

'Seismic Shift' in World's Approach to Land Use, Wildlife, and Climate Action Needed to Avoid New 'Era of Pandemics,' Study Says



Deforestation is among the human activities which threaten to lead to another, more deadly pandemic, scientists say. (Photo: [Matt Zimmerman/Flickr/cc](#))

By [Julia Conley](#) | [Common Dreams](#)

Warning that without a “seismic shift” in how world governments approach the treatment of wildlife, land conservation, and public health, the planet could be entering an “era of pandemics,” a United Nations-backed report released Thursday emphasized that the ability to avoid more public health crises like Covid-19 is entirely within the human population’s control.

Resulting from an urgent virtual workshop attended by 22 experts from around the world, [the report](#) by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services notes that more than five new diseases emerge in people each year, and each of these has the potential to develop into a global pandemic as the coronavirus did.

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—Dr. Peter Daszak, EcoHealth Alliance

The novel coronavirus has origins in microbes detected in animal species and is believed to have “jumped” from an animal to the human population in Wuhan, China, and human activity has made it dangerously easy for this sort of jump to happen again and again.

Scientists estimate that 1.7 million unknown viruses currently exist in mammals and birds and that up to 850,000 of them could potentially infect humans.

“There is no great mystery about the cause of the Covid-19 pandemic—or of any modern pandemic,” said Dr. Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance and chair of the IPBES workshop. “The same human activities that drive climate change and biodiversity loss also drive pandemic risk through their impacts on our environment. Changes in the way we use the land; the expansion and intensification of agriculture; and unsustainable trade, production, and consumption disrupt nature and increase contact between wildlife.”

To stop a new era of pandemics from emerging, the experts say, governments must work together to stop the exploitation of land and wildlife by profit-driven systems, which cause humans and animals to come into close enough contact for pathogens to jump to humans.

Unsafe contact between humans and wildlife would be reduced by conservation efforts to protect biodiversity and natural habitats, the promotion of “responsible consumption” and a reduction in “excessive consumption of meat from livestock production,” and climate action, the report reads.

“Climate change has been implicated in disease emergence (e.g. tick-borne encephalitis in Scandinavia) and will likely cause substantial future pandemic risk by the driving movement of people, wildlife, reservoirs, and vectors, and spread of their pathogens, in ways that lead to new contact among species, increased contact among species or otherwise disrupts natural host-pathogen dynamics,” the IPBES wrote.

According to the report, land-use change has been linked to the emergence of more than 30% of new diseases in the human population since 1960.

“Land-use change includes deforestation, human settlement is primarily wildlife habitat, the growth of crop and livestock production, and urbanization,” the report reads.

Land-use change

Agricultural expansion

&

Urbanization

Cause more than 30% of emerging disease events.

New [@IPBES #PandemicsReport](#) ☐☐ <https://t.co/aIoEx0MS08>

– UN Environment Programme (@UNEP) [October 29, 2020](#)

Habitat disturbance creates about one-third of pandemic disease events. The solution here seems pretty clear.
<https://t.co/haAPHqoRkJ>

– Scott D. Sampson (@DrScottSampson) [October 29, 2020](#)

“The solution here seems pretty clear,” tweeted Dr. Scott Sampson, executive director of the California Academy of Sciences, in response to the report’s section on land-use change.

The study includes a number of suggested reforms which could help to keep pathogens from spreading to humans, including:

- Launching a high-level intergovernmental council on pandemic prevention to provide decision-makers with the best science and evidence on emerging diseases; predict high-risk areas; evaluate the economic impact of potential pandemics and to highlight research gaps.
- Institutionalizing the ‘One Health’ approach in national governments to build pandemic preparedness, enhance pandemic prevention programs, and to investigate and control outbreaks across sectors.
- Ensuring that the economic cost of pandemics is factored into consumption, production, and government policies and budgets.
- Enabling changes to reduce the types of consumption, globalized agricultural expansion, and trade that has led to pandemics—this could include taxes or levies on meat consumption, livestock production, and other forms of high pandemic-risk activities.
- Reducing zoonotic disease risks in the international wildlife trade through a new intergovernmental ‘health and trade’ partnership; reducing or removing high disease-risk species in the wildlife trade; enhancing law enforcement in all aspects of the illegal wildlife trade and improving community education in disease hotspots about the health risks of wildlife trade.
- Valuing Indigenous Peoples and local communities’ engagement and knowledge in pandemic prevention programs, achieving greater food security, and reducing consumption of wildlife.

The cost of confronting global public health emergencies after

they've arrived—including damage to economies around the world, healthcare costs, and vaccine research—is roughly 100 times what it would cost to prevent another pandemic, the IPBES said.

“We have the increasing ability to prevent pandemics—but the way we are tackling them right now largely ignores that ability,” said Daszak. “Our approach has effectively stagnated—we still rely on attempts to contain and control diseases after they emerge, through vaccines and therapeutics. We can escape the era of pandemics, but this requires a much greater focus on prevention in addition to reaction.”

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