

# Earth Wars: Nature Strikes Back

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April 27, 2021

**The current pandemic has had many severe consequences, but it has also acted as a reminder of the need for international cooperation when facing global challenges. Continued environmental destruction will likely increase the risk for future pandemics. Population growth is one of the main driving factors of the continued encroachment into nature and needs to be addressed as such.**

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2020 was undoubtedly the year of COVID-19. The pandemic overshadowed the phantom menace of human overpopulation and the vast global healthcare, environmental, political, economic and social implications it causes, above all climate change [1,2,3]. Besides the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the deaths of 3 million people to date [4] as well as severe economic losses, and both directly and indirectly affected the physical and mental health of whole populations, the virus lifted a disturbing mirror to us and our society.

It showed us how fundamentally unprepared we were against the global menace despite all the technological advancement and general progress humanity has achieved. Worse, it revealed how undisciplined and even disobedient we are as citizens who are not willing to follow the benign recommendations given by authorities and experts (i.e. optional social distancing, wearing masks and respirators, and increased hygiene) [5]. The pandemic uncovered how much we value our individual freedoms to the extent we refuse to bear personal hardships for the common good; for example, how little we are willing to restrict ourselves in our free-time activities in solidarity with vulnerable, high-risk groups. How much we wish to think we are in the age of reason, while we believe everything from the irrational to the mendacious – myths, prejudice and fake news. How in a pursuit for never-ending economic growth and financial profit, we are willing to risk the lives and health of ourselves and others, such as our employers and employees [6].

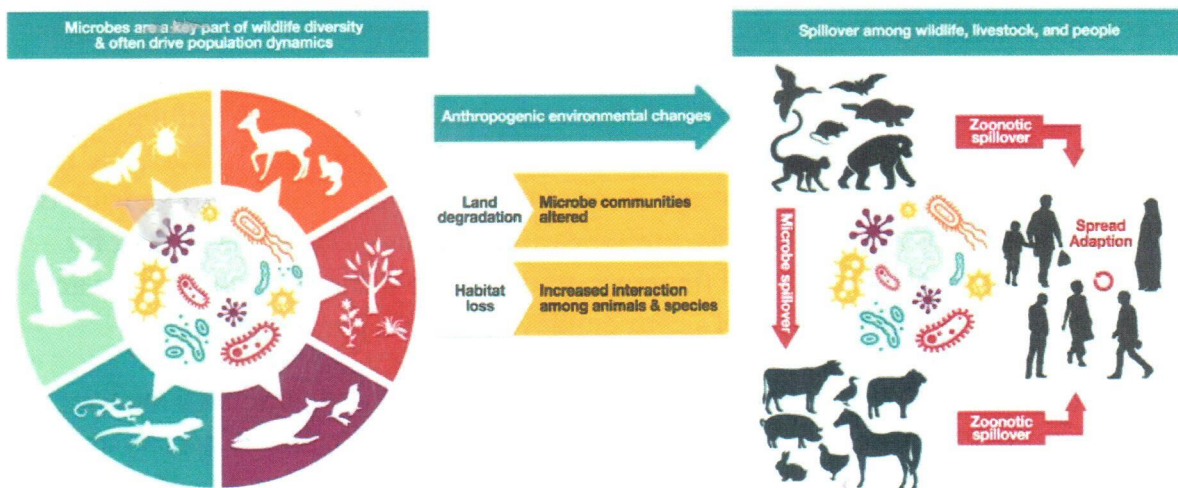
Still, from a long-term perspective, this difficult time in our history can be beneficial: It helped us uncover negative phenomena about ourselves and our current society and realize our mistakes and weaknesses, so that when another threat to our civilisation strikes, whether viral, extra-terrestrial or *another*, perhaps more threatening and lethal than this one, we can be better prepared. This difficult time also helps us realize that the environment is without borders and what happens in one region of the world affects the others. The virus respects no state borders, different political ideologies, or religious and cultural differences. Despite our differences, in a globalized world, humanity is essentially one organism; or, in other words, humanity is also without borders. For that reason, the virus is an important reminder of the need for international cooperation in meeting global challenges.



The realization of the unity of humanity, and its subsequent need for global cooperation, is a must because new disease outbreaks of pandemic scale are a near mathematical certainty if humanity does not improve its relationship with nature [7]. Multiple scientific authorities as well as international organizations, including the UN and WHO, have released warnings about how overexploitation of nature, especially via deforestation, wildlife trade and animal agriculture, is fueling this and similar human health crises [8].

In November, the *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES) released the major report “[IPBES Workshop on Biodiversity and Pandemics](#),” according to which the exponential increase in human consumption, trade, and global population leads to the increased risk of pandemics, with more than five new diseases emerging in humans every year [9]. IPBES Workshop Chair Peter Daszak states, “There is no great mystery about the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic, or of any other modern pandemic. The same human activities that drive climate change and biodiversity loss also drive pandemic risk through their impacts on our environment” [9].

Nearly all known recent pandemics and emerging diseases, including Ebola, Zika, Nipah encephalitis, influenza, HIV/AIDS and COVID-19, are zoonotic diseases that spread due to close contact between wildlife, livestock, and humans [9]. Population growth and increased wealth and consumption lead to increased production of meat products. According to projections, by 2030, the global middle class is expected to reach 5.3 billion people; i.e., two billion more consumers of meat products [10]. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the consumption of meat products, driven by a growing number of human consumers, is projected to double by mid-century [10], which will heighten the risk of new pandemics.



The spread of zoonotic diseases originates from anthropogenic destruction of the environment. Image from [IPBES Workshop on Biodiversity and Pandemics](#).

Intensive agriculture that brings animals into closer contact with humans creates an environment that enables the easier transmission of new viruses from animals to humans. Even without this, global agriculture uses half of all habitable land on Earth. What’s more, the triple threat of human expansion into natural habitats, urbanization, and globalization taken together increases exposure to new viruses. First, a growing population means



people expand into new areas where they might encounter infected species. Subsequently, the movement of people from rural areas into cities increases urban population density, and large human populations in cities and megacities represent ideal conditions for disease spread. Last, globalization results in close contacts between populations, and their greater and faster movement within and between countries means disease can spread more rapidly and extensively, as we witnessed this year. It is clear that population growth and environmental destruction fuel these deadly diseases [11].

Instead of merely relying on a damage-control strategy, IPBES calls for prevention of pandemic emergence, which is also more economical. The report shows that global preventive measures based on reducing wildlife trade and land use change would cost two orders of magnitude less than the damages inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic [9]. However, our track record for pre-emptive action is not good: Population Matters' [Olivia Nater](#) has highlighted our apparent inability to act until it's too late for all environmental crises we face today, from climate change to the sixth mass extinction [8].

The IPBES report warns that an estimated 1.7 million currently undiscovered viruses are thought to exist in mammal and bird hosts, between 540 to 850 thousand of which could potentially infect humans [9]. There is a great risk that preference for reaction over prevention will lead to people culling wildlife and livestock populations in response to the threat, which represents our destructive tendencies towards world domination. Such responses present a bitter irony. We brought on this pandemic, just like previous ones, by our disrespect of nature and its biodiversity of flora and fauna [8]. Metaphorically, it can be said that we brought this revenge of the virus on ourselves.

In December, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his "The State of the Planet" speech said: "Humanity is waging war on nature. This is suicidal. Nature always strikes back – and it is already doing so with growing force and fury. Biodiversity is collapsing. One million species are at risk of extinction. Ecosystems are disappearing before our eyes... Human activities are at the root of our descent toward chaos. But that means human action can help to solve it" [12].

IPBES, alongside other international bodies and recent scientific literature, urges the reduction of meat production and consumption, reduced wildlife trade and better biodiversity protection. It also calls for greater investments into gender equality, universal access to family planning methods and services and to education, including environmental education [9]. But that is only the start. We must do more: This pandemic can represent a paradigm shift in our thinking. As Olivia Nater concluded in her article reflecting on 2020, "Nature does not exist for us to exploit and destroy – we are just one of millions of interconnected species whose survival depends on a healthy environment" [8].

Seeking further war and striking back harder against nature is precisely *not* what we should do. The only way to "win" this war is to stop it. We must stop the interspecies genocide we are committing and stop destroying the environment that surrounds and supports us. We must retreat from some positions we violently conquered from nature and give back space for other species to flourish once again. Our retreat will enable us to



seek a truce, and eventually peace, with nature and its species: a win-win scenario. The opposite strategy, i.e. the continuing “attack of the humans” on nature and spread of their populations, products and garbage is apocalyptic for both humanity and nature.

Many would agree with Nobel Prize winning biologist Joshua Lederberg, who said that the single biggest threat to man’s continued dominance on this planet is the virus. This famous quote can be extended to say that the single biggest threat to the continued existence of life on this planet is man (more him than her). Finally, Lederberg’s quote can be extended to say that the single biggest threat to humanity’s continued existence on this planet is humanity. The circle is now complete.

If we successfully change our way of thinking and our way of life, if we show our respect, empathy and foresight towards nature and its interconnected species, and if we can find a reasonable harmony between humanity, its long-term sustainable development, and nature, there will be a new hope for a truly sustainable future for all.

As Antonio Guterres observed, human activities can help solve our problems. It must be said that we need to start by taking a critical look at the popular human activity of procreation, specifically sexual activity unbridled by the use of contraception. The effect of all other human activities, including all global production and consumption, derive from this one. While other measures (living car-free, avoiding flights, using green energy, going vegetarian, etc.) are important, they become truly functional only if we rein in procreation in the first place. To be clear, we need to limit human numbers by rational and ethical means through voluntary, non-coercive family planning methods, services and counselling, and by promotion of a reproductive ethics of small families (a maximum of two children, i.e., replacement level, and ideally less) [13].

Surely, it may seem absurd just after 3 million people have died from COVID-19 to call for a decrease in natality, but it is necessary to look towards the bigger picture and understand that human population increases by over 80 million people *every* year. This comparison can help us acknowledge the magnitude of our growth and its unsustainability (especially when compared with the steep decline in other species) [1,2]. To reduce our numbers is not only ethical (giving space to other terrestrial species and preserving resources for future generations) but also rational: if human population does not decline to long-term sustainable numbers, there cannot be a long-term sustainable environment for a decent human life. This is not one of the possible ways, this is the only way, for without sustainability there is no future, no survival of humanity and the biosphere. Only if we acknowledge this and act upon it, can we proclaim the return of reason.

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