

CONSERVATION  
INTERNATIONAL

# NATURE + CORONAVIRUS BRIEF

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread around the world at lightning speed, killing hundreds of thousands of people and infecting millions.

A growing body of research, including research by Conservation International scientists, points to a direct link between the destruction of nature and disease outbreaks — spotlighting the role of protecting and restoring nature in preventing future pandemics.

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## What does nature have to do with the spread of disease?

Ecosystems in nature function similarly to the human body: When they are robust and healthy — which means they have diverse species and space for healthy animal populations — they are less likely to be sources of disease.

As the global wildlife trade persists and human activities expand deeper into tropical forests, humans are increasing their exposure to wild animals and the diseases they may carry. When mining and logging degrade or destroy wildlife habitats, animals are forced into different or smaller areas and are more likely to become stressed or sick. They are also more likely to come into contact with people and domestic animals, driving the transmission of disease from wildlife to humans. We know that wildlife species threatened by exploitation or habitat loss are [more likely to be sources of disease](#), and new [research suggests](#) that outbreaks of animal-borne illness will become more frequent due to the accelerating destruction of nature.

## How is the pandemic affecting nature?

There is a misperception that [nature is “getting a break”](#) from humans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, many rural areas in the tropics are [facing increased pressure](#) from land grabbing, deforestation, illegal mining and wildlife poaching.

People who have lost their employment in cities are returning to their rural homes, further increasing the pressure on natural resources while also increasing the risk of COVID-19 transmission to rural areas. Meanwhile, there are reports of increased deforestation in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Illegal miners and loggers are [encroaching on indigenous territories](#), which could expose remote indigenous communities to the virus. Areas that are economically dependent on tourism face reduced resources as tourism has come to a halt, resulting in a rise in bushmeat (wild meat) consumption in Africa. Meanwhile, illegal mining for gold and precious stones in Latin America and Africa is on the rise, as prices spike and protected areas are left unguarded.

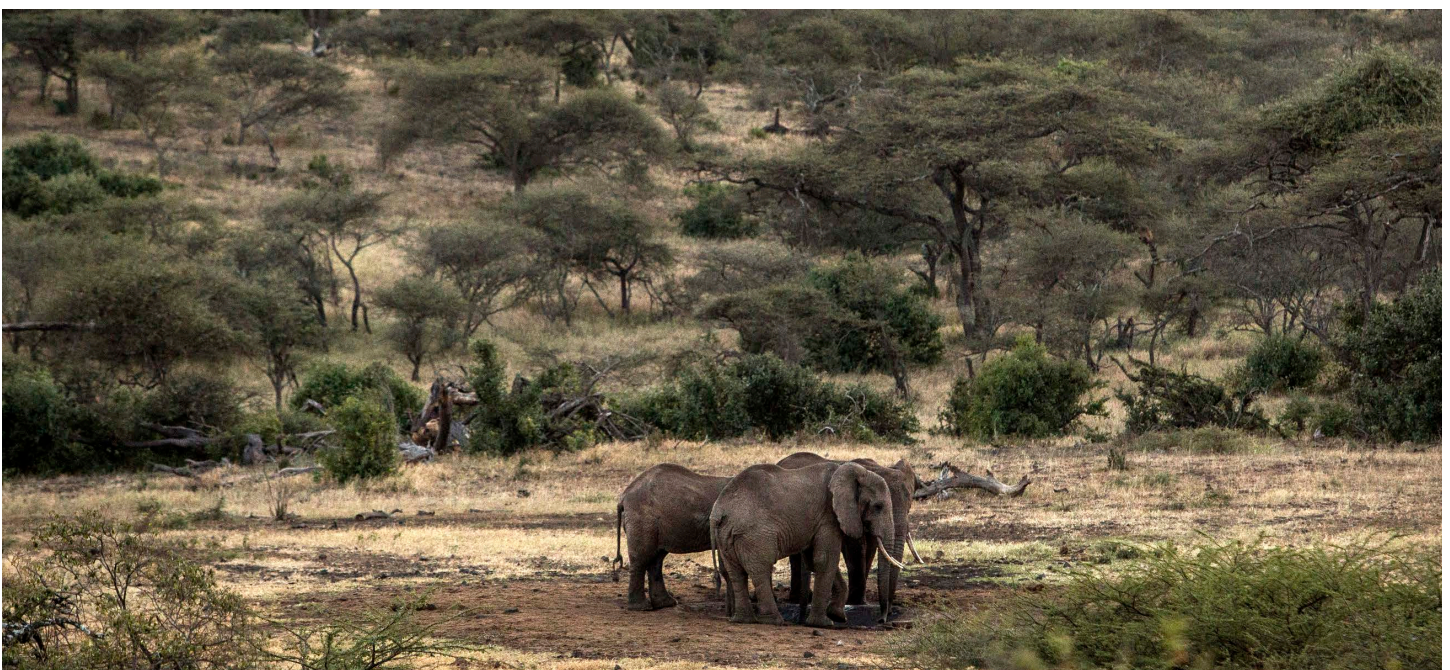
### What about climate change?

From a public health perspective, the climate crisis is increasing the spread of certain diseases and complicating efforts to combat others. Seasonality and weather are two of the major factors that control the rate at which viruses such as the flu infect humans. Although scientists are [currently uncertain](#) how climate breakdown will impact the spread of COVID-19, research predicts that rising global temperatures will alter the timing, distribution and severity of future disease outbreaks.

### What is Conservation International doing?

Human health and economic health are inextricably linked to the health of our planet — saving nature is really about saving ourselves. To that end, Conservation International is working with governments, companies, communities and other organizations to achieve these three essential steps to protect people and planet from emerging viruses and diseases:

- 1. Change humanity's relationship with nature.** Ecosystems are designed to be self-regulating, meaning they are built to maintain a balance between species and disease in a very natural way that should not be disturbed. This means leaving animals in their natural habitat and preventing the destruction of those habitats.
- 2. Slow deforestation and habitat destruction.** Land-use change is the No. 1 cause of emergent disease events that involve a virus spreading from animal to human. Tearing down trees does not eliminate the presence of viruses in nature; rather, it [encourages the spread of disease](#). Maintaining healthy ecosystems keeps viruses contained and decreases the chance they will transfer to humans.
- 3. Stop the illegal wildlife trade.** Illegal trade creates incentive for people to capture living animals and transport them to densely populated areas, which significantly increases the risk that pathogens will spread to humans. We must eliminate this incentive by creating alternative livelihoods.



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## What should policymakers do?

Governments must stop rolling back legal protections for the world's protected areas, as this can accelerate the pace of climate change, eliminate an important source of sustainable livelihoods, and contribute to biodiversity loss and deforestation — two significant drivers of disease outbreaks. Instead of scaling back protected areas, government should seize the opportunity to scale them up.

Governments in countries experiencing a rise in deforestation, illegal mining and poaching urgently need to maintain enforcement efforts, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Equally important, countries must start planning for rebuilding their economies in a way that fosters green structural transformation, including through long-term commitments to public spending and pricing reforms. After restrictions are lifted, governments and development financing institutions should prioritize [stimulus efforts that have high economic multiplier effects and reduce carbon emissions](#). Such investments would have additional benefits for biodiversity and reduce the risk of zoonotic disease outbreaks, too, thereby addressing an important root cause of the current pandemic.

[It is equally important that climate and biodiversity stay at the top of the agenda in 2020](#) and beyond, and that leaders leverage every opportunity to maintain the momentum.

## What should companies do?

Companies must double down on investments in [natural climate solutions, which](#) protect and restore critical ecosystems, support climate stability and ecosystem resilience, and help people by increasing their access to income. By investing in the protection of nature — chiefly forests — companies can help stem [biodiversity loss](#), which will improve resistance to disease by allowing for diverse species and healthy animal populations.

While businesses focus on responding to the immediate need to slow the pandemic and protect essential workers, they must also look ahead to economic recovery efforts that support communities. Natural climate solutions, like the restoration of degraded lands, can increase access to income for people in both developed and developing countries. [Recent studies](#) show that nearly 40 jobs can be created for every \$1 million invested in restoration or forest management, a much higher job creation rate than traditional industries like coal and gas; and between \$1.60 and \$2.60 of economic activity results from every dollar spent on tree restoration projects.

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## MEDIA COVERAGE

<b>Bloomberg Green</b>	<a href="#">“The Best Weapon Against a Future Pandemic”</a>
<b>TIME</b>	<a href="#">“Want to Stop the Next Pandemic? Start Protecting Wildlife Habitats”</a>
<b>Bloomberg Green</b>	<a href="#">“Want to Stop the Next Pandemic? Start Protecting Wildlife Habitats”</a>
<b>Fast Company</b>	<a href="#">“Why our shrinking natural world is increasing the pace of global pandemics”</a>
<b>ELLE</b>	<a href="#">“Could An Innovative Reforestation Program Help Stem Climate-Change-Fueled Wildfires Worldwide?”</a>
<b>Global Citizen</b>	<a href="#">“These Communities Are Fighting Poverty and Protecting Forests Amid COVID-19”</a>
<b>Financial Times</b>	<a href="#">“Poaching fears rise after coronavirus empties Kenya’s national parks”</a>
<b>Huff Post</b>	<a href="#">“Rhinos Are Also Coronavirus Victims”</a>
<b>ABC News</b>	<a href="#">“Experts in Kenya fear poaching, deforestation are surging during COVID-19 lockdown”</a>
<b>BBC Future</b>	<a href="#">“The hidden toll of lockdown on rainforests”</a>
<b>BBC Future</b>	<a href="#">“The wild animals at risk in lockdown”</a>
<b>RTE</b>	<a href="#">“Pandemic poachers aim to make a killing”</a>
<b>Our Daily Planet</b>	<a href="#">“Interview of the Week: M. Sanjayan, CEO of Conservation International”</a>

Our Daily Planet	<a href="#">“Coronavirus — How to Get Out of This Madness”</a>
Radio.com	<a href="#">“1Thing: How the Coronavirus Pandemic and Climate Change Are Related”</a>
Star Advertiser	<a href="#">“Column: Better tourism with visitor green fees”</a>
World Economic Forum	<a href="#">The COVID-19 pandemic is not a break for nature – let’s make sure there is one after the crisis</a>
World Economic Forum	<a href="#">Colombia’s former president says COVID-19 shows the importance of listening to indigenous peoples on how we treat the planet</a>
Coastal Management	<a href="#">The COVID-19 Pandemic, Small-Scale Fisheries and Coastal Fishing Communities</a>

## STATEMENTS AND PRESS RELEASES

[Statement on Deforestation Driving Disease Spread like COVID-19](#)

[Statement on Deforestation and Poaching](#)

[Statement on Petersberg Climate Dialogue Commitments](#)

[Press Release on Policy Recommendations Linking Nature and COVID-19 Recovery](#)

### [The Link Between Infectious Disease and the Destruction of Nature](#)



**“In the last 50 years, wildlife populations have declined by 60 percent... In the same time period, infectious diseases have quadrupled. Clearly these two things are linked. An investment in protecting nature is also an investment in health.”**

- M. SANJAYAN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

## CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL BLOGS

