

Environmental Health is Public Health

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Daily, the number of environmental threats, from pollution to biodiversity loss to climate change grows. Yet, we are still failing to connect these challenges with the opportunities we have to address them. This failure of inaction has dire consequences for us as a species. It is also a missed opportunity to address a number of global health challenges.

First up. We are in the midst of a 6th extinction crisis, Up to [one million species](#) are threatened with extinction. Pollution, overexploitation and climate change, are destroying ecosystems and the [biodiversity](#) they contain at an astounding rate. The impact of this is hardly realized but could be catastrophic. Take bees, other insects and birds. They are pollinators. Their extinction threatens more than [¾ of our world's leading types of food crops](#) which would put [millions of people](#) around the world at risk of malnutrition. Overfishing along with pollution threatens to destroy our marine resources which will put up to [1.39 billion people](#) at risk of micronutrient deficiencies. It's not just about bees and fish; all species are important as they form the delicate web of life that surrounds us. As other species go, so too do we.

We use the planet as a dumping ground. Pollution, seeping from [landfills](#), [agriculture and industry](#) kills. According to a [study](#), in 2015, pollution resulted in 9 million premature deaths and 268 million [DALYs](#) (disability-adjusted life-years). Pesticides are a major source of this pollution. According to a [study by Hoang et. al.](#), the use of pesticides is responsible for 5-6% of the world's [non-communicable diseases](#), specifically Parkinson's disease, cancers, infertility, development disorders, and it affects thyroid and childhood development.

Air pollution is a particularly growing threat to our health. [90% of people](#) on Earth are breathing polluted air. This [increases the global burden of heart disease](#), stroke, lung cancer, COPD, lower-respiratory infections and type 2 diabetes. The [UN Environment's Sixth Global Environment Outlook \(2019\)](#), reported that [fine particulate air pollution](#) was responsible for 6 to 7 million deaths worldwide in 2016.

Investing in clean and renewable energy will not only mitigate against climate change, but it will also reduce air pollution. Another way to do this is to look to nature. The world's reserves of forests, wetlands, mangrove swamps and jungles are built in systems that absorb [carbon dioxide](#) and many pollutants. In 2017 alone, forests

absorbed [3.8 billion tons of carbon](#) which is about 38% of the fossil fuel and industry emissions that year. When wildfires occur, such as what we saw in Australia, Indonesia, Brazil and the Western United States two big problems occur. Massive amounts of carbon are released into the atmosphere and these natural carbon sinks are destroyed. According to a [report](#), wildfires in Australia alone during the summer of 2019, released upwards of 409,700,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Climate change is an existential threat to our lives. Rising sea levels, larger wildfires, drought, and more frequent and extreme weather events are resulting in a loss of life, property and increasing insecurity especially for vulnerable populations. This in combination with pollution, biodiversity losses, and the destruction of ecosystems is increasing the incidence of [cardiovascular disease, cancers, respiratory illness, diabetes, mental-health related illnesses, and malnutrition food](#) as well as the [rise and spread of infectious diseases](#). Protecting our natural ecosystems will reduce the incidence of these diseases.

The loss of these ecosystems across the globe affects us all. One of the main things we can do to combat deforestation and climate change is to adopt a more balanced diet by eating less meat. The [rising demand of meat](#), especially cattle, requires more and more land, to both raise the cattle and grow their feed. This has motivated the deforestation of our forests and jungles as seen in the [Amazon Region](#). The animals themselves also contribute to the global amount of [greenhouse gases](#). By adopting a diet with less red and processed meat, you also reduce your risk of developing non-communicable diseases such as [obesity, cardiovascular disease, colorectal cancer and type 2 diabetes](#).

Protecting our environment not only protects nature, but also our health. It is a win, win investment for policymakers. Collective action by environmentalists, public health officials, NGOs and the private sector can drive policymakers to protect our ecosystems and in doing so will protect our health and the health of future generations.

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