

Press Release WHO/  
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## Damage to ecosystems poses growing threat to human health

GENEVA/BRASILIA – A new report shows that some 60 per cent of the benefits that the global ecosystem provides to support life on Earth (such as fresh water, clean air and a relatively stable climate) are being degraded or used unsustainably. In the report, scientists working on the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) warn that harmful consequences of this degradation to human health are already being felt and could grow significantly worse over the next 50 years.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) synthesis report warns that the erosion of ecosystems could lead to an increase in existing diseases such as malaria and cholera, as well as a rising risk of new diseases emerging. Worsening ecosystems will also affect the world's ability to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG's).

"Ecosystems are the planet's life-support system. They are fundamental to human health and indispensable to the well-being of all people everywhere in the world," said Dr Kerstin Leitner, WHO Assistant Director-General for Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments, and Member of the MA Board. "The work of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment makes clear how ecosystems and human health are inter-twined - and further highlights how important it is that decisions related to economic development also protect the environment, in order to ultimately safeguard human health."

The links between environmental change and human health are complex because they are often indirect, displaced in space and time, and dependent on a number of modifying forces. There are two ways of avoiding disease and injury caused by ecosystem disruption. One is to prevent, limit or manage environmental damage; the other way is to find ways to protect individuals and populations from the consequences of ecosystem change.

"One of the striking and over-arching conclusions of this assessment lies in the fundamental need to ensure ecological sustainability to safeguard ecosystems and therefore protect human health in the long-term," said Dr Carlos Corvalan, a WHO scientist who contributed to the MA report. "Where ill-health is caused by excessive consumption of what the ecosystem provides such as water, food and energy, substantial reduction in consumption -- and right of access to essential resources to marginalized communities -- would have major health benefits."

The *MA Synthesis Report* is the first in a series of seven synthesis and summary reports and four technical volumes that assess the state of global ecosystems and their impact on human well-being. The study started in 2001 in response to a call by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for global support of the MDG's. Some 1300 experts from 95 countries volunteered to conduct the study, while 900 served as reviewers and editors.

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The link to MA synthesis report can be found online at <http://www.who.int/globalchange/>

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