



The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP
Secretary of State for Defence
Ministry of Defence

18 February 2021

Via e-mail: defencesecretary-group@mod.gov.uk

Dear Minister:

I'm writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and our more than 1.3 million members and supporters regarding the Cobra Gold 2021 joint military exercise, which thousands of military personnel from countries around the world, including the United Kingdom, are scheduled to participate in or observe at various locations throughout Thailand. **The crude killing of animals during this annual drill dishonours troops, risks public health, and endangers species vulnerable to extinction. Based on the information presented below, we urge you to compel Cobra Gold organisers to end the use of live animals in food procurement survival exercises and instead use more effective and ethical animal-free training methods.**

The *Daily Mail* has reported that during Cobra Gold, participants kill chickens with their bare hands, skin and eat live geckos, consume live scorpions and tarantulas, and decapitate cobras and drink their blood.¹ These callous actions – as seen in damning video footage² – put troops at risk of contracting zoonotic diseases that can endanger them and the wider public. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that “an estimated 70 per cent of emerging and re-emerging pathogens” – including those that cause COVID-19, Ebola, Zika, SARS, MERS, smallpox, tuberculosis, and other well-known diseases – originated in animals.³ SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, likely originated in bats and was transmitted to humans via contact with an intermediate animal host.⁴ HIV has been linked to human handling and killing of primates for bushmeat.⁵

In addition to creating a dangerous disease risk, Cobra Gold's training exercises involving animals are both cruel and impractical. While the US Department of Defense (DOD) characterises the inhumane killing and consumption of animals as food procurement training, the practice resembles a barbaric hazing ritual and doesn't deliver any practical survival skills. Rather, as the US Marine Corps has admitted, the main objective is a camaraderie-building activity and a “time honored tradition” that purportedly cements the relationship between US troops and those of the other participating nations⁶ – a goal that could easily be achieved through other means that don't involve causing animals pain, suffering, and death.

Furthermore, Cobra Gold may be placing species at risk who have been identified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the global authority on the conservation status of species and the measures needed to safeguard biodiversity.⁷ Multiple military news sources identify the cobras who are decapitated during the event as king cobras⁸ – one of two species of cobras

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native to Thailand identified as in need of protection by the IUCN.⁹ Specifically, king cobras are listed as “vulnerable”,¹⁰ meaning that they face “a high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future”.¹¹ There is also at least one reference by a US Marine in the aforementioned Cobra Gold video to the consumption of meat from the Komodo dragon,¹² another species listed as vulnerable to extinction.

Many food procurement survival skills training methods don’t involve the use of animals. For instance, in the book *Primitive Wilderness Skills, Applied & Advanced*, the authors – having themselves trained US Army Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) instructors – explain how to obtain food in nature.¹³ In addition, Gretchen Cordy, a former US Air Force survival instructor who appeared on the CBS show *Survivor*, hosts an instructional wilderness survival video series titled *Prepared to Survive*.¹⁴ SERE specialists are already using virtual reality to prepare US Air Force pilots for worst-case scenarios,¹⁵ and interactive video games that have food procurement components are now on the market. Furthermore, as the *Daily Mail* notes, “There are also vegan options ... with the jungle being rich in fruit and other lush, edible vegetation.”¹⁶

PETA US has submitted a petition for rulemaking to the DOD urging it to eliminate the cruel and unnecessary killing of animals during Cobra Gold.¹⁷ Ending the use of animals for survival training is not without precedent. In 2011, the US Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center suspended its use of live animals in its survival training courses following discussions with PETA US.¹⁸ Nearly three decades ago, the US Army’s Dugway Proving Ground also cancelled a survival skills training course using animals after PETA US asked then-US Secretary of Defense Les Aspin to intervene.¹⁹

For the sake of military personnel, public health, and animals, we urge you to follow the lead of these facilities by demanding that Cobra Gold organisers permanently replace the use of live animals in food procurement survival exercises with more effective and ethical animal-free training methods.

May I please hear from you on this urgent matter? You can contact me via e-mail at JuliaB@peta.org.uk. I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,



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¹James Gordon, “Welcome to the Jungle: US Marines Drink the Blood of Beheaded Cobras and Chomp On Tarantulas and Scorpions as They Learn Survival Skills in Wargame Exercises in Thailand,” *Daily Mail*, 2 Mar 2020 <www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8063555/US-Marines-war-games-exercise-teaches-survive-Thai-jungle.html?ITO=applenews>.

²*South China Morning Post*, “Coronavirus: US Marines Learn Jungle Survival in Thailand as Exercises Go Ahead Despite Epidemic,” YouTube, 4 Mar 2020 <www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ3MMseHCnE&feature=youtu.be>.

³World Health Organization, “How WHO Is Working to Track Down the Animal Reservoir of the SARS-CoV-2 Virus,” WHO.int, 6 Nov 2020 <www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/how-who-is-working-to-track-down-the-animal-reservoir-of-the-sars-cov-2-virus>.

⁴World Health Organization, “Origin of SARS-CoV-2,” WHO.int, 26 Mar 2020 <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332197/WHO-2019-nCoV-FAQ-Virus_origin-2020.1-eng.pdf>.

⁵Laura A. Kurpiers, *et al.*, “Bushmeat and Emerging Infectious Diseases: Lessons From Africa,” *Problematic Wildlife*, edited by Francesco M. Angelici, Springer, Cham, 2015, pp. 507–551 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22246-2_24>.

⁶2nd Lt Jonathan Coronel, 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, “Cobra Gold 20: Thai, US Marines Strengthen Bonds for Another Year,” Marines.mil, 9 Mar 2020 <www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/2105579/cobra-gold-20-thai-us-marines-strengthen-bonds-for-another-year/>. See also Marc Castaneda, “Cobra Gold 2017 Officially Kicks Off in Thailand,” Marines.mil, 14 Feb 2017 <www.marforpac.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/1084530/cobra-gold-2017-officially-kicks-off-in-thailand/> and Jean Lotus, “PETA: U.S. Marines Drinking Cobra Blood, Eating Live Wildlife Risk Disease,” UPI.com, 27 Apr 2020 <https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2020/04/27/PETA-US-Marines-drinking-cobra-blood-eating-live-wildlife-risk-disease/2081588015338/>.

⁷International Union for Conservation of Nature, “About,” IUCN.org, accessed on 22 Jan 2021 <www.iucn.org/about> and “IUCN Members,” IUCN.org, accessed on 22 Jan 2021 <www.iucn.org/about/members/iucn-members>.

⁸US Army Pacific Public Affairs Office, “Cobra Gold 20: US, Royal Thai Marines Participate in Jungle Survival Training,” DVIDSHUB.net, 2 Mar 2020 <<https://www.dvidshub.net/image/6121613/cobra-gold-20-us-royal-thai-marines-participate-jungle-survival-training>>; *Stars and Stripes*, “Marines Drink Cobra Blood in Jungle Survival Training at Cobra Gold,” StarsAndStripes.com, 3 Mar 2020 <<https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/marines-drink-cobra-blood-in-jungle-survival-training-at-cobra-gold-1.621046>>; Hope Hodge Seck, “Marines Guzzle Snake Blood Once Again in Gnarliest Training Exercise,” Military.com, 20 Feb 2019 <<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/02/20/marines-guzzle-snake-blood-once-again-gnarliest-training-exercise.html>>; Dylan Gresik, “PETA Demands Marines Stop Drinking Cobra Blood, Eating Live Animals,” *Marine Corps Times*, 5 Mar 2020, <<https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/03/05/peta-demands-marines-stop-drinking-cobra-blood-eating-live-animals/>>; Dave Burke, “Soldiers Tear Snakes Faces Off and Drink Their Blood in Bizarre Ritual,” *Mirror*, 3 Mar 2020 <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/soldiers-tear-snakes-faces-drink-21627043>>; *Business Insider India*, “Wild Photos Show US Marines Munching on Scorpions and Washing Them Down With Snake Blood as They Learn to Survive in the Jungle,” BusinessInsider.in, 3 Mar 2020 <<https://www.businessinsider.in/slideshows/miscellaneous/wild-photos-show-us-marines-munching-on-scorpions-and-washing-them-down-with-snake-blood-as-they-learn-to-survive-in-the-jungle/slidelist/74449353.cms>>.

⁹Thai National Parks, “King Cobra.” ThaiNationalParks.com, accessed on 22 Jan 2021 <www.thainationalparks.com/species/ophiophagus-hannah>.

¹⁰Chelmala Srinivasulu, *et al.*, “King Cobra: *Ophiophagus hannah*,” The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, accessed on 22 Jan 2021 <<https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2012-1.RLTS.T177540A1491874.en>>.

¹¹International Union for Conservation of Nature, “IUCN Definitions – English,” IUCN.org, accessed on 22 Jan 2021 <https://www.iucn.org/downloads/en_iucn_glossary_definitions.pdf>.

¹²See *South China Morning Post*, *supra* note 2.

¹³John and Geri McPherson, *Primitive Wilderness Skills: Applied & Advanced*. Reissue ed., Prairie Wolf, 2002. More information about this book is available on Amazon.com at <<https://www.amazon.com/Primitive-Wilderness-Skills-Applied-Advanced/dp/0967877784>>.

¹⁴*Prepared to Survive*. Performances by Gretchen Cordy, *et al.*, LifeView Outdoors, 2005. More information about this video series is available on Amazon.com at <https://www.amazon.com/Prepared-Survive-Gretchen-Cordy/dp/B000AOVQZ4/ref=dp_return_1?ie=UTF8&n=2625373011&s=movies-tv&sa-no-redirect=1&pldnSite=1>.

¹⁵US Air Force 2nd Bomb Wing, “SERE Specialists Use VR to Prep Pilots for Worst Case Scenario,” Military.com, 14 Mar 2019 <www.military.com/video/sere-specialists-use-vr-prep-pilots-worst-case-scenario>.

¹⁶James Gordon, “Welcome to the Jungle: US Marines Drink the Blood of Beheaded Cobras and Chomp On Tarantulas and Scorpions as They Learn Survival Skills in Wargame Exercises in Thailand,” *Daily Mail*, 2 Mar 2020 <www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8063555/US-Marines-war-games-exercise-teaches-survive-Thai-jungle.html?ITO=applenews>.

¹⁷PETA US, *Petition Before the U.S. Department of Defense Requesting Rulemaking to End the Use of Live Animals in the Annual Cobra Gold Training Program*, 17 Feb 2021 <<https://www.peta.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Cobra-Gold-PFR.pdf>>.

¹⁸Phillip Chandler (then-commanding officer of the US Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center), e-mail to PETA, 31 May 2011.

¹⁹Brent Israelsen, “Animals Live Through Survival Course,” *Deseret News*, 20 Mar 1993 <www.deseret.com/1993/3/20/19037988/animals-live-through-survival-course>.