

Strong scientific link between forests and human health

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Marking two years since the current pandemic spread across the globe, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) today released *The Vitality of Forests*, a new report synthesizing a mounting body of evidence that documents

how human health depends on forests. This is one of the first reports that details the escalating risks to human health associated with forest loss and degradation, including the emergence of zoonotic infectious diseases. The findings strongly argue that the conservation, protection and restoration of the world's forests are undeniably critical to safeguarding and promoting human health.

"Forests deliver critical benefits to people, nature and climate," said Kerry Cesareo, senior vice president for forests at WWF. "They are habitats for wildlife, capture and store carbon, and protect our water supply. This report now outlines another compelling reason to safeguard forests: They are indispensable to human health. We can use these findings as a road map for collaboration across the health and environment sectors to help resolve [public health](#) issues ranging from emerging [infectious diseases](#) to mental well-being."

The report finds that forests play a vital role in supporting human health across several dimensions—infectious diseases; noncommunicable diseases like cancer, diabetes, and mental health issues; nutrition and food security; and physical hazards.

For example, the authors detail how deforestation drives the emergence and spread of zoonotic pathogens, infectious diseases that pass from animals to humans. These account for most of the recent epidemics, including COVID-19, the Zika virus, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the H1N1 flu, and the Ebola virus. By shrinking and fragmenting forests, the report says, deforestation can concentrate interactions between animals and the diseases they carry, resulting in more opportunities for disease transmission among animal species and people.

The report also emphasizes the active role forests play in safeguarding human health. Exposure to forests lowers cardiovascular disease risks

and stress hormones. Forests are essential to both local and global [food security](#); can help lessen the impacts of natural hazards, including heat waves, floods and landslides; and clean polluted air and water. Additionally, forests help mitigate climate change and its associated health effects.

"We found that public health and forests are entwined—at the local, regional and global level—and that across each of nature's contributions to [human health](#), [forest conservation](#), protection and management can improve our lives," said Craig Beatty, manager of forest strategy and research at WWF and one of the report's primary authors. "And when we consider the public health challenges we face in our communities, counties and countries, we should examine the very real health implications of how we're treating our forests—and how they're treating us."

With this in mind, the report presents a framework to understand the public health value of forests and outlines numerous actions to safeguard the vitality of forests and promote long-term human well-being. These include protecting forests and avoiding forest conversion; improving forest management on working lands; taking a diversified approach to forest restoration; creating urban forests; and fostering a learning exchange between the conservation and health fields.

More information: The Vitality of Forests report can be found here: [www.worldwildlife.org/publicat ... sts-and-human-health](http://www.worldwildlife.org/publications/sts-and-human-health)

Provided by WWF

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