



**Sahabat Alam Malaysia**  
**Friends of the Earth Malaysia**  
For Environmental Justice

1, Jalan Joki, 11400 Penang, Malaysia  
Tel No: +604 827 6930  
Fax No: +604 827 6932  
Email: foemalaysia@gmail.com  
<https://www.foe-malaysia.org>

**Letter to the Editor**

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**ENVIRONMENT MUST TAKE CENTRE STAGE TO AVERT FUTURE  
HEALTH AND CLIMATE CRISIS**

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is of the view that the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that if we relentlessly destroy, degrade and encroach on nature and ecosystems, public health will be gravely endangered in ways that we have not imagined before.

Indeed, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) noted last week that 75 per cent of all emerging infectious diseases in humans are zoonotic, i.e. coming from animals, whether from the wild or from those which are domesticated.

As we have learnt, the Covid-19 pandemic is believed to have been unleashed due to the trade in wildlife for human consumption, with the coronavirus spreading from wild animals to humans.

The consequences have been catastrophic world over, with a recent UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) study pointing out that a US\$ 2.5 trillion support package is needed for developing countries facing unprecedented economic damage from the pandemic.

Obviously, governments have not taken the warnings of the scientific establishment very seriously, such as that of the U.N. convened Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) 15 years ago, or that of the 2019 Global Assessment of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) on the ecosystem-health nexus.

These major landmark reports have warned about the emergence or re-emergence of infectious diseases due to mainly increasing human encroachments on natural environments such as land clearing and habitat fragmentation, reductions in biodiversity (including the loss of natural predators of organisms that transmit disease), current practices in livestock and poultry production and wildlife trade.

We agree that every country must learn from what we now know and correct the course, as we plan our exit strategies from the pandemic once the health situation improves and as we chart the economic recovery.

The alarm bells have gone off. It is time to take the environment and ecology very seriously. One very major lesson to learn and not ignore is the need to critically protect our natural ecosystems, including animal habitats, halt deforestation and land clearing, end the fragmentation of habitats as well as trade in wildlife and promote forest rehabilitation and biodiversity protection. Our livestock and poultry farming methods must also be reviewed and corrective measures taken which ensure environmentally sound practices.

What is needed are transformative commitments through paradigm shifts in our existing irrational production systems and consumption patterns, grounded in genuine sustainable development that meet the economic, environment and social imperatives.

Economic development, job creation, etc. are important but have to be balanced and re-oriented with environmental concerns and quality of life being at the centre of decision-making.

Thus, the environment, ecology and quality of life have to be prioritised in all government planning processes, policies, plans and laws, including with robust and serious implementation.

There is certainly a need to review policies and re-balance priorities to achieve a truly green agenda, that not only addresses the current public health crisis, but also prevents future crises, including that stemming from climate change.

We cannot afford to repeat mistakes by resorting to business-as-usual approaches for short-term economic and political interests that jeopardise the well-being of the planet and its peoples.

After going through the dramatic live-changing experience and events with the coronavirus, for governments to persist in ignoring such warnings from scientific bodies on the ecosystem-health nexus is not only foolish but also highly irresponsible.

The environment and ecology can no longer be viewed as a side issue but must take centre-stage if we are to prevent future calamities.

**Meenakshi Raman**  
**President**  
**Sahabat Alam Malaysia**