



Bringing nature back into our lives

Over the past few months, COVID-19 has caused major disruption to our society, economy and taken a heavy toll on lives and livelihoods. We are now beginning to come to terms with the true scale of its impact, and finding ways to kick-start recovery in Europe and around the globe.

We will draw many lessons from the pandemic. But one thing has become abundantly clear – the intimate connection that exists between our health, our economy, and the natural environment. Our new Strategies for Biodiversity and Farm to Fork, launched in May as part of our wider European Green Deal, acknowledge these connections, and will help rebuild society with a new drive to protect and strengthen the natural world we depend on.

The Recovery Package proposed by the Commission one week after the adoption of the new strategies follows the same logic, and enjoys the same level of ambition. It marks a new determination to build back better, basing the strength and competitiveness of our economy on its sustainability, and opening the way to a future that is circular, climate-neutral, digital and socially just.

The timing couldn't be more appropriate. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated just how intricate the link is between our own health and that of our natural environment. It has become increasingly clear that protecting and restoring Europe's biodiversity is essential for reinforcing our own resilience to future pandemics.

Moreover, even without the added dimension brought so suddenly to the table by SARS-CoV-2, how humanity reframes its relationship with the natural world over the coming years, particularly with regards to habitat and biodiversity preservation, was always going to be a crucial transition that would define the history of the 21st century. Healthy ecosystems offer a vital ingredient in the fight against climate change but are currently threatened by urban sprawl, pollution, intensive agriculture and deforestation, amongst others.

Restoring and protecting nature will also be a vital ally in the fight against climate change. Many of the problems facing climate and biodiversity are intrinsically linked. But just as the crises are linked, so are the solutions.

The recent lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown the value of green urban spaces. But, while protection of some urban green spaces has increased, green spaces often lose out to grey spaces in the competition for land, as the share of the population living in urban areas continues to rise. The strategy aims to reverse these trends and stop the loss of green urban ecosystems by promoting the systematic integration of healthy ecosystems, green infrastructure and nature-based solutions into all forms of urban planning.

It's predicted that by 2050, 70 % of the world's population will live in urban areas, up from 55 % in 2018, largely driven by societal shifts in Asia and Africa. In Europe, 50 % of Europeans already lived in urban areas as far back as 1950. According to Eurostat, this rose to over three quarters of Europeans living in urban areas as of 2018.

To bring nature back to cities and reward community action, the Commission will also call on all European cities of 20,000 inhabitants and above to develop ambitious Urban Greening Plans by the end of 2021. These should include measures to create biodiverse and accessible urban forests, parks and gardens; urban farms; green roofs and walls; tree-lined streets; urban meadows; and urban hedges.

To facilitate this work, in 2021 the Commission will set up an EU Urban Greening Platform, under a new 'Green City Accord' with cities and mayors. This will be done in close coordination with the European Covenant of Mayors.