

Speech by Minister Marghem for the opening of the day devoted to the trade in exotic reptiles and amphibians

Biodiversity is the diversity of life on Earth. It is extraordinary:

- in the variety of its species - animals, plants, fungi and bacteria
- in the richness of its ecosystems.

Knowing that this tiny world interacts and lives in harmony with its environment can only evoke wonder.

As Minister for the Environment, I have seen in various cases that this balance is extremely fragile.

However, it is essential to ensure that nature remains healthy and diversified. After all, doesn't it offer a whole host of benefits for us humans? Think of nature's role in pollination and regulating pollutants, or as a source of new drugs. Robust and healthy biodiversity is also a bulwark against the spread of diseases that can be transmitted to humans or animals.

As regards amphibians and reptiles, they have a vital role for the balance of ecosystems. That's why, when I learned of the presence of the salamander-killing fungus *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans* (BSAL) in Belgium, I coordinated and adopted a national action plan to tackle this threat, along with my colleagues from the regions. Together with Germany, I have also addressed my European colleagues on the need to act on international trade, since the amphibian trade is the cause of the spread of the fungus. As you know, it was ultimately through animal health that the EU was able to act, by imposing restrictions on the import of salamanders into its territory.

This case has shown the need to work with a multidisciplinary approach, collaborating with different fields of expertise such as animal health, scientific research and veterinary medicine. The One World One Health / Un monde Une santé perspective takes on its full meaning in this regard.

As Minister for the Environment and Sustainable Development, I am convinced that the well-being of humans is closely linked to the health of the planet. Biodiversity is an integral part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015. More specifically, Goal 15 aims to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification.

However, the fact remains that biodiversity is not doing so well, and that is an understatement. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, IPBES for short, submitted a very alarming assessment this year. The rate of species extinction is unprecedented and is accelerating.

As Minister for the Environment, I cannot stand idly by. I have taken several initiatives to ensure that Belgium becomes aware of and tackles the decline of wild animal populations. The "Sors tes dents" (Get your teeth out) campaign on ivory owned by private individuals, and the financial support granted to Virunga Park in the DRC, are just two examples of actions among many.

The scientific community recognises around 7,900 species of amphibians at the present time. 40% of these are on the verge of extinction. Amphibians are the most endangered vertebrates in the world. For the 11,000 species of reptiles, the situation is slightly less worrying. But it is time to sound the alarm for reptiles too.

Owing to their diversity, colours and even their rarity, reptiles and amphibians are coveted by a growing number of people, who want to own them as pets.

The trade in exotic animals intended to be kept in captivity in homes is a recent phenomenon. The European Union, along with the United States and Japan, is a thriving market for this type of trade.

When it poses problems in terms of conservation, invasive alien species, animal health, human health and even safety, trade in reptiles and amphibians needs government intervention.

As the Minister for the Environment responsible for the import and export of exotic species, I am concerned about the lack of data regarding this trade. We do not know how many amphibians and reptiles there are in Belgian homes. There is very little data on global and intra-Community trade in non-CITES species. We have some estimates, thanks to researchers. But in order to set out effective measures, it is essential that we have reliable data.

The CITES Convention and EU implementing regulations only concern a minority of amphibians and reptiles. It is only recently that EU legislation on animal health has taken into account diseases affecting biodiversity. This stance has been decisive in the fight against BSAL. That is why we can only encourage the European Commission to continue down this path.

When we talk about live animals, we also need to consider their well-being. The way amphibians and reptiles are taken from the wild, transported and end up in homes in our country may raise questions. In this respect, the supply chain plays an essential role in order to avoid any unnecessary suffering. In Belgium, a first positive list of reptile species that can be kept has entered into force this year at the Flemish regional level.

Research into the impact of keeping reptiles and amphibians on human health has not revealed any acute problems other than the presence of salmonella in reptiles. We should not forget that reptiles and amphibians are used in traditional

medicine. Their contribution to the treatment of certain human diseases should also prompt the health sector to undertake to protecting them.

Individuals are confronted with overlapping legislation when it comes to keeping reptiles or amphibians at home: CITES, invasive alien species, environmental permits required for certain types or according to the number of animals, animal welfare, animal health, human health. It can quickly become overwhelming.

That is why I invite my federal and regional colleagues responsible for, respectively, animal health, environmental permits, nature conservation *in Belgium*, and animal welfare, to set up a Task Force. The aim is to get organised, to be able to provide comprehensive and coherent information to the public, by creating a portal on a website, for example. Too much information kills information. A single entry point for all relevant information on reptiles and amphibians should help keeping them, and trading in them, more responsible.

Today's conference highlights the different angles from which the trade in reptiles and amphibians needs to be overhauled: with a multidisciplinary approach, in accordance with the principle of "One World One Health".

I am delighted to see the participation of various representatives from the academic world, scientific research, government, the private sector, animal health and NGOs for animal conservation and welfare.

I wish you an excellent and especially fruitful working day, as you discuss recommendations that might make the reptile and amphibian trade more sustainable.