

#GLFBiodiversity



Protected areas in a post-COVID world

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White paper

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Increasing risk of zoonoses due to biodiversity loss and degradation

The current COVID-19 pandemic, believed to originate in a virus spillover from animals to humans at a 'wet market' in Wuhan, China, is just the latest addition in a series of zoonotic infectious diseases of regional or global reach, including, among others, HIV/AIDS, Ebola and SARS. Yet while COVID-19 proliferates particularly quickly, scientists have already been warning for quite some time that such spillover events are likely to become more frequent and potentially even more dangerous – and that this increase is not a coincidence. Rather, it is a consequence of the destruction of ecosystems and of humans' ever-closer encroachment into wildlife habitats through agricultural expansion, deforestation, urbanisation, wildlife hunting and trafficking, etc. In unbalanced ecosystems, more robust species, which are more likely to carry dangerous viruses, spread and endure more easily, and with increasing contact between humans and wild animals, the likelihood of human contagion rises. As such, while tackling the global human health crisis is the immediate imperative in this pandemic, in the intermediate term conservation must take center stage in the crisis response strategy. Traditionally, protected areas are a cornerstone of conservation strategies, yet initial reactions to the pandemic shed new light on persisting debates about the promises and pitfalls of protected areas.

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Humans and nature: integration or separation?

The long-lasting debate about protected areas' role for preserving valuable ecosystems has gained new urgency, particularly with regard to the Global South. It is widely acknowledged that well-managed protected areas can make an important contribution to storing carbon in trees and soils, as well as to conserving species and ecosystems, and thereby to maintaining environmental and human health. However, conservation approaches that support a strict separation between spaces for human livelihood activities and spaces for wildlife have come under sustained criticism in recent years. This criticism echoes concerns over human rights violations in protected areas, as local people are frequently evicted from their ancestral land, and customary rights to the areas' resources may be curtailed, thereby putting at risk their livelihood, self-determination and traditional knowledge. In contrast, many have argued that environmental and social sustainability requires much greater integration of human and non-human nature. Evidence is also growing that biodiversity thrives better in sustainably-managed landscapes than if left on its own. Yet the zoonotic origins of COVID-19 forcefully illustrate the dangers of human intrusion into wildlife habitats, and have resulted in calls to fortify the remaining pristine refuges for wildlife and to promote a stronger separation between humans and nature. So, do we need a new debate about the appropriate balance between humans and non-human nature, and the buffer function of protected areas?

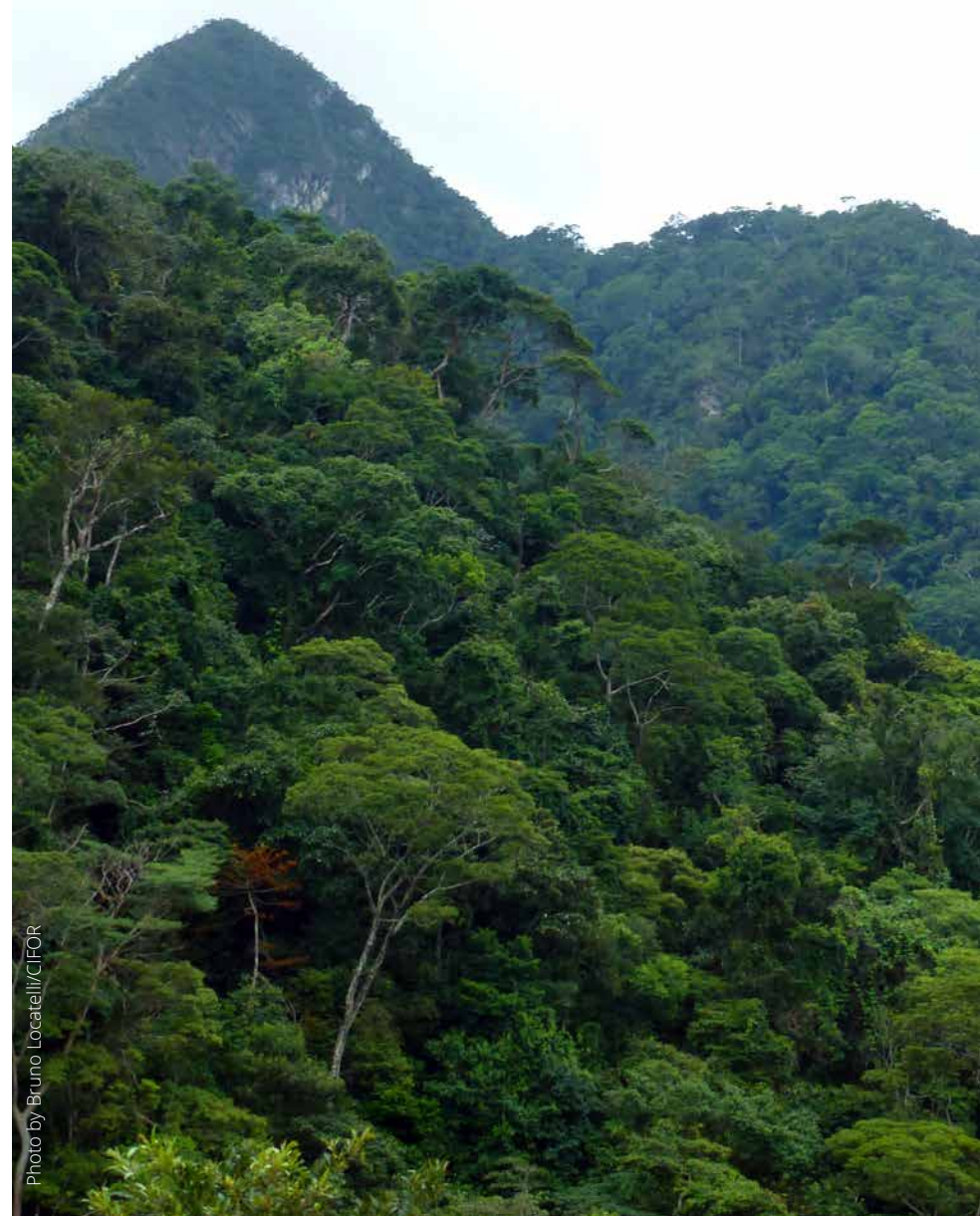
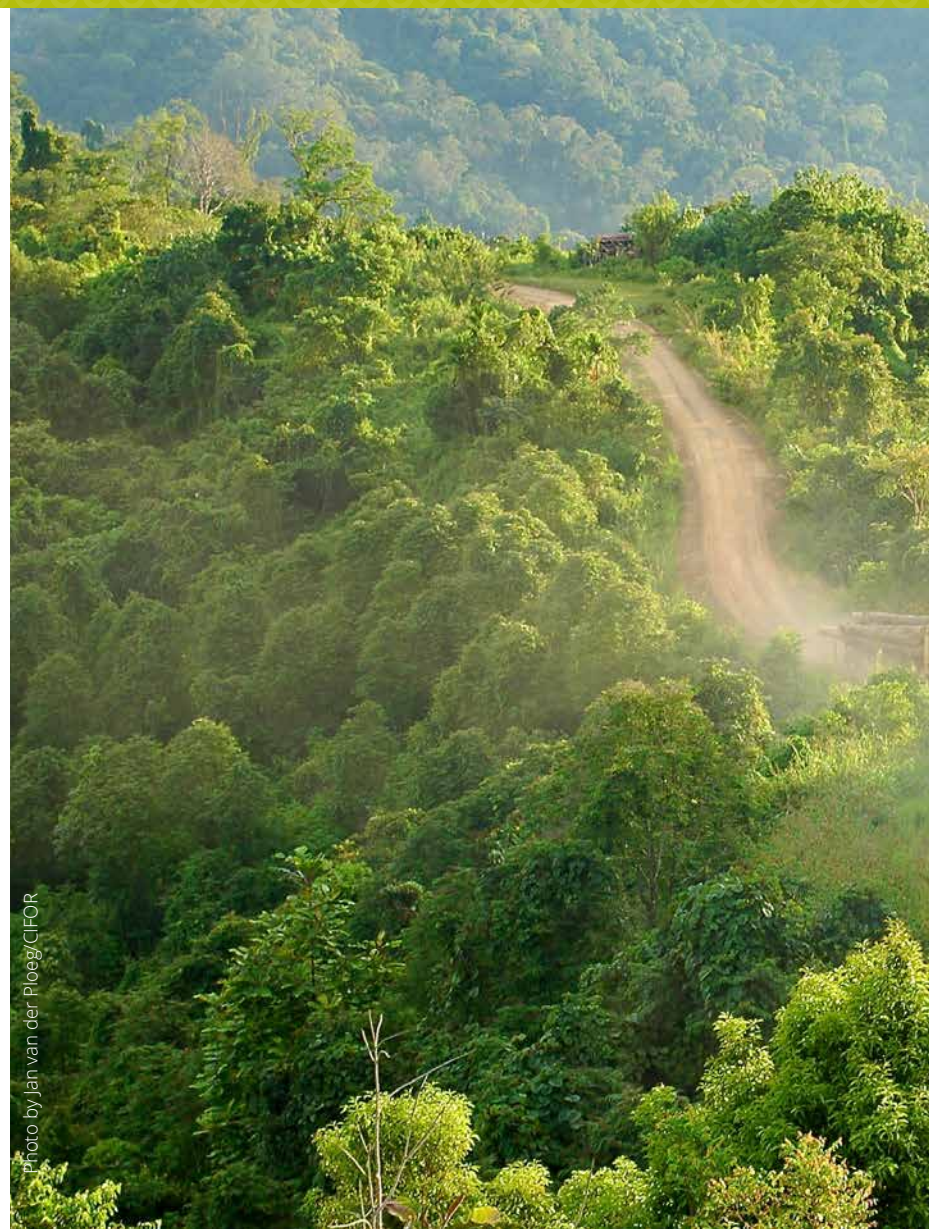


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Threats to protected areas' sustainability

Several indirect consequences of the pandemic also threaten the sustainability of protected areas. In many countries in the Global South, subsistence pressures on protected areas have increased: as day labourers lose essential income in lockdowns, as market supply chains are interrupted and as populations re-migrate from the cities to rural areas, more and more people turn to protected areas' resources to meet their daily needs. A related challenge derives from the sharp decline in ecotourism. Wildlife tourism has previously attracted much criticism for its flight-related carbon footprint, and for being environmentally and socially unsustainable when it admits large numbers of tourists to the parks while local rural communities are excluded from their forests, pastures and homelands. Yet, under COVID-19 conditions, many tourism employees lose their income, adding to the subsistence pressure on protected areas, and revenues from tourism for protected area management are missing. Finally, with countries striving for economic recovery, there is a real danger that protected areas will be degazetted to allow for economic exploitation such as logging or mining. What, then, is needed to safeguard protected areas from the economic repercussions of the pandemic? In particular, what might a green post-pandemic tourism recovery, which generates revenues for protected areas without adversely affecting habitats and fuelling global warming, look like? How might the economic slump be overcome without sacrificing vulnerable ecosystems?

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Political action needed

In this GLF session, we aim to discuss the new potential challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic for protected areas, lessons learned and the way forward, in the form of a digital roundtable with participants from diverse backgrounds and with diverse viewpoints. We look forward to multifaceted and well-balanced discussions of highly complex political questions that will allow us to draw action-oriented conclusions to inform protected areas policy debates ahead of the [UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#), the next [IUCN World Conservation Congress](#) and the [Convention on Biological Diversity COP 15](#).

References and background material:

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The **Global Landscapes Forum** (GLF) is the world's largest knowledge-led platform on integrated land use, dedicated to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Climate Agreement. The Forum takes a holistic approach to create sustainable landscapes that are productive, prosperous, equitable and resilient and considers five cohesive themes of food and livelihood, landscape restoration, rights, finance and measuring progress. It is led by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), in collaboration with its co-founders UN Environment Programme and the World Bank and Charter Members.

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