

SAFE FORESTS, SAFE PEOPLE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON DISEASES OF ANIMAL ORIGIN

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

The rapid spread of the [SARS-CoV-2 virus](#) across the world has focused attention on the seemingly invisible processes that help pathogens originally found in wild animals make the leap to humans. [Diseases of animal origin](#) such as Ebola, HIV, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, bird flu and swine flu have raised alarm over potential pandemics in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed the worst fears of scientists. The contagion, thought to have originated in a wet market that kept live animals in Wuhan, China, points to many underlying factors: the destruction of forests and trapping or farming of wild species has brought these animals closer to humans, and the viruses they harbour find ready hosts in domestic animals, moving to humans. There is concern also about rising economic activity, such as road building and mining cutting through forests, bringing more people in close contact with animals. Another dimension is the global trade in wild species — in Wuhan, they reportedly ranged from wolf pups to rats, civets and foxes, among others — and their sale in markets along with domestic animals. The well-documented histories of the lethal Nipah and Hendra viruses, involving transfer from bats to pigs in the former, and bats to horses in the latter, underscore the value of maintaining viable ecosystems, and eliminating the need for wild bats to colonise human surroundings.

Biodiversity in forests harmlessly retains dangerous viruses and other pathogens among a vast pool of wild animals, away from people. What this phenomenon makes clear is that governments should stop viewing undisturbed landscapes as an impediment to economic growth. As COVID-19 has proved, these short-term high growth trajectories can come to an abrupt halt with a pandemic. Such a terrible outcome could be witnessed again, potentially caused by reckless exploitation of the environment. In spite of repeated warnings of crippling pandemics waiting in the wings, governments paid little attention. Now, a novel virus that can move effortlessly from human to human has found a large reservoir of hosts in a globalised world. Unlike previous epidemics, the latest one has extracted a staggering toll, killing people, forcing a lockdown and causing economic devastation. This should serve as a dire warning to the government that hasty permissions granted for new roads, dams, mines and power projects in already enfeebled forests can unleash more scourges. It would do well to roll back its dilution of the environmental clearance system, strengthen it with a mandate to the States, and leave protected areas to scientific experts. There is mounting evidence that environmental protection confers health protection. Pristine forests with diverse species keep viruses virtually bottled up, out of man's way. They should be left undisturbed.

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