

# Conserving nature will prevent pandemics

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May 31, 2020

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WITH almost 5.7 million cases and more than 350,000 deaths globally as of May 27, the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) is indeed causing a global threat.

In the Philippines, there were almost 14,700 Covid-19 cases and almost 900 deaths during the same period as the country was preparing to downgrade the strict quarantine status, especially in Metropolitan Manila, that was imposed since March 15.

Recognizing the linkages of biodiversity and health, and the regional efforts to integrate biodiversity conservation into its Covid-19 response, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) is calling for nature's conservation to prevent future pandemics.

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## Biodiversity and pandemics

The call was made during a webinar organized by the Asean Secretariat (ASEC) and the Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), dubbed "Biodiversity and Preventing Future Pandemics," on May 20. A panel of experts engaged the audience from the Asean member-states about nature's role in preventing future pandemics.

The activity was part of the efforts of ASEC and ACB to increase their communication activities and mainstream biodiversity across various sectors and disciplines before the International Day for Biological Diversity (IDBD) last May 22.

With the theme, "Our solutions are in nature," the observance of the IDBD highlights the global call to citizens to re-examine their relationship with nature.

## Nature-based solution

Since it is widely believed that the problem—severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which causes the Covid-19—came from wild animals, experts consider that the solution to the disease, as well as other future pandemics, should also come from nature.

Asean Deputy Secretary-General Kung Phoak, for Socio-Cultural Community, in his remarks, underscored the importance of nature-based solutions to prevent future pandemics through cross-sectoral collaboration and multi-stakeholder engagement.

The Asean leaders have recently expressed risk concerns about the spread of the new disease and its effects on the wellbeing of the people and global socioeconomic development through the declaration of a special summit on Covid-19 response, he said.

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Moreover, Kung said the Asean leaders have also emphasized the importance of a coherent, multisectoral, multi-stakeholder and whole-of-Asean community approach in ensuring Asean timely and effective response to the pandemic and future public health emergencies.

He encouraged individuals and communities to become “bio-literate” to adopt behaviors that addresses the root cause of future pandemic and zoonosis.

## Covid-19 in Asean

Acep Somatri, director of the Bureau of International Cooperation of Indonesia’s Ministry of Health who spoke on behalf of Drg. Oscar Primadi, chairman of the Senior Officials’ Meeting on Health Development and Secretary-General of the Ministry of Health of Indonesia, said Asean has a total of 69,842 cases and 2,220 deaths as of the date of the webinar.

The latest report, he said, indicated an increasing rate of infection, in the region, with Singapore topping the list, followed by Indonesia and the Philippines.

The Asean mechanism and actions for coordinated Covid-19 response was put in place by the region's leaders, who provided the policy and guidelines as reflected in several statements and declarations.

## **Health sector mechanism**

Likewise, Somatri said Asean health sector mechanisms and platforms were mobilized as part of their response to the global pandemic.

Asean health ministers also lined up priorities in Covid-19 pandemic response—such as enhanced sharing of timely data and information, coordination for cross-border contact-tracing and outbreak investigations, enhanced cooperation in real-time capacity-building, sharing technical, material and financial resources, and enhanced collaboration in research.

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When the coronavirus is defeated, the health ministers also agreed that they would be together in strengthening and institutionalizing regional mechanisms, and intensify cooperation in Covid-19 response.

## **Greater cooperation**

ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim, a wildlife management expert, meanwhile, stressed the need for greater cooperation within the region and with other regional bodies and governments of the world to prevent future pandemics.

Providing a background on Asean biodiversity and zoonoses—or diseases which can be transmitted to humans from animals—Lim said two-thirds of known human infectious diseases are zoonotic, and 75 percent of new and emerging diseases are likewise identified with zoonoses.

Other studies, she added, even suggested that around 90 percent of diseases are linked to animal wildlife.

However, she said earlier that although studies to confirm the possible animal source of Covid-19 are still ongoing, some animals like bats, pangolins—the most traded wildlife on the planet—and even civet cats are being linked to the dreaded coronavirus.

Citing recent data that there may be around 1.7 million unidentified viruses believed to still exist in mammals and water birds that can infect people, she expressed fears that Covid-19 may not be the last.

## **Biodiversity and Asean**

Lim said biodiversity and health, including zoonotic diseases, are interlinked.

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She said biodiversity loss often result in health problems.

“The decline of species can trigger the spillover of viruses that are dormant or inactive, leading to their transmission to both domestic animals and humans. This grim data should serve as a warning to all of us,” Lim said.

She explained that biodiversity encompasses not only plant and animal wildlife species, but the entire ecosystems—both terrestrial and marine ecosystems, including freshwater ecosystems.

While relatively small compared to other regions, Asean is one of the richest in terms of biodiversity, Lim said.

Asean represents only about 3 percent of the Earth’s surface area, but 18 percent of known plants and animals can be found in it.

It also boasts of rich marine and coastal species and ecosystems, having around 173,000-kilometer shorelines.

## **Link to wildlife species**

Wildlife as a source of human disease is often indirect.

While wildlife is often suggested as the origin of a disease, it usually passes through domestic animals that act as “mixing vessels” or “disease bridges” for otherwise latent or dormant pathogens in wildlife reservoirs, Lim explained.

“Clearly, there’s a link to wildlife species and we are at risk because of this certain threats,” she said.

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Lim added that wildlife trade is also an opportunity for contact between humans and wildlife.

Because of illegal wildlife trade, virus and diseases jump directly from wildlife to humans, without passing through domestic animals.

Hence, she said, increasing interaction between humans and wildlife also increases the opportunities for direct infection.

Besides trading, poaching and hunting, by keeping animals as pets or consuming them, are ways for virus and diseases to transfer.

## **Pressure on ecosystems, birds, bats**

Lim said the pressure on ecosystems—by destructive development projects, land-use conversion, human encroachment of wildlife habitats or ecosystems—add to the problem.

The same pressure is being experienced in marine areas by pollution and destruction of ecosystems, which increase the interaction between humans and animals, such as in the case of water birds.

Asean is gifted with diverse species of birds, a reason why the risk of coronavirus passing on to humans is possible.

There are 2,779 avian species in Southeast Asia, 56 are already critically endangered, 85 are endangered, and 184 are vulnerable.

For duck species, two are already critically endangered, two are endangered and five are vulnerable.

Mass death of birds, she said, may be linked to pathogenic diseases, which need to be investigated to prevent a possible outbreak that may lead to a pandemic .

Like birds, bats have been implicated to diseases, citing the case of Covid-19.

In Southeast Asia, Lim said there are 356 bat species, of which 30 percent are mainly fruit bats and nectar feeders, and around 20 percent are insect bats.

The rest, she said, feed on rodents and large insects. Almost 20 percent of all bat species are threatened.

## **Biodiversity means cure**

Biodiversity loss, eventually, result in the loss of sources of medicines necessary for the treatment of diseases, not only at present, but also in the future.

Among ACB's initiatives, Lim said, is mainstreaming biodiversity, and working with Asean member-countries to protect and conserve the wilderness through the Asean Heritage Park (AHP) Program.

AHPs support the protection of the remaining important ecosystems in the region, which are also valuable habitats that act as refuge for wildlife.

Along with the AHP Program, Lim said ACB is focused on helping cause a transformational change in all levels of society through mainstreaming of biodiversity.

It is working with various sectors and is transitioning to a new, and hopefully a “better normal” situation through a change in the mindset and behavior, a new development paradigm and care for the environment in everyday decisions, she said.

During the webinar, Unnikrishnan Payyappalimana of the International Institute for Global Health of the United Nations University shared the highlights of the scoping study on the interlinkages of health and biodiversity of the ACB, in cooperation with UNU-IIGH, Kuala Lumpur and supported by Asean-EU Biodiversity Conservation and Management of Protected Areas in Asean.

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Meanwhile, Tan Sri Zakri bin Abdul Hamid, a Malaysian resource economics and environmental valuation expert, said nature must not be forgotten while governments are saving human lives and rebooting the economy in their post-Covid 19 response.

“After all, the root cause of zoonotic diseases, such as Covid-19, is the destruction of wildlife habitats, a fact endorsed by most scientific community,” Zakri said.

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