

# Sustainable forestry is crucial for our health

## Statement by ITTO Executive Director Sheam Satkuru on International Day of Forests

As the world population grows and people crowd ever more closely together, the realization has dawned that we need to take a holistic view of human health. This has been called a “One Health” approach, which recognizes that the health of people is closely connected to the health of animals and the environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us our vulnerability. The heavy toll it took on our health and ways of life is a warning to be heeded.

The theme of this year’s International Day of Forests, “healthy forests for healthy people”, is timely. There is strong evidence for the close relationship between forests and human health—put bluntly, we need healthy forests for our survival.

The list of benefits for human health offered by healthy forests is extensive. For example, forests:

- Produce clean water for drinking and sanitation.
- Capture and store carbon, thus helping mitigate climate change—which poses a huge threat to us all.
- Support agriculture and therefore food security and nutrition by (among other things) providing pollination services, maintaining soil fertility and reducing soil erosion.
- Produce fruits, leaves, mushrooms and wild animals that contribute directly to the healthy, nutritious diets of nearly 1 billion people globally.
- Provide jobs and livelihoods for hundreds of millions of people, thereby enabling them to pay for or otherwise access nutritious foods, clean water and medical care.
- Boast a huge variety of plants—an estimated 50 000 species—with medicinal value. Many common pharmaceutical medicines and other products are derived from these.
- Provide flood control and regulate microclimates.
- Harbour a large proportion of the world’s terrestrial biodiversity and thus constitute a huge genetic storehouse for producing new medicines and nutritious foods.
- Boost our mental and physical health—spending time in forests has been shown to reduce stress, blood pressure, depression and other ailments. Trees in cities absorb pollutants, filter particulates and cool the air.
- Have sacred value for many traditional communities and thus help maintain spiritual health.

ITTO has long recognized the importance of tropical forests for human wellbeing.

For example, a new phase of a long-running ITTO project is developing DNA tracking technologies for the threatened African cherry tree (*Prunus africana*), the bark of which is used by pharmaceutical companies in the treatment of prostate disorders. The aim of the project is to better regulate the trade of this species (and also *Pericopsis elata*, another threatened tree species) to ensure its conservation

and sustainable management, as well as remunerative returns for local people. Our collaborative work with the Australian National University is investigating the use of DNA profiling to track the source of African cherry bark in trade to its original management area.

We worked closely with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora on a project in Cameroon to assist in the sustainable management of African cherry, starting with an inventory of the species and an effort to document harvesting levels. The project helped establish sustainable harvesting in Cameroon and other African countries.

In Ghana, where up to three-quarters of the population depends to some extent on plants for health delivery, an ITTO project helped arrest the loss of traditional medicinal plants. Among other things, it trained local herbalists and collectors in general nursery and field management of medicinal plant species, natural regeneration techniques, silviculture and the domestication of wild medicinal plants.

A project in Benin helped communities protect and restore 42 sacred forests, with significant outcomes for wellbeing in those communities. And another ITTO project, in Mexico, enabled local women in Veracruz to publish a [manual on medicinal plants](#) as a means for disseminating their traditional knowledge.

Ultimately, *all* ITTO's work is about human health. Knowing the importance of forests—and tropical forests in particular—to the planet and people, we promote sustainable tropical forest management and a sustainable tropical timber trade as means for maintaining forests and all the values of human wellbeing they embody.

In addition to projects, we do this through [policy guidance](#)—for example, our *Guidelines on Tropical Forest Fire Management* assist policy development on integrated fire management in the tropics; our *Environmental and Social Management Guidelines* provide safeguards for ITTO projects to ensure they protect human health and support forest health; the *Voluntary Guidelines for the Sustainable Management of Natural Tropical Forests* promote forest health as well as worker health and safety; the aim of *Guidelines for Forest Landscape Restoration in the Tropics* is to increase the positive contributions of trees and forests to the ecological health, productivity and resilience of landscapes; and our *Policy Guidelines on Gender Equality and Empowering Women* ensure that all aspects of ITTO's work integrate and mainstream gender considerations, thereby recognizing the invaluable contributions of women to (among other things) the health and wellbeing of their families.

Healthy forests are essential for our wellbeing but, conversely, unhealthy forests threaten it. For example, the smoke generated by the out-of-control burning of drought-stressed forests is a huge hazard to human health. Land degradation threatens the water-protection functions of forests and reduces our capacity to grow enough food to feed ourselves. Biodiversity loss due to deforestation and forest degradation robs us of potential medicines and destabilizes the ecosystems that sustain us.

We need healthy forests, which means we need to put much more effort into their sustainable management. To do this, policymakers, financial institutions and consumers of forest products and ecosystem services need to ensure that people at ground level—communities, companies and governments—are properly remunerated for their management efforts. Let's heed the warning.