

Are we ready for the next pandemic?

As the world struggles to survive the impacts of the dreaded coronavirus disease, the next zoonotic disease may just be around the corner.

By **[Jonathan L. Mayuga](#)**

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As scientists continue to find a cure for the dreaded coronavirus disease that has affected more than 10 million people worldwide, the lingering question is: Are we ready for another zoonotic disease that may cause another pandemic?

A new report by World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) warns that the conditions are rife for the next pandemic—unless action is taken.

Through the report, “Covid-19: Urgent Call to Protect People and Nature,” WWF has called for urgent global action to address the key drivers it has identified which will cause future zoonotic disease outbreaks.

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Zoonotic disease drivers

The environmental factors driving the emergence of zoonotic diseases include: trade and consumption of high-risk wildlife; land-use change leading to deforestation and conversion; expansion of agriculture and unsustainable intensification; and animal production.

In a news release highlighting the launch of WWF’s latest report, Marco Lambertini, director general of WWF International, said there is an urgent need to recognize the links between the destruction of nature and human health.

“We must curb the high-risk trade and consumption of wildlife, halt deforestation and land conversion as well as manage food production sustainably,” he said.

He said such actions will help prevent the spillover of pathogens to humans, and also address other global risks to society like biodiversity loss and climate change.

“There is no debate, and the science is clear: we must work with nature, not against it. Unsustainable exploitation of nature has become an enormous risk to us all,” he added.

Unsustainable global food system

On top of trade and consumption of animal wildlife, the report partly blames the unsustainable global food system, which is driving the large-scale conversion of natural spaces for agriculture, fragmenting natural ecosystems and increasing interactions among wildlife, livestock and humans.

“Since 1990, 178 million hectares of forest have been cleared, which is equivalent to the size of Libya, the 18th-largest country in the world, and around 10 million hectares of forest are still being lost each year through conversion to agriculture and other land uses,” WWF International said.

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The report pointed out that the Covid-19 crisis revealed the need for systemic changes to address the environmental drivers of pandemics.

‘One Health’ approach

WWF is advocating a “One Health” approach that link the health of people, animals and their shared environment.

Specifically, WWF wants the organization to be included in decision-making on wildlife and land-use change, and be incorporated within all business and financing decisions related to global health.

According to Lambertini, there is an opportunity to heal man's relationship with nature and mitigate the risks of future pandemics.

Urgent action

“World leaders must take urgent action to transform our relationship with the natural world. We need a ‘new deal’ for nature and people that sets nature on the path to recovery by 2030 and safeguards human health and livelihoods in the long term,” he said.

For his part, WWF-Philippines Executive Director Joel Palma also noted that it is high time to start treating environmental issues with the same urgency as economic trepidations.

“Science has proven that planetary health is related to human health. This pandemic is a manifestation of our disregard for the environment. We have put on the side environmental protection over economic gains. Our environment can only give as much and is now within its limits that even our economic gains are threatened. It's about time to prioritize the environment so that we can sustain healthy communities with an equitable economy,” he said.

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Back to basics

Biodiversity experts agree with the WWF report's key findings.

Sought for reaction, Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon, the concurrent director of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources-Biodiversity Management Bureau (DENR-BMB) described the report as an “accurate observation.”

Calderon said in a telephone interview with BusinessMirror on June 25 that coping with the challenges of Covid-19 and preparing to face the threats of new ones requires a step back to be able to go back to the basics which are anchored on natural-resource management and nature-based solutions.

“It goes back to basics. We are going back to the management and protection of our natural resources, including our flora and fauna. Despite this pandemic, whether this is natural or synthetic, just the same, we are going back to nature,” the DENR-BMB chief said in mixed English and Filipino,

Solutions in nature

Citing the mantra of the Convention on Biological Diversity, he said the solutions are in nature.

“We can see that even in our economic recovery, we must consider our natural capital as window to survive the new normal. We should go back to basics. [Protecting and conserving] our water, our forest and our wildlife. We should start all over again,” explained Calderon, a forestry expert and a former national coordinator of the government’s National Greening Program, said.

He noted that the road to recovery being eyed by experts amid the pandemic is aligned with the current thrusts and program of the DENR-BMB.

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“Our pipeline projects, the biodiversity corridor project, and an upcoming project, Sibol, a consortium with USAID [United States Agency for International Development], was conceptualized years ago but they are still aligned with the path of the new normal we are going through,” Calderon said.

Human capital investment

Beyond investment in protection and conservation of natural resources, he said the DENR is also heavily invested in human capital.

“If you can see, the DENR is heavily invested not only in natural resources, but also in people in upland and coastal areas as our partner in natural resources management” Calderon added.

He explained that the investment in human capital is a two-way process. “The people [residents] will benefit and us,” referring to the DENR that has been implementing various programs in the rural areas, such as those that tap into the indigenous knowledge and the people in upland communities who are familiar of the local situations, as well as the residents in coastal areas.

Sustainable livelihood, income

Citing the potential adverse impact of Covid-19, the loss of jobs means a need for a sustainable source of income. This, he said, can be provided by “green jobs program.”

“There are many displaced OFWs [overseas Filipino workers] and this new normal points to the direction of economic activities that are dependent on natural resources, such as farming. To increase agricultural productivity, there’s a need to ensure good water source,” he said.

“The road to recovery, although there’s a need to invest in the health sector, there’s also a need to invest on the natural resource sector as part of the new normal,” he ended.

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Biodiversity decline

The Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) said the threats of new zoonotic diseases, possibly deadlier than Covid-19, are real.

Interviewed via Messenger on June 25, ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim, a licensed veterinarian with specialization on wildlife management and disease, said that as with the rest of the world, the Southeast Asian region has experienced biodiversity decline over the years.

“According to Asean Biodiversity Outlook 2, the region stands to lose 13 percent to 42 percent of its species by 2100. It is a concern that biodiversity decline, if it will continue

unabated, can trigger the spillover of viruses that are dormant or inactive, leading to their transmission to domestic animals and humans,” she said.

Health and biodiversity

She noted that the recent pandemic has indeed made the connection between biodiversity and health more palpable—public health is dependent on the richness and health of biodiversity, or the variability among living organisms.

“As biodiversity underpins all ecosystems and the fundamental services that they provide for humanity’s daily subsistence, the decline of biodiversity could spell out the reduction of these services,” she said

The ACB chief cited that scientists have estimated that there could still be around 1.7 million viruses in wild mammals and birds that could potentially cause pandemics.

Lim, a former director of the DENR-BMB, said bats have been identified as a natural reservoir for most of such viruses.

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“The Asean region is a center of diversity for bat species. If left alone and protected, these bats will continue to keep these potential pathogens at bay,” she said.

According to Lim, having the mandate to facilitate cooperation and coordination among Asean member-states, the ACB has been supporting the region in tackling these issues, including the resolve of Asean member-states to address the drivers of biodiversity loss that could lead to more health crises in the future.

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