastructure to

detect exactly the kind of bat sarbecovirus spillover that caused COVID-19—was transformed into a scapegoat to deflect attention from the real drivers of pandemics: the global wildlife trade, industrial agriculture, and the systematic destruction of natural habitats by capitalist production. Destroying EcoHealth Alliance’s capacity and dismantling its international surveillance networks is therefore not merely an injustice to one scientist. It is a direct and devastating blow against global pandemic preparedness.

Politically, the “lab leak” narrative is not a legitimate scientific controversy; it is a manufactured, state-aligned propaganda campaign. This fascistic lie has been weaponized by the ruling class to escalate the war drive against China, dismantle public health institutions, and scapegoat principled scientists—among them the very researcher who predicted COVID-19 before it had a name.

In defense of scientific truth and global public health, the exoneration of Dr. Peter Daszak is not merely a matter of personal justice—it is a precondition for rebuilding the international pandemic preparedness consensus that his persecution was designed to destroy. The scientific record assembled since 2022, and growing as recently as this month, vindicates not only his innocence but the entire program of work to which he dedicated his career. Federal funding for EcoHealth Alliance must be restored and the debarment reversed. The state-sponsored lab-leak propaganda on official platforms, including COVID.gov, must be dismantled and replaced with the evidence-based public health infrastructure it supplanted. And the broader surveillance architecture—the global networks for monitoring bat coronaviruses, tracing wildlife trade routes, and identifying spillover hotspots—must be rebuilt and expanded, because the Pekar and Havens studies confirm that the next pandemic progenitor is already circulating in nature, moving through exactly the channels Daszak spent his life mapping. The question is not whether another spillover is coming. It is whether the world will have destroyed the very people and systems capable of detecting it before it arrives.



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