

NEWS ANALYSIS



The Ecology of Disease

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July 14, 2012

THERE'S a term biologists and economists use these days — ecosystem services — which refers to the many ways nature supports the human endeavor. Forests filter the water we drink, for example, and birds and bees pollinate crops, both of which have substantial economic as well as biological value.

If we fail to understand and take care of the natural world, it can cause a breakdown of these systems and come back to haunt us in ways we know little about. A critical example is a developing model of infectious disease that shows that most epidemics — AIDS, Ebola, West Nile, SARS, Lyme disease and hundreds more that have occurred over the last several decades — don't just happen. They are a result of things people do to nature.

Disease, it turns out, is largely an environmental issue. Sixty percent of emerging infectious diseases that affect humans are zoonotic — they

originate in animals. And more than two-thirds of those originate in wildlife.

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