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## Vet college hosts international wildlife disease conference

By *Claudia Wheatley*

How do you vaccinate a 600-pound tiger?

That question and many others were explored in depth at the 65th Annual Wildlife Disease Association Conference, hosted July 31-Aug. 5 by Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine (CVM) Wildlife Health Group and the Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future. The event drew nearly 400 participants from 25 countries, 38 states and nine provinces, bringing them together to exchange ideas, initiate collaborations and advance the field of wildlife research and conservation.

Cornell wildlife disease ecologist Krysten Schuler, who chaired the conference organizing committee, said it also brought together colleagues from different parts of the university. "Across the breadth of Cornell, there are a lot of people who work on wildlife health," said Schuler. "A meeting like this brings those people together with other scientists from around the globe to foster beneficial collaborations."

According to Schuler, the number of Cornell researchers who attended also reflected CVM's expanding role in wildlife health and conservation policy.

A driving motivation for this year's conference theme, "Sustainable Wildlife: Health Matters," was to find ways to prevent, anticipate and address the spread of diseases that pass from wildlife to humans and domesticated animals, and vice versa. Diseases such as AIDS, Ebola and the Zika virus have spread around the world with alarming speed, often catching medical and public-health authorities off guard. Understanding how diseases operate in wildlife not only benefits wild animal species but other animals and systems, including humans, national economies and the environment.

"We always seem to be in a defensive mode rather than working to get ahead of these issues," says Dr. Beth Bunting, Cornell wildlife veterinarian and plenary organizer. "The goal of the conference was to extend the discussion past the focus on wildlife and disease outbreaks by looking at wildlife health in a larger context. How do factors like climate, ecosystem health, human interaction and genetics influence the emergence and spread of disease?"

Plenary speakers discussed the importance of: exploring the environmental factors that trigger epidemics; communicating scientific data to policymakers more effectively, and; updating our thinking about how diseases are passed between species. Prominent scientists from Canada, England, the Netherlands and the U.S. all provided examples of the current wildlife health field and where it should be going.

Conference sessions covered a broad range of topics and included the challenges facing Javan rhinos in Indonesia [there are only 63 left in the world], chronic wasting disease in reindeer in Norway and a fungus that endangers hellbender salamanders in New York state. Other events, including an auction at Ithaca's State Theater, provided opportunities for networking.

In the session Vaccines for Conservation, Wildlife Conservation Society veterinarian Martin Gilbert, who will join the CVM faculty this fall, described how inoculating as few as two Amur

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tigers against canine distemper significantly slowed the decline of the population at Russia's Sikhote Alin Biosphere Reserve. Ecologist Julie Rushmore's research suggests disease outbreaks among chimpanzees could be prevented with fewer resources if chimps that spend the most time socializing with other chimps were targeted for vaccination, as opposed to selecting animals at random. Virologist Michael Jarvis described an immunization method using benign viruses armed with antigens for the targeted pathogen; as the virus spreads through a species population, so does the vaccine.

Sarah Cleaveland, a professor of comparative epidemiology, spoke of a failed effort to vaccinate African wild dogs against rabies. When the species disappeared anyway, critics blamed the program and the vaccine. Both were cleared, but local governments still banned the handling of wild dogs. "Expect controversy when intervening in wildlife populations," warned Cleaveland.

Steven Osofsky, who recently joined the CVM faculty to help spearhead international wildlife health efforts, co-chaired the vaccination session. Osofsky said the presentations were meant to help colleagues think strategically about adding vaccines to their "conservation toolbox" while recognizing "the ethical, the philosophical, the socio-ecological, the political – and of course the practical" ramifications of wildlife vaccination.

"By thinking through all of these different issues," Osofsky said, "we can be more effective conservation practitioners."

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