

# ECOLOGIST

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## Natural solutions to pandemics

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As we gather around the daily briefing lectern to hear about the latest Covid 19 regulations on our day-to-day lives, the question on everyone's lips is, how did we get to this point?

Countless more businesses face closure as many areas of the country face tougher restrictions under the revised tier system following the second lockdown.

Of course, there are many ways to slice and dissect the current situation, from scrutinising public health policies to looking at meta trends of globalisation.

### Zoonotic

However, we cannot sit here and claim this as an exclusively human crisis. This is a crisis of our natural world.

Scientists have been warning of the rise in zoonotic diseases and the potential for global pandemics for years.

Yet despite these warnings, consumption rates have increased and the destruction of our natural world has continued. Current estimations put deforestation at a 50 percent to 70 percent increase through 2020 compared to 2019.

Now is the time when we need to look directly at the link between human wellbeing and the continued pillage of our home, our planet.

Emerging research from a number of sources has proven that high biodiversity has the capacity to interfere and affect the transmission of zoonotic diseases.

### Transmitting

This process is known as the 'dilution effect'. With high levels of animal biodiversity, the number of 'superspreaders' - hosts or vectors that are particularly competent at spreading pathogens - are balanced out by non-spreading species, reducing the overall spread of pathogens.

Of course, nature has a system and a balance. But what happens when deforestation or a similar disturbance depletes biodiversity?

The self-regulation capacity of forests is lost. Forests become out of balance and unhealthy. The alteration of forest habitats disrupts wild animal populations.

Predators become extinct and their absence benefits small herbivores and other small mammals whose numbers then increase.

When they have exhausted the local food supply, these smaller creatures will disperse and come into contact with humans and some of these are known to be capable of carrying and transmitting infectious pathogens.

## **Possible**

So maintaining a healthy, ecological balance and working with nature is crucial to reducing the risk of future pandemics and zoonotic disease infection.

Regardless of what happens in the coming weeks, or after a vaccine has been made widely available, it is blatantly clear that we cannot continue to plunder our planet without suffering the consequences.

So, before we all rush to share the nostalgia of how things used to be, let's first take some time to really explore what we want a new normal to look like.

Resilient local community networks, better availability of green energy, a reduction in Christmas consumption, increased availability of locally grown produce, local seed banks, regreened cities - all these things are possible.

When we finally go back to our 'new normal', the power to define what our world looks like is in our hands. Let's make it count.

## **Habitat**

If we are consuming, if we are taking from nature - which of course we all are - now is the time to make it normal to give back.

Carbon offsetting is one example of this, but why not dream of a new normal which isn't as transactional as swapping carbon footprint for cash, but built on respect, reverence and love of nature?

The events of this year have brought about a collective longing for solutions. Let's not wait for government, for policy or for a complete climate collapse. We are the solution. We can drive the massive change that is needed.

One of the easiest, most effective ways to ensure a healthy future, for us and for our world, is to plant trees. Lots of them.

Trees sequester carbon from the atmosphere, they cool the Earth, regulate the water cycle and provide habitat for wildlife.

## **Growing**

There are so many benefits of large scale reforestation, the ancient wisdom of trees offers remedial solutions for a plethora of today's health and environmental problems.

Of course, for most of us planting thousands of hectares of forest is not feasible in the gardens of UK suburbia. So how do we start a reforestation revolution that is going to change the course of history?

Enter TreeSisters. TreeSisters' philosophy is local, ethical, community-based reforestation with native trees.

The charity is currently planting and assisting trees to regenerate naturally in 11 areas across the tropics, including the Amazon rainforest and the Orangutan habitats of Borneo.

Funding a tree will set you back just £0.40. But what is really needed is an on-going commitment to our Earth in the form of a monthly direct debit which makes growing a forest a reality.

## **Plant**

£20 will fund 50 trees, so over a year you could grow a forest which is 600 trees strong. Even just £5 a month - the cost of swapping two takeaway coffees - could fund 150 trees by this time next year.

Over the next few weeks, we will see the continued debate rage on regarding how we got into this situation.

Fingers will be pointed and accusations will be made. But when the anger subsides, when all is said and done, nature-based solutions will, do, and continue to offer us a viable and healthy future.

Of course, it is impossible to know what is coming next. But perhaps, guided by the beautiful simplicity of planting trees, we can all create a better, healthier world.

As Clare Dubois, Founder of TreeSisters, puts it: “It’s tangible, it’s simple, it’s future-proofed, it’s life-giving.”

So, what’s stopping us from creating our own answer to the question, what comes next? Let’s decide to start a green revolution, let’s create a healthier future for all. Let’s plant trees.

Source: <https://theecologist.org/2020/dec/07/natural-solutions-pandemics>