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U.N. Predicts Rise In Diseases That Jump From Animals To Humans Due To Habitat Loss

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A cut tree stands in a burned area in Piranha, Para state, Brazil. A U.N. report says habitat loss is leading to more animal-to-human transmission of disease.
Leo Correa/AP

A new United Nations report warns that more diseases that pass from animals to humans, such as COVID-19, are likely to emerge as habitats are ravaged by wildlife exploitation, unsustainable farming practices and climate change.

These pathogens, known as zoonotic diseases, also include Ebola, MERS, HIV/AIDS and West Nile virus. They have increasingly emerged because of stresses humans have placed on animal habitats, according to the U.N. Environment Program report Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission, released on Monday.

"We have intensified agriculture, expanded infrastructure and extracted resources at the expense of our wild spaces," UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen said. "The science is clear that if we keep exploiting wildlife and destroying our ecosystems, then we can expect to see a steady stream of these diseases jumping from animals to humans in the years ahead."

Andersen said that investing in research of zoonotic diseases would allow the world to get "ahead of the game ... preventing the type of global shutdown we've seen."

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The new report recommends that governments adopt a coordinated "One Health" approach pulling together public health, veterinary and environmental experts to combat these outbreaks of zoonotic diseases.

"People look back to the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919 and think that such disease outbreaks only happen once in a century," said Maarten Kappelle, the head of scientific assessments at UNEP. "But that's no longer true. If we don't restore the balance between the natural world and the human one, these outbreaks will become increasingly prevalent."

Global demand for animal meat has increased 260% in the past half century, exacerbating the problem, Andersen said.

Some animals, such as rodents, bats, carnivores and nonhuman primates, are most likely to harbor zoonotic diseases, with livestock acting as a bridge for transmission between the animal hosts and humans, according to the report.

Meanwhile, in some of the world's poorest regions, endemic zoonotic diseases associated with livestock cause more than 2 million human deaths a year, the report says. However, Africa, which has successfully responded to a number of zoonotic epidemics, such as Ebola, could be a place to turn for solutions to controlling outbreaks of human-to-animal diseases in the future, it says.

"To prevent future outbreaks, countries need to conserve wild habitats, promote sustainable agriculture, strengthen food safety standards, monitor and regulate food markets, invest in technology to identify risks, and curb the illegal trade in wildlife," U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said.

zoonotic diseases united nations

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