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Planetary Health

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This is an episode from the “What Makes Us Human?” podcast’s second season, “Where Is the Human in Climate Change?” from Cornell University’s College of Arts & Sciences, showcasing the newest thinking from across the disciplines about the relationship between humans and the environment. Featuring audio essays written and recorded by Cornell faculty, the series releases a new episode each Tuesday through the spring.



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In the mid-2000s, I started to spend more time thinking about how our changing environment was impacting our health, and about ecosystem services—the things that nature gives us that truly sustain us, such as the provision of clean air and fresh water by forests, and the supply of nutritious foods that come from coral reefs and fisheries.

I vividly remember going into one meeting where a very... agitated Minister of Public Health from a large country in Latin America said, “My counterpart, the Minister of Forests, has sold X millions of dollars of logging rights over the past decade. But my ministry, the Ministry of Public Health, has spent orders of magnitude more on the malaria that followed that logging.” And so there was just this stark right hand-left hand issue in the same government, where the vector-borne disease consequences of the way that logging was done, of the subsequent movements of people into what had been intact forest—these consequences were a total externality— meaning the forestry sector wasn’t accounting for them. And yet—someone was clearly bearing the costs.

So I started to ask the luminaries in the ecosystem services realm why they weren’t talking more about health. At the time, it turned out no one was really looking at the health aspects of this, so I assembled a group of environmental conservationists, public health specialists, MDs and others to hold some brainstorming sessions. We started to look around the world—at things like the paper and pulp and palm oil industries in Indonesia where

land is cleared by burning. The haze that gets generated across Southeast Asia causes hundreds of millions of dollars of costs in cardiopulmonary disease downwind—in Indonesia itself, Singapore and Malaysia—again, a very real consequence that the industries involved had essentially been ignoring.

We noted, too, that about 75 percent of emerging diseases, like Ebola, arise out of the hunting and consumption of wild animals. HIV/AIDS arose from the transmission of a virus when someone killed and ate a chimpanzee. Yet global companies that log or mine in places like the Congo Basin are not always held accountable for making sure that their workers are well-provisioned with food, so field staff are forced to eat wild animals, increasing the risk of another emerging infectious disease jumping into the human population. So logging, mining and energy companies are helping to create this exacerbated risk— but not bearing the costs. We are fooling ourselves about the true costs of incursions into what is left of wild nature, and, similarly, about the true costs of disrupting the global climate system.

We have to get better at quantifying these relationships, while of course being intellectually honest. We can't pretend that "intact nature" always equals "healthy," at least for humans. We drain swamps to get rid of malaria, we cut down trees and plant crops to feed people nutritious foods. I acknowledge that. But I'm interested in knowing where is there a true win-win, where do incredibly complex systems like coral reefs and forests and grasslands pay positive public health dividends that we've been taking for granted? Can we better quantify these dividends in ways that are clear to both economists and the public health community? I think we can.

Robust transdisciplinary research is needed to unravel these complex relationships and support really moving science into policy and action. But if we succeed in this new field we now call planetary health, humanity can make more holistic, better-informed decisions, in terms of land- and ocean-use planning, public health policy, and environmental conservation. It's critical that we do this. We are today mining nature's capital instead of living off of the interest it generates, and so we're essentially stealing the future from our children and grandchildren.

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