

Why It's Important to Understand the Connections between Forests, Climate Change, and Health

Since our founding in 1966, the World Forestry Center (WFC) has connected people to the importance of forests and sustainable forestry. However, in recent years we realized that there is more to the sustainable forestry conversation that needs to be shared: Research has revealed a connection between improved mental health and well-being to nature contact, and climate change is altering our forests, resulting in their diminished capacity to provide clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreation amenities.

“The WFC is particularly interested in human health and climate change because of the intersection of forests, human health, and climate,” said Eric Vines, director of the WFC. “It’s not just because humans are highly dependent upon forests for water use, air filtration, soil stabilization, and a range of products (wood for housing, furniture, musical instruments, paper), we’re also intensely focused on the impacts that climate change has on the ability of forests to thrive in the future. To the degree that forests lack resilience in a changing climate, our health will suffer.”

To share this climate change and human health conversation with the public, the WFC is hosting discussions that feature experts in these fields to share insights and offer solutions for moving forward. Our latest event was on March 2, when we hosted a Climate and Health Conversation to discuss how the research presented at the National Climate and Health Meeting in Atlanta could be applied to the Northwest. (The recording of the Climate and Health meeting is available at <https://www.climaterealityproject.org/health>.)

Our speakers were Kristi Ebi, director of the University of Washington’s Center for Health and the Global Environment, and Emily York, program lead for Oregon Health Authority’s Climate & Health Program, who both attended the Climate and Health meeting in Atlanta.

Ebi summed the issue very succinctly: “Climate change is here and it’s affecting our health.” One of the numerous examples she shared was the November 2016 thunderstorm asthma outbreak that happened in **Melbourne**, Australia, which overwhelmed the city’s hospital system and resulted in nine deaths. Although there is a question as to whether a changing climate was responsible for this specific thunderstorm event, “we know we’re putting more energy into the climate system, and that’s being expressed in more extreme events,” she said.

For York, she came away from the Climate and Health Meeting impressed that the attendees, which included representatives of foundations, leading researchers, academics, and students, were “ready to step up in a bigger way regardless of where our federal administration goes in terms of support for this [climate change and public health] work,” she said. “It was reassuring to be there with national leaders, hearing that this work is not going away and it’s growing.”

The WFC considers itself part of this growing movement, and we see our role as hosting these type of discussions because we are in a position to bring the public and representatives from a diverse range of disciplines and organizations into the same room for cross-sector conversations.

When considering the climate change and human health issue, it's easy to become overwhelmed at what steps individuals or organizations can do locally when this is a global challenge. Michael Heumann suggested that the place to start is local, which York seconded. "Start where we are, wherever in the workplace or the neighborhood you live in," she advised. "We can only do so much on our own, but if we continue to build partnerships and continue to explore working with people who maybe traditionally we haven't thought of working with, this is one step to build the resilience of the community we live within. Those networks and conversations, like the one we're having today, are really going to serve as a proactive factor for when opportunities do arise we know who to call."

That's how we see the role of the WFC. We cannot solve the challenges of climate change on our own, but we can leverage the work of our partners to further this conversation. We invite you to join us at future conversations, which will be posted at <http://www.worldforestry.org/events/>.