

Forests reduce health risks, new global report confirms

The global scientific evidence of the multiple types of benefits that forests, trees and green spaces have on human health has now been assessed by an international and interdisciplinary team of scientists. The outcome presented in a major peer-reviewed report titled **"Forests and Trees for Human Health: Pathways, Impacts Challenges and Response Options"** by the [Global Forest Expert Panels \(GFEP\) Programme](#) of the [International Union of Forest Research Organizations](#) (IUFRO).

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Image by Alexander Buck

The report highlights the important contribution of forests and trees to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its goals, particularly Goal 3 (SDG 3), which aims to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all all ages."

Contemporary human health challenges differ across the globe. In low- and middle-income countries, health is related to interactions with forests through food, medicinal plants, and clean water as well as infectious diseases, such as malaria or Zika virus. In high-income countries, there is a higher dominance of non-communicable diseases such as heart diseases and diabetes, but also mental disorders.

"Health benefits of forests are particularly important for vulnerable communities in low-income countries, like many countries in Africa, which have limited access to health-related services. Water filtration by forests, for example, help fight diarrheal diseases among children in communities lacking access to water treatment technology", says *Ranaivo Rasolofson*, Madagascar, researcher at Duke University, North Carolina, USA, and member of the Expert Panel on Forest and Human Health.

Forests and trees provide medicinal plants, which are particularly important to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) and provide basic health care for 70% of the world's population. A recent study revealed that the well-known African Baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) has multiple medicinal benefits in the treatment of infectious diseases and the bark's extract has been found to be useful against malaria and fever.

Global crises such as climate change and its extremes, land-use change, urbanization and biodiversity loss endanger the important role that forests and trees provide as 'safety nets' for the food security and livelihoods of vulnerable populations. For example, a study covering rural households in Ethiopia, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda revealed that the amount and composition of forests and their accessibility have a significant influence on the quality and diversity of diets.

Djibril S. Dayamba, senior programme officer with the African Forest Forum (AFF), Nairobi, Kenya, and Expert Panel member says, "Forest management instruments in Africa, generally, do not integrate the promotion of health benefits from forest and tree resources. Global crises have enhanced the need for consideration of forest and human health relations. **This report shines a spotlight on the benefits forest and trees can provide to human health and calls on decision makers in Africa and beyond to integrate these opportunities in the design of forest, health, or biodiversity policies and strategies, especially in places where modern health care facilities are scarce.**"

As the acceleration of negative global trends and challenges including climate change and pandemics alters and intensifies the importance of forest-human health relations, urgent action is required. It is therefore crucial to improve the understanding of the role of nature in providing benefits to humans, and consequently, the role that ongoing nature destruction is playing in increasing health threats.

Forests and Trees for Human Health: Pathways, Impacts, Challenges and Response Options. A Global Assessment Report, IUFRO World Series Volume 41, Vienna 2023
Editors: Cecil Konijnendijk, Dikshya Devkota, Stephanie Mansourian and Christoph Wildburger

Download report and Policy Brief at:

<https://www.iufro.org/science/gfep/gfep-initiative/panel-on-forests-and-human-health/>

About IUFRO

The International Union of Forest Research Organizations ([IUFRO](#)) is a non-profit and non-governmental worldwide network of forest scientists, who work together on a voluntary basis to enhance the understanding of the ecological, economic and social aspects of forests and trees. IUFRO unites more than 15,000 scientists in more than 630 member organisations – mainly public research centers and universities – in 115 countries and is a member of the International Science Council. The organisation was founded in Germany in 1892 and has been headquartered in Vienna, Austria, since 1973. The [26th IUFRO World Congress](#) will take place in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2024.

About GFEP

IUFRO's Global Forest Expert Panels ([GFEP](#)) Programme, established in 2007, combines diverse expertise to assess scientific knowledge about the role of forests and trees in achieving global goals and inform political decision making, mainly

intergovernmental conventions and agreements of the United Nations (UN). GFEP primarily produces global scientific assessments conducted by interdisciplinary expert panels that unite leading scientists from around the world. Up to 2022, eight thematic reports in the frame of the IUFRO-led Joint Initiative of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests ([CPF](#)), and several related global and regional policy briefs have been successfully completed on a wide range of topics including food security, water, and climate change mitigation.

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