

Report: Deforestation, linked to pandemics, increased in 2019

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Deforestation of tropical old-growth forests increased last year, according to new satellite data unveiled Tuesday, wiping out acreage roughly the size of Switzerland in a period when experts are raising

alarms about the transmission of a variety of diseases, including the novel coronavirus, that jump between animals and humans.

Earth in 2019 lost 9.3 million acres of primary tropical forests—swathes of pristine ecosystems that humans had left largely untouched. Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia saw the largest losses, while Bolivia and Australia experienced record tree losses for those countries due to wildfires.

The groups that released the figures, Global Forest Watch and World Resources Institute, said the losses worldwide last year were the third-highest annual total for [primary forests](#) this century.

"We seem to be going in the wrong direction," Frances Seymour, distinguished senior fellow at WRI, told reporters. "The 2019 data corroborates what we already know. If governments put into place good policies and enforce the law, [forest](#) loss goes down," Seymour said.

Deforestation, the destruction of animal habitats and wildlife trafficking are linked with the spread of zoonotic diseases, including the novel coronavirus, which can transmit between humans and animals.

While the origin of COVID-19, which has killed more than 370,000 globally and more than 100,000 in the U.S., is uncertain, researchers have found genetic similarities between it and viruses found in bats sold at markets that offer live animals in China, though the exact point of the outbreak is unclear.

Other high-profile zoonotic infectious diseases include SARS, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome and the Ebola virus, all of which likely jumped from wildlife to humans after finding hosts, such as primates or camels.

Environmental groups joined an effort in late April to stop the commercial shipping and sale of wild animals for human consumption.

"When you look at the conditions that led to the spread of COVID-19, and the strong link to [wildlife species](#) that are highly sought-after in open markets, it's a clear sign we need to take a hard look at our global wildlife trade, specially the [illegal trade](#)," Alejandra Goyenechea, senior international counsel for Defenders of Wildlife, said at the time.

Rep. Daniel Lipinski, D-Ill., introduced legislation March 2 to curb illegal [wildlife](#) trafficking and extend the life of a federal [wildlife trafficking](#) task force.

Mikaela Weisse, Global Forest Watch Project Manager at WRI, said she has heard anecdotes of a spike in forest destruction during the COVID-19 outbreak.

"We've been getting all these stories from partners on the ground about instances where they are seeing increased illegal activity because of perhaps the lower law enforcement or just people who are taking advantage of the pandemic to actually continue incursions on indigenous lands or protected areas," Weisse said.

Pulling data from the University of Maryland, Google, the U.S. Geological Survey and NASA, Global Forest Watch—established in 1997—tracks forest growth and loss, providing updates weekly and annual reports.

Weisse said she and her colleagues were trying to corroborate and "link" those anecdotes with satellite data.

Brazil accounted for one-third of all primary forest loss last year. Because of massive bushfires, compounded by drought, Australia saw a

560% increase in lost tree cover between 2018 and 2019.

"A sixfold increase," said Rod Taylor, an Australian who heads Global Forest Program.

"My home country," he said, "suffered through what is being called the devastating Black Summer Bushfires last year," adding that "2019 was Australia's worst year on record."

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