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By Reynard Loki

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Why Healthy Forests Mean Fewer Pandemics

Teaser: COVID-19, SARS, and Ebola were transmitted to humans from wild animals living in tropical forests. Destroying their habitats is killing us.

Author Bio: [Reynard Loki](#) is a co-founder of the [Observatory](#), where he is the [environment](#) and [animal rights](#) editor. He is also a writing fellow at the [Independent Media Institute](#), where he serves as the editor and chief correspondent for [Earth | Food | Life](#). He previously served as the environment, food, and animal rights editor at AlterNet and as a reporter for Justmeans/3BL Media covering sustainability and corporate social responsibility. He was named one of FilterBuy's Top 50 Health and Environmental Journalists to Follow in 2016. His work has been published by Yes! Magazine, Salon, Truthout, BillMoyers.com, Asia Times, Pressenza, and EcoWatch, among others. He volunteers with [New York City Pigeon Rescue Central](#).

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[Article Body:]

As scientists continue to research the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, one fact has become clear: Deforestation is linked to emerging diseases. When humans destroy forests to create land for human use, whether it's for farming, mining, logging, infrastructure development, or urban expansion, [biodiversity is diminished](#). And as some species go extinct, the ones that remain and even flourish in degraded forest ecosystems—like bats, rats, and birds—are those that are more likely to be hosts for deadly viruses that can jump to humans.

COVID-19, SARS, and Ebola—three infectious diseases that spread across national borders since 2002—share one thing in common: They were transmitted to humans from wild animals living in tropical forests, which are [losing more than 100 trees per second](#) due to rampant, unsustainable deforestation. It is also important to note that cutting down trees negatively impacts not only biodiversity and human health but the climate: Deforestation is responsible for [30 percent of global carbon emissions](#).

Human Activity Creating Reservoirs of Zoonotic Disease

Researchers in England examined over 6,800 ecological communities across six continents and found trends connecting disease outbreaks to regions where biodiversity has been diminished due to human activity. Their [study](#), published in the journal Nature in August 2020, concluded that “global changes in the mode and the intensity of land use are creating expanding hazardous interfaces between people, livestock and wildlife reservoirs of zoonotic disease.”

Some scientists had been sounding this alarm for many years, but it had fallen on deaf ears. “We’ve been warning about this for decades,” said Kate Jones, an ecologist at [University College London](#) who was one of the study’s authors. “Nobody paid any attention.”

Calls to Maintain Healthy Forests

Now is the time for governments to pay attention to the science: To prevent the next pandemic, efforts must be made to rein in rampant deforestation. In an [essay](#) published in the journal Science in July 2020, a group of scientists made the case that reducing both deforestation and the wildlife trade would result in a lower risk of future pandemics. “The clear link between deforestation and virus emergence suggests that a major effort to retain intact forest cover would have a large return on investment even if its only benefit was to reduce virus emergence events,” they write.

Epidemiologist Ibrahima Socé Fall, who heads emergency operations at the [World Health Organization](#) in Geneva, Switzerland, echoes that call. “Sustainable development is crucial,” he [said](#). “If we continue to have this level of deforestation, disorganized mining, and unplanned development, we are going to have more outbreaks.”

Sustainable Development Means Sustainable Livelihoods

Investing in sustainable solutions also means investing in sustainable livelihoods. And so part of reducing deforestation is understanding the needs of rural communities living in or alongside forests, including providing economic incentives to protect the natural ecosystems around them. Giving Indigenous groups legal rights to their land is one way.

In 2009 in India’s Narmada District, for example, villagers were able to secure legal rights to their land and resources, which led to more sustainable land management.

“Being secure in the knowledge that they own their land has meant that these communities have an incentive to protect and improve it for the future,” [writes](#) Edward Davey, the international engagement director of the [Food and Land Use Coalition](#), an initiative to improve the world’s food and land use systems. “Villagers can now invest in actions like leveling, terracing, and irrigating farmland for greater productivity. Some villages are also taking steps to prevent illegal forest clearing and forest fires, by patrolling the forest and brokering community agreements to manage fire.”

In addition, research indicates that improving rural healthcare can lead to a reduction in illegal logging. In one [study](#) conducted by researchers from the United States and Indonesia, villagers in rural Borneo were given discounts on health clinic visits, which offset the medical costs that were often paid for by illegal logging. “The greatest logging reductions were adjacent to the most highly engaged villages,” write the study authors. “Results suggest that this community-derived solution simultaneously improved health care access for local and indigenous communities and sustainably conserved carbon stocks in a protected tropical forest.”

Advocacy Groups Call for Action

In early 2021, several environmental groups and advocacy organizations co-sponsored a [public petition](#)—signed by more than 87,000 people as of July 2023—urging the Biden administration and Congress to curb deforestation in an effort to lower the risk of the next pandemic. Specifically, the petition calls for \$2.5 billion in the next COVID relief bill to “support healthcare and jobs training for indigenous people in every tropical rainforest community, and support impoverished nations to build the healthcare systems to stop outbreaks before they spread.”

The petition’s sponsors, which include Brazilian Rainforest Trust, Endangered Species Coalition, and Mighty Earth, argue that “[e]nding deforestation is our best chance to conserve wildlife, one of the quickest and most cost-effective ways to curb global warming, and absolutely crucial to prevent the next deadly, global pandemic.”

“We are all interconnected,” famed primatologist Jane Goodall [told](#) PBS NewsHour. “And if we don’t get that lesson from this pandemic, then maybe we never will.”