

Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainable forest management, combat desertification, halt and reverse the process of land degradation and halt the loss of biodiversity



The services of nature

Nature responds to the most pressing needs people face today. It provides us with oxygen, purifies the water we drink, provides fertile soil, and produces the variety of foods we need to stay healthy and resistant to disease. It also enables medical researchers to understand human physiology and provides substances for drug development. Nature is the basis of most industries and livelihoods. It even helps mitigate the effects of climate change by storing carbon and regulating local rainfall. Life on Earth would not be possible without the services of nature.

The impact of human activity

Human activities have significantly altered three-quarters of the land and two-thirds of the ocean area. Only in the period from 2010 to 2015, 32 million hectares of forest disappeared. Over the past 150 years, the living coral reef cover has halved. Glaciers are melting at an astonishing rate, the acidity of the ocean is increasing, threatening its productivity. Species in the wild are disappearing tens to hundreds of times faster than in the last 10 million years, and within the next 10 years one in four known species could be wiped off the planet.

We are on the brink of mass extinction, and if we continue down this path, the loss of biodiversity will have serious consequences for humanity, including through the collapse of food and health systems.

Human needs

With their growing needs, people are pushing nature beyond its limits. In the last 50 years, the population of the planet has doubled, the world economy has almost quadrupled, and world trade has increased about tenfold. It would take 1.6 planet Earths to meet the demands humans place on nature each year.

The emergence of COVID-19 highlights the fact that when we destroy biodiversity, we destroy the system that sustains human life. By disrupting the delicate natural balance, we create conditions for the spread of pathogens, including coronaviruses.

We are completely connected to nature. If we don't take care of nature, we can't take care of ourselves.

Biodiversity loss and COVID-19

The emergence of COVID-19 has made it clear that when we destroy biodiversity, we destroy life-support systems. By disrupting the delicate balance of nature—deforestation, encroachment on wildlife, intensified agriculture, reducing genetic diversity in animal populations, causing climate change and extreme weather events—we have created ideal conditions for the spread of viruses between animal and human populations. The more biodiverse an ecosystem is, the more difficult it is for a pathogen to spread rapidly or dominate. While the loss of biodiversity provides an opportunity for pathogens to pass between animals and humans. We have altered the system that would naturally protect us and created conditions that allow certain pathogens – including coronaviruses – to spread.

Today, worldwide, it is estimated that about one billion cases of illness and millions of deaths occur each year from diseases caused by coronaviruses. About 75 percent of all emerging infectious diseases in humans are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted to humans from animals. Nature sends us a message.

It's time for Nature

COVID-19 gives us an opportunity to simultaneously reexamine our relationship with nature and restore a more environmentally responsible world. Addressing the emergence of zoonotic diseases requires addressing the root cause – primarily the impact of human activities. As the global population approaches 10 billion, we need to better understand the web of life and appreciate that it functions as a complete system. It is time to rethink our relationship with nature and put nature at the heart of our decision-making.

The Convention on Biological Diversity recognizes that biological diversity is critical to the health of the planet. Following the decisions taken by UN Member States in the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Environment Program with its partners is launching the UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) – a global initiative to restore the connection between people and nature. The United Nations Environment Program is working with world leaders to develop a new and ambitious Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework to achieve the 2050 Vision for Living in Harmony with Nature.

Living in harmony with nature can only be achieved if we reverse the negative impact of biodiversity loss and aim for full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

World Environment Day celebrations will help build momentum to unite the global community in action for positive change.

What each of us can do

Each of us has a role to play in ending biodiversity loss and preserving nature for human well-being. As humans we need to rethink what we buy and use and become conscious consumers. If we want to change the current pattern of destruction “stewardship” of nature, we must first LEARN what we can do: SHARE this knowledge with our family and friends on World Environment Day and ACT on what we need to change.

