Special Update – COVID-19

6 April 2020

News from the FELID TAG – COVID-19 confirmed in Tiger’s and African Lion’s

We would like to respond to some of the anecdotal reports and concerns that have been circulating on list serves/social media with respect to COVID-19 in non-domestic cats.

“We have just received confirmation from NVSL (National Veterinary Services Laboratory) of a natural infection in a symptomatic tiger in a zoo.” This has since been confirmed as 2 Tigers and 3 African Lions.

To date, this is the only infection confirmed at approved testing laboratories (USA). The transmission was after a keeper was asymptotically infected in the USA. Other felids were also in contact but to date have not shown signs of respiratory infection.

Given this information and the new information about a natural infection, the Felid TAG veterinary advisors feel that it would be prudent to presume that all non-domestic felids may be susceptible to this novel coronavirus and that SARS-CoV-2 poses a risk to non-domestic felids in human care.

There are still many unknowns. We know that people can carry and transmit the virus without even knowing that they are infected. It is considered most probable that SARS-CoV-2 infections that occur in non-domestic felids in zoo settings will be due to spread from humans. We do not know if cats (domestic or non-domestic) can also carry the virus without showing clinical signs. We do not yet know the disease course and spectrum of clinical signs in those cats that do get sick. We do not know if an infected non-domestic cat can transmit the virus to other cats in our care or to humans.

Given these unknowns, we feel that each facility should do a comprehensive risk assessment that includes:

- PPE management and disinfection protocols
  - including for potential fomites such as food bowls, enrichment
- Limiting staff access to felid holding
- Re-assessment of proximity to cats (implementing social distancing - 6’ minimum) including during
  - Training
  - Shifting
  - Feeding
- Screening of staff with access to felids for symptoms
  - Pro-active evaluation of staffing needs should staff become sick so that safe working environments with sufficient trained staff on site can be maintained

In light of the current outbreak of Covid-19 with signs of respiratory disease in lions and tigers, PAAZA recommends:

- That all facilities holding exotic felids increase their biosecurity with immediate effect when handling cats, preparing food or cleaning enclosures.
- Recommendation are overalls, masks, gloves and if available face shields. Biosecurity only works if done probably so clothes masks and overalls need to be washed daily.
PLEASE REMEMBER: PPE supplies and their use should be critically evaluated as these are needed by those on the front lines in the human medical community.

It is also important to remember that non-domestic felids are susceptible to a wide range of other respiratory pathogens. Testing through your resident Vet to ensure correct diagnosis is advised.

We realize that this is unsettling news coming at an unsettling time and that there are more questions than answers. Should you have questions, please send them to the PAAZA Executive office johnw@zoosafrcia.com who will refer them to the relevant professional for advice.

A quote from the Australian National Wildlife Biosecurity Guidelines:

“Everyone who works with, or interacts with, wildlife has a role to play in wildlife biosecurity”