

Opening speech - Hilde Eggermont, Director INBO

BeOH event “Ecosystems in the balance: supporting future policy and research”, 22/1/2025

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues

Good morning, and welcome to the One Health Conference! It's a pleasure to welcome you to the Herman Teirlinck Building, one of the homes of the INBO, the Flemish Research Institute for Nature and Forest. We are an independent research institute of the Flemish government, dedicated to supporting the development and evaluation of biodiversity policy and also supporting conservation practice through applied research, monitoring and knowledge sharing.

Last year, we launched our new Research Agenda for next 5 yrs – [INBO on the road to 2030](#). You can download it from our website, and you'll notice One Health also embedded in our work. The concept of One Health has come a long way from its origins as a veterinary approach focusing on the interactions between animals and humans. It has since expanded into a comprehensive framework encompassing human, animal, and environmental health. At its core, One Health emphasizes the interconnectedness of these domains—reminding us that a threat to one is a threat to all.

Clearly, the COVID-19 crisis has reminded us that the One Health approach is more relevant than ever. It demonstrated how a single strain of RNA can disrupt entire societies, affecting not only human health but also economies, food systems, and global trade. The pandemic highlighted the intricate connections between wildlife, ecosystems, and human activities, showing us the consequences of neglecting these relationships. It also underscored the urgent need for better collaboration across sectors—science, policy, and society—to prevent and respond to such crises in the future. This conference, touching on these different elements, is clearly very timely and relevant.

As a research institute with a strong focus on biodiversity and ecosystems—and increasingly on the interplay between humans and nature—INBO is proud to contribute to the principles of One Health in several ways:

For example: we study the role of urban green spaces in enhancing biodiversity and improving public health.

Our research also includes monitoring pathogens and diseases in wildlife, such as tapeworms in foxes and muskrats, Macro-parasites in Pallas's squirrels, zoonotic agents in bullfrogs, rabies in bats, and avian influenza in seabirds like the Sandwich tern. These studies not only help protect wildlife but also enhance our understanding of risks to human health.

Another example is – that we investigate pollutants such as PFAS in fish species and their impact on food webs and human consumption. Our research on secondary intoxication in wild carnivores underscores the far-reaching ecological consequences of human activity.

We are also engaged in One health initiatives, such as Belgian Wildlife Disease Society and projects such as MEMO+, which monitors Aedes mosquitoes to address vector-borne diseases. And of course, we are also proud to be a host institute of the Belgian Biodiversity Platform, which has been instrumental in advancing One Health on both research and policy agendas—and continues to do so.

Last but not least, I believe our greatest strength lies in its collaborations. By working with pest control agencies, hunters, conservation organizations, universities, and research networks, we address One Health challenges through collective expertise. Therefore, I strongly believe that the role of the Belgian

One Health Network is critical in fostering such partnerships and ensuring the integration of science, policy, and practice.

So, while the challenges we face are significant, the combined power of science, policy, and action can create a healthier future for all.

Big thanks to the Belgian One Health network, Sciensano and the Belgian Biodiversity Platform for putting their shoulders to the wheel! Wishing you an inspiring and productive conference!