

Preserving nature to protect human health

Sébastien Denys,

Director of Environmental and Occupational Health, Santé publique France.

Throughout the industrial era, also known as the Anthropocene, nature has played a key part in the modernisation of Western societies. It has provided humans with the resources vital for development such as water, arable land, minerals and fossil fuels. In this respect, many of our modern comforts are derived from nature. However, mankind has focused on creating artificial and inorganic living environments, becoming ever more distant from nature, our original cradle.

Scientific data based on observations of the environment and biodiversity are unanimous: this development model has caused lasting damage to nature. The exploitation of natural resources combined with the creation of artificial urban and agricultural spaces and standardised food production models have caused transformations on a global scale: climate change, biodiversity collapse, a deterioration in the quality of natural resources and widespread contamination by synthetic chemical pollutants. These disruptions have proven consequences, not only on land and aquatic ecosystems, but also on the physical and mental health and well-being of human populations – particularly the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged.

But instead of dwelling on the gloomy picture painted by these issues, they should be viewed as drivers for collective action towards restoring, strengthening and preserving the links between humans and nature. This kind of collective action is key to preserving and improving our health and ensuring that future generations enjoy a healthy environment. To achieve this, we need to give priority

to methods of development that also deliver co-benefits for health and biodiversity.

This issue of *La Santé en action* uses solid scientific knowledge to place this major public health and environmental challenge at the top of the agenda. The different articles illustrate the complex relationship between health and nature using a wealth of scientific data put forward by international bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and international platforms of experts such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). These data document the impacts of human activity on the environment, including accelerated climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as the repercussions of this decline in biodiversity on human health. While risks such as the emergence of zoonotic or vector-borne infectious diseases have been clearly identified, other consequences relating to premature mortality and physical or mental health are illustrated here by several authors. Mental health is a particular concern and while the incidence of eco-anxiety has yet to be documented in the general population, research has led to a clear scientific consensus: access to nature improves mental health. Access to nature also offers benefits in terms of cardiovascular health, immunity and the emotional and social development of children.

This issue also showcases the work of diverse professionals (doctors, perinatal care providers, teachers, ecologists and local authorities) who target different populations on different continents. The interviews illustrate the abundance of initiatives that are helping to bring people and nature closer together. They highlight the key factors for success and the levers for individual or systemic change. On an individual level, this

can mean getting involved in biodiversity observation programmes or benefiting from nature prescribing, as offered to people in Quebec. On a systemic scale, there is one effective lever: the development of public policies spanning different sectors that promote the introduction of and access to nature in the city. This further depends on such policies minimising any potentially negative effects, including the introduction of invasive species or the gentrification of urban areas. The authors also emphasise the importance of evaluating these kinds of interventions, which remain scarce at present, so that they can be scaled up and deliver long-term protection of health and nature. This is crucial for meeting the challenges of global change. ■