

FEWER SPECIES, MORE DISEASE

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

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted human life and the economy in an unprecedented way. Across countries, lockdowns have kept people indoors and provided opportunities for wild animals to roam around spaces they otherwise don't venture into. Scientists believe that the loss of biodiversity, and wildlife trade, have strong linkages with the emergence of epidemics. The pandemic is an opportunity for the global community to explore the consequences of its unscientific actions on nature and prepare for behavioural change.

Dangerous infectious diseases (Ebola, Bird flu, MERS, SARS, Nipah, etc.) have been transferred from wild animals to humans. In order to clear land for agriculture and development, forests and habitats have been destroyed. In the process, we have lost several species. Human-induced environmental changes reduce biodiversity resulting in new conditions that host vectors and/or pathogens.

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It is not yet fully understood which species have contributed to the transmission of COVID-19 and how. However, according to experts, there is strong evidence that it spread from a wildlife market in Wuhan, China. Two hypothesis have been discussed: (a) the virus jumped from bats directly to humans; and (b) from bats to pangolins and then to humans.

Apart from wildlife markets, illegal trade of wildlife is part of the growing problem. Trafficking in wild plants and animals and wildlife products has become one of the largest and most lucrative forms of organised crime. By deliberately pursuing and hunting certain species or by establishing monocultures, habitats and ecosystems are being damaged, fragmented or destroyed.

Illegal wildlife smuggling is an emerging threat to India's unique wildlife heritage. According to an NGO based in Guwahati, which works for the protection of Eastern Himalayan biodiversity, India shelters a number of vulnerable and threatened species. Body parts of animals including pangolins, Asiatic black bears and rhinos are being traded illegally to countries such as China, Vietnam, and Laos. Another study has found that there was a significant increase in the poaching of wild animals in India even during the lockdown. Species are being wiped out by organised trade networks, with new poaching techniques, for manufacturing traditional Chinese medicines.

The IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services shows that people extensively encroach natural habitats; hence biodiversity is declining significantly. By disturbing the delicate balance of nature, we have created ideal conditions for the spread of viruses from animals to humans. We should realise that we live in a world where biodiversity is our common heritage and natural capital.

Also read | ['Easy to blame China; but India's wildlife trade is thriving too'](#)

We need to revisit our relationship with nature and rebuild an environmentally responsible world. Nations should work towards realising the 2050 vision for biodiversity, 'Living in Harmony with Nature'. We must follow a 'one health' approach which considers the health of people, wild and domesticated animals, and the environment. We need to strictly regulate high-risk wildlife markets, promote green jobs and work towards achieving carbon-neutral economies.

In order to ensure that another crisis such as this does not occur again, India should strictly enforce the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, which prohibits the trade of 1,800 species of wild animals/plants and their derivatives; the Biological Diversity Act of 2002; strategies and action plans including the National Biodiversity Targets; and the National Biodiversity Mission. The mainstreaming of biodiversity is needed in our post-COVID-19 development programme. The over 2 lakh biodiversity management committees (local-level statutory bodies formed under the Act) can play a significant role in this regard. Mass biodiversity literacy should be our mission. Ecosystem integrity will regulate diseases and restrict the transmission of pathogens from one species to another.

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