

Forests Make People Healthier, 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 is 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 \(IUFRO\)](#).

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 at all ages."



*Melghat, India, is a famous wildlife sanctuary and a tourist attraction. Local inhabitants collect non-timber forest products like fruit, flowers, gum and medicinal plants to augment their income.
Photo IUFRO, John Parrotta*

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, SARS and COVID-19. In high-income countries, there is a higher dominance of non-communicable diseases such as heart diseases and diabetes, but also mental disorders.

“Forests and trees provide food and medicinal plants which are particularly important to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs). They provide primary healthcare to 70% of the world’s population”, says **Expert Panel Member Dr. Unnikrishnan Payyappallimana**, Professor, Transdisciplinary University, India.

However, 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, especially in rural areas.

Exposure to natural environments, including forests, has generally been associated with reduced risk of mortality and improved life expectancy. The potential effect of natural environments on the cardiometabolic system is one of the most commonly studied topics. Several studies including in China showed that exposure to areas with more vegetation was associated with reduced odds of cardiovascular diseases.

An important precondition for individuals to reap the health benefits from forests is that they have access to those forests. This is not only a question of property rights but also of the design of forests and greenspaces to promote positive and pleasurable experiences. An evaluation of forest trails in the Royal National Park in Australia, for example, showed that visual access improved forest experiences by decreasing concerns about getting lost or fears of wildlife.

"From a design perspective, it is important to explicitly include health as a guiding design principle in master plans and more detailed designs for forest areas," says **Expert Panel Member Dr. Shureen Faris Abdul Shukor**, Associate Professor, Universiti Putra Malaysia. “Designers of forests and green space need to take into account the preferences of different users to avoid potential conflicts between visitors with different needs. A key challenge for the health-promoting design of forests is to create universal designs that meet the needs of all users. This entails the provision of adequate infrastructure that accommodates

all user needs, regardless of their disability or handicap. It also entails balancing the different psychological needs for the safety and the challenge of individuals and user groups".

The opportunities for forest contact have been substantially reduced with urbanization. In cities health benefits from forests are often unevenly distributed due to the uneven distribution of forest areas. "Globally, estimates indicate that only 13% of urban residents live in neighborhoods with more than 20% forest cover, which means the majority of people are not well-positioned to experience the mental, physical, and social health benefits. Evidence from cities across high and low-middle income countries consistently shows that access and quality of urban green spaces is related to wealth and ethnicity," says **Expert Panel Member Professor Xiaoqi Feng**, University of New South Wales, Australia.

As the acceleration of negative global trends and challenges including climate change, urbanization and pandemics alters and intensifies the importance of forest-human health relations, urgent action is required. It is therefore crucial to take more integrative and cross-sectoral approaches 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/>

Media Toolkit with fact sheet at: <https://www.iufro.org/science/gfep/gfep-initiative/panel-on-forests-and-human-health/outreach-and-media/>

Watch launch webinar at: https://youtu.be/vzGnD_dGkxA

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 organizations – mainly public research centers and universities – in 115 countries and is a member of the International Science Council. The organization 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 ([CPE](#)), 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.

For more information, please contact: Gerda Wolfrum at +43-1-8770151-17 or [wolfrum\(at\)iufro.org](mailto:wolfrum(at)iufro.org)