

# COVID-19 Lessons for Environmental Law and Policy

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As I write this, [COVID-19-related deaths](#) have soared to over 185,000 in the United States and more than 835,000 globally. [Scientists](#) and [public health experts](#) agree that the data indicate COVID-19 arose from a zoonotic source; that is, from animals to humans. Rabies, West Nile virus, plague, and Lyme disease are other well-known examples of zoonotic diseases and infections. Wild animals harbor an estimated [40,000 unknown viruses](#), a quarter of which could potentially jump into humans. The [World Health Organization estimates](#) that 75 percent of new infectious diseases in the past decade are zoonotic in origin.

Future pandemics will occur, and [experts worry](#) how we will fare when key nations “can’t even deal with a starter pandemic.” Lessons from COVID-19 can guide us in becoming more knowledgeable in preventing pandemics where we can, and responding to them when we must.

Regarding response, COVID-19 has demonstrated that those nations that quickly mobilized to test, trace, quarantine as needed, and effectively treat the sick have been most successful in limiting illnesses and death and restarting economies. Building up an efficient health care system, and developing and practicing pandemic plans, will be essential elements of future response strategies.

As to prevention, the first step is recognizing that human health and well-being is inextricably tied up with that of other species and ecosystems. In offering strategies to prevent the next zoonotic pandemic, the UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme warns that “growth in humanity and its activity is largely to blame” for the challenges we face. She adds that:



We have intensified agriculture, expanded infrastructure and extracted resources at the expense of our wild spaces. Dams, irrigation and factory farms are linked to 25 per cent of infectious diseases in humans. Travel, transport and food supply chains have erased borders and distances. Climate change has contributed to the spread of pathogens. The end result is that people and animals, with the diseases they carry, are closer than ever.

She recommends accelerated attention to “ending the over-exploitation of wildlife and other natural resources, farming sustainably, reversing land degradation and protecting ecosystem health,” and the “urgent” integration of human, animal, and environmental health expertise. This latter, “[One Health](#)” approach is being advanced by partners such as the World Health Organization, the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature ([IUCN](#)), which represents over 15,000 conservation experts globally. Experts in the public health, animal health, plant health, and ecological sectors are working together towards joint

detection and prevention of, and coordinated response to, potential outbreaks of zoonoses at the local, national, regional and international levels. The recent [Berlin Principles on One Health](#) accordingly recommend governance and investment strategies that “integrate biodiversity conservation perspectives and human health and well-being.”

Despite such pleas from experts to improve human-environment relationships as a means of preventing new infectious diseases, the UN has found that many nations are in fact weakening, rather than strengthening, environmental controls during the current pandemic, [particularly in the Americas](#). Calling this rollback “[irrational and irresponsible](#),” UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and the Environment David Boyd appealed to nations to protect human rights and health by ensuring a “safe, clean and sustainable natural environment.”

The [IUCN’s World Commission on Environmental Law](#) has issued [guidance on law and governance](#) needed to meet this challenge. These global environmental law practitioners, researchers, and judges call not only for full implementation of existing laws, but also improved protection of the environment, grounded in core principles that include:

- the obligation of all – from nations to private entities to individuals – to care for and promote the well-being of nature,
- the rights of each human and other living beings to the conservation, protection, and restoration of the health and integrity of ecosystems, including nature’s own “inherent right to exist, thrive, and evolve,” and
- decisionmaking that errs on the side of protecting and conserving the environment.



In implementing such measures, immediate prioritization of global action to protect environmental defenders is critical. [Harassment and killing of frontline advocates](#) working to safeguard lands and lives continues to rise, including [attacks during COVID-19 lockdowns](#) designed to “strengthen draconian measures to control citizens and roll back hard-fought environmental regulations.” The [UN has called on nations](#) to provide a “safe and enabling” space for environmental defenders, so they may

“operate free from threats, harassment, intimidation and violence.” The UN has further developed a [model law](#) to protect those working to protect us. Nations should take up this effort, along with enhanced environmental protections, to best ensure shared human and environmental well-being in the future.

*Linda Sheehan, August 28, 2020*

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