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Sabah boosts wildlife disease surveillance as first line of defence against pandemics

By **Olivia Miwil** January 20, 2026 @ 7:53pm



Sabah Wildlife director Mohd Soffian Abu Bakar (second left) and Conservation Medicine director Tom Hughes (second right) at the memorandum of signing ceremony at Sabah Wildlife department headquarters. - Pic courtesy of Sabah Wildlife Department

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Picture courtesy of Sabah Wildlife Department

KOTA KINABALU: Sabah is strengthening its role in preventing pandemics through enhanced wildlife disease surveillance, following the signing of a renewed memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Sabah Wildlife Department and Conservation Medicine.

The agreement continues a collaboration that began in 2011, focused on monitoring wildlife health and zoonotic diseases — illnesses that can spread from animals to humans — and reflects growing recognition that early detection in wildlife populations is critical to protecting public health.

A key pillar of the collaboration is the Wildlife Health and Genetic Forensic Laboratory, established in partnership with the Danau Girang Field Centre.

The Sabah Wildlife Department said the Biosafety Level 2 laboratory has been certified to international standards since 2013 and, in 2024, achieved ISO 17025 accreditation, an internationally recognised benchmark for laboratory quality.

The accreditation places the Wildlife Health and Genetic Forensic Laboratory among just 11 dedicated wildlife laboratories worldwide to have attained this level of recognition, enabling the laboratory to conduct wildlife disease diagnostics and DNA forensic analysis that can be used in court prosecutions.

This capability supports the department's efforts to combat illegal wildlife trade and poaching, which pose risks to both conservation and human health, it said.

Beyond laboratory diagnostics, the department and Conservation Medicine have worked together to build state capacity in zoonotic disease surveillance and the management of high-consequence animal pathogens.

In 2013, the collaboration led to the establishment of the Sabah Wildlife Health Unit, which conducts physical and diagnostic evaluations of rescued and relocated wildlife across the state, as well as field sampling of free-ranging animals.

Conservation Medicine has also provided regular training to the department's officers and rangers in areas such as wildlife and bushmeat sampling, laboratory and field biosafety, disease testing and outbreak response.

Conservation Medicine director Tom Hughes said the increased contact between humans, livestock and wildlife, which are driven by agricultural expansion, land conversion, hunting, wildlife trade and urban growth, has accelerated the emergence of new diseases.

"Two new diseases have jumped from animals to humans each year over the last century.

"Some are mild, but others, such as Ebola, HIV and Covid-19, have been devastating," he said, adding that scientists estimate that there might be some 1.5 million zoonotic viruses yet to be discovered, with about 700,000 potentially dangerous to humans.

Sabah Wildlife Department director Mohd Soffian Abu Bakar said understanding the diversity and prevalence of zoonotic agents in wildlife species, particularly in areas where people, domestic animals and wildlife interact closely, could enable earlier responses to spillover events and reduce risks to human and livestock health.

He said data generated through the collaboration also supports the department's wildlife management efforts and informs work with other agencies, including the Sabah Health Department, local universities and research partners involved in the RESPOND project funded by the Australian government.