

Roads could help rather than harm the environment, say experts

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Two leading ecologists say a rapid proliferation of roads across the planet is causing irreparable damage to nature, but properly planned roads could actually help the environment.

"Loggers, miners and other road builders are putting roads almost everywhere, including places they simply shouldn't go, such as [wilderness areas](#)," said Professor Andrew Balmford of the University of Cambridge, UK. "Some of these roads are causing [environmental disasters](#)."

"The current situation is largely chaos," said Professor William Laurance of James Cook University in Cairns, Australia. "Roads are going almost everywhere and often open a Pandora's Box of environmental problems."

"Just look at the [Amazon rainforest](#)," said Laurance. "Over 95 percent of all [forest destruction](#) and wildfires occur within 10 kilometers of roads, and there's now 100,000 kilometers of roads crisscrossing the Amazon."

But the researchers say it doesn't have to be like this. "Roads are like real estate," said Laurance. "It's 'location, location, location'. In the right places, roads can actually help protect nature."

The secret, say the scientists, is to plan roads carefully, keeping them out of wilderness areas and concentrating them in areas that are best-suited for farming and development.

"In such areas," said Balmford, "roads can improve farming, making it much easier to move crops to market and import fertilizers. This can increase farm profits, improve the livelihoods of rural residents, enhance food security and draw migrants away from vulnerable wilderness areas."

This will be crucial in the future, say the scientists, given that global farming production will need to double in the coming decades to feed up to 10 billion people.

Writing in the journal *Nature*, the researchers say a global mapping program is needed, to advise on where to put roads, where to avoid new roads and where to close down existing roads that are causing severe environmental damage.

"It's all about being proactive," said Laurance. "Ultimately, local decision-makers will decide where to put roads. But by working together, development experts, agriculturalists and ecologists could provide badly needed guidelines on where to build good roads rather than bad [roads](#)."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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