

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Rethinking climate change and health of nature

Byline: By Amado S. Tolentino, JR.

Published Date: March 27, 2021

Section: opinion

Word Count: 863

Content:

THE upside of the coronavirus pestilence is greater awareness of biodiversity or species of plants and animals' conservation. Nearly all the new infectious diseases that scientists know about originate in animals and so will the emergence of diseases in the years to come. HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) began in chimpanzees, SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in bats, influenza in aquatic birds. At some point, the animal pathogens jump the species barrier to humans which experts call a spillover. Spillovers have always occurred, but the rapid environmental changes wreaked by humans in recent years have accelerated the spread.

Scientists believe bats are most likely the source of the coronavirus, with pangolins also being eyed as the transmitter of the pathogens. While China cracked down on wildlife trade after the SARS epidemic in 2003, the emergence of Covid-19 clearly showed a lot more needs to be done. Apart from killer diseases traced to animals, the world continues to confront the many problems that are endangering both plant and wildlife.

Biodiversity loss and its impact on humanity

Biodiversity loss is the dying out or the extermination of species because of environmental forces like habitat fragmentation, global climate change, natural disaster and over-exploitation of species for human use. Mankind is using 25 percent more natural resources than the planet can sustain.

Concomitant with biodiversity loss is habitat destruction. As more and more people need space, damaging human activities continue to encroach on natural environments, thereby destroying the habitats of countless species. As the population increases, cities and industrial areas are growing, fragmenting the remaining habitat and leaving 'isolated islands' of natural populations of plants and animals which are too small to survive.

Research shows that only one quarter of land areas and one-third of oceans remain undamaged by human activity. Mankind is also laying heavy pressure on populations of the wild species both by meat-hunting and large-scale industrial fishing. Increased hunting has also reduced the number of waterbirds and rare marine species (dugong, dolphins and sea turtles). Wildlife poaching and trafficking as well as intensive harvesting of aquatic resources, including aquatic vegetation also present threats to many species. Another is agriculture intensification to meet the needs of the overgrown population for food.

Moreover, the planet is on the verge of a climate catastrophe due to endless production of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide and methane). In this regard, the impact of climate change on human health, on the other hand, is varied. Sunburn of our lungs happens when we inhale smog which causes chest pain, coughing and difficulty breathing. It triggers asthma attacks exacerbating conditions of bronchitis and emphysema. Extreme high temperature contributes directly to death from cardiovascular and respiratory disease.

Climate change has caused the extension of mosquito season beyond the summer months. That means more spread of malaria, dengue fever and other diseases.

Depletion of the ozone layer has a harmful effect on human health too. This typically results in higher ultraviolet rays from the sun reaching us on earth. Research confirms that higher levels of UV rays cause non-melanoma skin cancer. Additionally, it plays a major role in malignant melanoma development.

It is now commonly known that floods contaminate freshwater supplies, heighten the risk of waterborne diseases and create breeding grounds for disease-carrying insects. A lack of safe drinking water can compromise hygiene and increase the risk of diarrheal disease.

The way to fight back

With biodiversity in our ecosystem, the result is a greener environment. In addition, a healthy ecosystem can help reduce the risk of all diseases and the way people respond to them. Environmental changes brought about by climate are regulated because of biodiversity.

Culture too is enriched through biodiversity as it involves the existence of numerous species and people in one environment. In short, the ecosystem becomes the hallmark of diversity because it helps sustain the lives of diverse living things.

We should, therefore, work towards maintaining biodiversity and find solutions to prevent its decline resulting to loss. Governments must strive hard in formulating stricter laws and create awareness among people on environmental issues and its consequences. They must demonstrate to people that it is the responsibility of everyone to save our planet Earth by maintaining a rich biodiversity. Otherwise, humans will need to find another planet to live in.

Best of all, do no harm. Instead of being contributors to the earth's destruction, we should all genuinely fulfill our duties of being the "stewards of nature" through collective action with patience and forbearance.

Corollary to the stewardship concept is the call on the UN for the recognition of the right to a healthy environment as a human right which is proposed in the Global Pact for the Environment. Approval by the UN General Assembly of the pact will make the right to a healthy environment a 'hard law,' binding on all signatory states.

As gleaned from the foregoing discussion, the Covid-19 pandemic has its roots in habitat loss and illegal wildlife trade. To quote from a recent Manila Times editorial, "The new human right can help ensure that the global green recovery the world needs to rebuild society following the pandemic takes both biodiversity and the climate emergencies into account."