



Vatican COVID-19 Commission

Executive summary: Ecology Taskforce



Rainforest burning, Indonesia, by USAID Biodiversity and Forestry

SEE: COVID-19 is a crisis with nature

Zoonotic diseases are increasing as ecosystems decline globally

The coronavirus crisis can be seen as the result of humanity's increasingly disharmonious relationship with the natural world. This latest coronavirus, like its predecessors, is a 'zoonotic' disease – an infection that has jumped from animals to people, often due to pathogens passing from wild animals to humans and then leading to human-to-human transmission.

Research shows that nearly 70% of emerging zoonotic infections are linked to wildlife, primarily driven by land changes caused by human activities. In recent decades, several new infectious pathogens have emerged as wildlife habitats have been destroyed and ecosystems violated at rates unprecedented in human history.

Environmental experts have been warning for years about crucial tipping points in our relationship with the planet. The Stockholm Resilience Center's landmark Planetary Boundaries report says the world has already crossed crucial thresholds in climate, biosphere integrity, land system change and biogeochemical flows.

The Earth is poised on the verge of a **sixth mass extinction** of species – with diastrophic implications for the entire web of life (National Academy of Sciences).

One million species are at risk of extinction, many of them within the next few decades (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services).

Humanity has just a few years left to ensure that global temperatures do not cross the **critical 1.5°C threshold** (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change).



Pope Francis has asked the Vatican COVID-19 Commission to consider key issues arising from the pandemic and also to reflect on what new socio-economic-cultural approaches are needed to build a better future for everyone. This is the executive summary from Week 4 of the Commission's Ecology Taskforce.



A clear warning shot from nature

Scientists have warned that pandemics such as COVID-19 are likely to return more often, spread more rapidly, be more deadly and inflict worse economic damage if we fail to re-balance our relationship with the environment and wildlife.

JUDGE: Nature is sending us a message

Failing to take care of the planet means not taking care of ourselves

The Covid-19 pandemic reveals the fundamental truth that societies cannot be healthy unless the planet and its ecosystems are healthy. The origin of the present coronavirus – and its predecessors SARS and MERS, as well as Ebola – is linked to human interference in the intricate balance of natural ecosystems.

Human activity is placing unprecedented pressure on the natural world, with damaging consequences.

Scientists say our rapid destruction of the Earth's life-sustaining ecosystems and biodiversity, through wildlife trading, deforestation, mining, logging and agriculture, is increasing the danger of new, and possibly deadlier, viruses evolving to infect humans.



In 'wet markets' around the world, dead and live wild and domestic animals are on sale (often in highly unsanitary conditions) alongside fruit and vegetables.

Climate change is also disrupting the basic life-support systems that underlie human health and well-being. Research shows that infectious disease agents such as protozoa, bacteria and viruses are highly sensitive to changes in climatic conditions such as temperature or rainfall.

UN Environment Programme chief Inger Andersen says nature is telling us there are 'too many pressures at the same time on our natural systems'.

ACT: Stronger global policies are needed to protect the environment and ecosystems

Put nature and the climate at the centre of post-pandemic reconstruction:

- As countries race to recover their economic losses post-COVID-19, they must not reduce environmental regulations in favour of intensive agriculture, unsustainable transport or other fossil fuel-intensive sectors.
- COVID-19 policy responses should support nature-positive activities and recognise the complex interconnections between people, animals, plants and our shared environment.

End the wildlife trade to help prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases:

- Stricter controls on the sale and consumption of wild species are needed globally, as well as implementation of the International Health Regulations, and awareness campaigns on the negative impact of wildlife consumption.
- It is now the time to make sure all countries adhere to international standards on the wildlife trade, including strict enforcement of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Link increased agriculture production with ecosystem protection:

- With the world's population projected to be 10 billion by 2050, and as incomes increase across the developing world, overall food demand is on course to rise by more than 50% compared to 2010.
- Feeding more people will require substantial increases in crop and animal production, involving even more antibiotics, water, pesticides and fertilizer, as well as greater contact with animals.
- Governments should explicitly link efforts to boost crop and pasture yields with legal protection of forests, savannas, and peatlands to prevent agriculture from expanding into natural ecosystems.

