

Africa's COVID-19 recovery should harness the benefits of nature and conservation

May 25 2020



A herd of elephants in the Maasai Mara, Kenya. Credit: World Wide Fund for Nature

Today, as we celebrate International Day of Biodiversity, the global community is called to re-examine our relationship to the natural world.

We celebrate this day in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that is severely impacting people and organizations around the world, and highlighting the fragility of so much of what we hold dear. We stand in solidarity with all those who are suffering at the hands of this global crisis.

Today's theme, "Our solutions are in nature," emphasizes "hope, solidarity and the importance of working together at all levels to build a future of life in harmony with nature." This message resonates with particular strength today, as the scope and scale of the devastation of COVID-19 to human health and wellbeing becomes increasingly clear. While most African governments have acted expeditiously to contain the spread of this virus across the continent, the [economic impacts](#) of the pandemic are both acute and far-reaching. These impacts threaten the very foundation of Africa's sustainable development agenda.

One sector where the impacts of COVID are particularly clear is tourism. Estimates by the African Union suggest that the economic impact of COVID-19 on Africa's tourism and [travel sector](#) alone may be as much as \$50 billion USD—nearly 7 times greater than the 2008 economic crisis—with widespread job losses and the looming threat of food insecurity.

These economic impacts reach far beyond the sector itself, however. With the rise of ecotourism over the past three decades, the fate of the industry has become increasingly linked with the wellbeing of rural communities in high biodiversity areas. In many parts of Africa, [human health](#) and wellbeing is inextricably linked to sustainable management of their [natural](#) resources. The sudden and comprehensive collapse of global tourism has brought to the fore a largely hidden but parallel crisis brewing for Africa's conservation landscapes and the people that protect and depend on this rich natural heritage.

In addition to providing alternative livelihoods to vulnerable rural communities, tourism has transformed the very nature of conservation in Africa. It has engendered a revolution in community-based natural resource management through revenue sharing, enabled the expansion of conservation outside of protected areas, and provided a mechanism to fundamentally change the conservation narrative from "exclusion" to "inclusion"—from government ownership to community rights. Tourism has also demonstrated the potential for channeling resources from wealthy economies to developing countries and communities in support of conservation. Critically, income from tourism has supported conservation both inside and outside of protected areas and provided an incentive for many communities to protect biodiversity.

Furthermore, tourism has created vast multiplier effects across economic sectors. For example, it is estimated that every night that a tourist stays at a high-end wildlife lodge in a remote part of Africa, [up to 14 people in the surrounding community benefit](#) indirectly from the income generated. On a macro level, there are numerous examples of countries whose revenue from the tourism sector significantly contributes to the national treasury, with much of this revenue being channeled to other essential sectors such as health and education.



Mountain gorilla silverback male playing in habitat in Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda. Credit: World Wide Fund for Nature

In countries like Uganda and Rwanda, tourism revenue pays for the construction of schools and health care facilities for communities neighboring protected areas. In Kenya, tourism is the third largest source of foreign exchange; it supports 1.5 million jobs (especially in rural areas), and dominates the service sector. In 2018, the World Travel and Tourism Council reported that South Africa's tourism sector directly contributed to 2.9 percent of the GDP, and the economic contribution from tourism could be multiplied by a factor of four to include its revenue-generating ability across other sectors, ranging from agriculture to manufacturing.

Tourism also fueled the transition of nations like Cabo Verde, the Maldives and Samoa from what the U.N. defines as 'least developed countries' to 'middle income countries.'

On this International Day of Biodiversity, however, it is equally important that we remember the existential value of nature. Even without tourism, we are completely dependent on nature for our water, food, medicines, clothes, fuel, shelter and energy. The collapse of tourism reminds us to appreciate the other essential services that nature provides, such as reducing vulnerability to climate change; providing food and water security; reducing pollution; ensuring access to important genetic material and traditional medicine; timber production, and carbon storage. All of which are essential to Africa's future economic development. A recent report on Global Futures by WWF suggests that a "business-as-usual" development strategy that fails to protect nature and its essential services could result in an economic loss of nearly \$10 trillion USD by 2050. It is therefore imperative that nature is part and parcel of our local and national development plans.

We know that tourism has its challenges, and even as we emerge from this crisis, we will need to critically examine issues such as the negative impacts of carbon emissions from international travel, and the environmental degradation resulting from too many tourists, among other things. We also recognize that it is time to explore new models of sustainable finance for nature that go beyond the current tourism model. But we know fundamentally that the ability of this sector (and our economies more generally) to recover will be based on the health of the product it is selling—in this case nature and biodiversity.

Africa's tourism industry will be an important launching pad for economic recovery. We call on African leaders and policy makers to consider tourism as one of the key components of stimulus packages and economic recovery plans. Aside from being deeply entrenched in the

African continent's development DNA, tourism fosters unparalleled positive ripple effects to other sectors of the economy during this recovery phase. But let's not stop there. Even as we build on the social and environmental benefits that [tourism](#) can support, let's ensure that biodiversity, and nature more generally, are recognized as key building blocks for a post COVID -19 recovery.

In the spirit of today's theme, "our solutions are in nature," let us seize this opportunity to reflect on the central role of nature in our health, wellbeing, and sustainable development. Happy International Day of Biodiversity!

This story is republished courtesy of Earth Institute, Columbia University <http://blogs.ei.columbia.edu>.

Provided by Earth Institute at Columbia University

Citation: Africa's COVID-19 recovery should harness the benefits of nature and conservation (2020, May 25) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-05-africa-covid-recovery-harness-benefits.html>

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