

## Forests and Human Health: A Symbiotic Relationship for Greener Pakistan

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### *Abstract*

Forests are not merely silent witnesses to the passage of time; they are vital partners in our quest for well-being and sustainability. This article explores the intricate and symbiotic relationship between forests and human health. Covering approximately 2.23% of Pakistan's landmass, these forests emerge as guardians of green growth, offering an array of benefits that significantly impact the health and sustainability of our nation. This exploration unveils the profound influence of forests on physical health, including improved air quality, enhanced respiratory health, and the therapeutic effects of forest therapy. Moreover, the article delves into the positive impact of forests on mental health, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression while promoting overall well-being. Intriguingly, Pakistan's forests also have a role in healthcare, contributing to traditional and modern medicine through forest-derived medicines. Additionally, the article highlights the importance of sustainable forest management and community engagement in conservation efforts to ensure that this symbiotic relationship thrives for generations to come. As we recognize how closely our health is connected to the forests around us, we invite readers to join us on a journey. This journey will show how this long-lasting partnership can make Pakistan greener and our lives healthier.

**Keywords:** forests; human health; sustainability; mental well-being; physical health; sustainable forest management.

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## **I. Introduction**

Forests have long been celebrated for their majestic beauty, rich biodiversity, and as sanctuaries of tranquility. But their significance extends far beyond their aesthetic appeal. These sprawling green expanses have a profound impact on human health, both physical and mental, forging a symbiotic relationship that shapes our well-being and the environment we inhabit. Forests cover approximately 2.23% of Pakistan's landscape. Yet, their significance transcends this relatively small fraction. They stand as guardians of our green growth, holding within their leafy embrace a myriad of benefits that contribute to a healthier and more sustainable Pakistan.

In this exploration of the vital synergy between forests and human health, we embark on a journey to uncover the multifaceted ways in which these towering giants enrich our lives. From the physical benefits of cleaner air and enhanced respiratory health to the restorative effects on our mental well-being, the forests of Pakistan play a pivotal role in shaping a healthier nation. In this article, we will delve into the remarkable interplay between Pakistan's forests and the health of its people. We will examine how these green landscapes offer solace for weary souls, act as buffers against the perils of climate change, and even contribute to healthcare through the provision of forest-derived medicines. Alongside, we will consider the conservation efforts that are indispensable for preserving this symbiotic relationship for generations to come.

As we start this journey, we invite you to celebrate how closely our well-being is linked to the forests that cover our land. Let's explore together how this long standing partnership can keep making Pakistan greener and our lives healthier

## **II. The Green Guardians: Role of Forests**

Forests are the unsung heroes of Pakistan's ecosystem, silently working to maintain the delicate balance of nature. Their significance is far-reaching, affecting both the environment and human well-being in profound ways.

### **2.1. Vital Role in Pakistan's Ecosystem**

Pakistan's forests serve as a crucial component of the country's ecosystem. They are home to a diverse range of plant and animal species, some of which are unique to these regions. The Chilgoza pine forests of northern Pakistan, for instance, not only provide habitat for various wildlife but also support the livelihoods of local communities through pine nut harvesting. These forests are also essential for maintaining soil stability, preventing erosion, and preserving watersheds, ensuring a consistent supply of freshwater for agricultural and urban areas. The forests of Pakistan are part of the global ecosystem, contributing to regional and even global biodiversity and ecological stability.

### **2.2. Biodiversity and Natural Resources:**

Pakistan's forests are rich in biodiversity, housing a wide array of plant and animal species, some of which are endangered or endemic. For instance, the Deodar forests of the Himalayan region are home to various species of flora and fauna, including the endangered Western Tragopan bird. Forests are invaluable sources of natural resources such as timber, non-timber forest products, and medicinal plants. The study on the medicinal plants of Pakistan's forests highlights their potential in the pharmaceutical and herbal medicine industries.

### **2.3. Climate Regulation, Water Purification, and Oxygen Production**

Forests play a pivotal role in climate regulation, acting as carbon sinks by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. They help mitigate the impact of climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and stabilizing temperature and weather patterns. Forests also act as natural air filters, improving air quality by trapping pollutants and releasing oxygen through photosynthesis. The mangrove forests along Pakistan's coastline, like the Indus Delta, are particularly important for coastal protection, carbon sequestration, and providing breeding grounds for fish.

Furthermore, forests aid in water purification, preventing soil erosion and filtering pollutants from entering rivers and streams, thus safeguarding the quality of freshwater sources. In summary, Pakistan's forests are the green guardians of the nation, serving as the cornerstone of its ecosystem. They provide essential services like biodiversity conservation, natural resource sustenance, climate regulation, air purification, and water filtration. By recognizing and safeguarding these vital ecosystems, Pakistan can ensure a greener, healthier, and more sustainable future for its people.

## **III. Forests and Physical Health**

Forests not only nurture our souls with their natural beauty but also play a significant role in promoting physical health, offering a range of tangible benefits that contribute to our well-being.

### **3.1. Direct Impact of Forests on Physical Health**

Forests have a direct and positive impact on physical health. The lush green canopies act as a natural shield against harmful UV rays, reducing the risk of skin cancer. Spending time in these green spaces also encourages physical activity. Whether it's hiking, jogging, or simply taking a leisurely walk, forests provide an ideal setting for exercise. Moreover, forests contribute to stress reduction, which in turn lowers the risk of stress-related health issues such as hypertension and cardiovascular diseases.

### **3.2. Improved Air Quality and Respiratory Health**

One of the most significant contributions of forests to physical health is the improvement of air quality. Trees act as natural air filters, removing pollutants such as fine particulate matter and harmful gasses from the atmosphere. In urban areas, this is particularly crucial. Forests in and around cities provide a vital service by mitigating air pollution, which can otherwise lead to respiratory problems. Forested areas are also known to have higher humidity levels, which can soothe dry respiratory passages and improve lung function. This is especially beneficial for individuals with respiratory conditions like asthma.

### **3.3. Benefits of Forest Therapy and Nature Walks**

Forest therapy, also known as *shinrin-yoku* or "forest bathing," has gained recognition for its therapeutic benefits. It involves immersing oneself in a forest environment, engaging all the senses to reduce stress and improve mood. Studies have shown that forest therapy can lower cortisol levels (a stress hormone), reduce blood pressure, and enhance the immune system. Nature walks in forested areas offer similar advantages. They promote relaxation, reduce mental fatigue, and enhance overall well-being. In essence, forests are not just passive landscapes but active contributors to physical health. Their

natural properties improve air quality, encourage physical activity, and provide opportunities for therapeutic experiences that rejuvenate both the body and mind. Recognizing the profound connection between forests and physical health underscores the importance of preserving these green sanctuaries for the betterment of our communities.

#### **IV. Mental Health and Well-being**

Forests offer much more than just scenic landscapes; they serve as natural therapists for our mental well-being, providing solace, peace, and a profound connection to nature.

##### **4.1. Positive Effects of Nature and Green Spaces on Mental Health**

Nature has an inherently calming effect on the human mind. Exposure to green spaces, such as forests, has been linked to reduced mental fatigue and improved emotional well-being. Simply being in the presence of trees and natural surroundings can elicit feelings of relaxation, wonder, and awe. The term "biophilia" describes the innate human affinity for nature, suggesting that our mental health is intricately tied to our connection with the natural world.

##### **4.2. Role of Forests in Reducing Stress, Anxiety, and Depression**

Forests are sanctuaries for stress reduction. Time spent in these green havens has been shown to lower cortisol levels, reducing stress and anxiety. The Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, is a testament to the stress-reducing power of forests. It involves immersing oneself in the forest environment to alleviate stress and promote relaxation. Forest therapy has also been associated with reduced symptoms of depression, offering a natural and holistic approach to mental well-being.

##### **4.3. Proximity to Forests and Improved Mental Well-being**

Living in proximity to forests has tangible benefits for mental health. Studies have shown that individuals who reside near green spaces, including forests, tend to experience lower levels of psychological distress and enjoy better overall mental well-being. Access to urban forests can have a particularly positive impact on mental health. These green oases within cities provide respite from urban stressors, offering a space for relaxation and rejuvenation. In summary, the mental health benefits of forests are profound and well-documented. These natural sanctuaries have the power to alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression while promoting a sense of calm and wonder. The proximity of individuals to forests, whether through visits or residence, is associated with improved mental well-being, underscoring the importance of preserving and accessible these natural treasures for the betterment of mental health in our communities.

#### **V. Forests and Healthcare**

Forests are not only providers of solace and tranquility but also valuable resources for healthcare, offering a range of natural remedies that have been used for centuries and are increasingly recognized by modern medicine.

##### **5.1. Connection between Forests and Healthcare Services**

The connection between forests and healthcare services is deeply rooted in the history of humanity. Forests have long been regarded as pharmacies of the natural world, offering a

vast array of medicinal plants and resources. Traditional healers and indigenous communities have relied on forest-derived medicines for generations, using plants and herbs found in forests to treat various ailments. Modern healthcare systems are also recognizing the therapeutic potential of forest-based interventions, a practice referred to as "green prescribing" or "nature therapy".

### **5.2. Use of Forest-Derived Medicines in Traditional and Modern Medicine**

Forests are a treasure trove of medicinal plants, many of which have been scientifically validated for their therapeutic properties. For example, neem, a tree native to South Asia, has been traditionally used for its antibacterial and antifungal properties and is now a subject of modern pharmaceutical research.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) makes extensive use of forest-derived herbs and plants, some of which have gained global recognition for their health benefits. The discovery and development of drugs from forest resources, such as the anticancer drug Taxol derived from the Pacific yew tree, highlight the potential of forests in modern medicine.

### **5.3. Initiatives and Research on Forest-Based Healthcare in Pakistan**

Pakistan boasts rich biodiversity, including numerous medicinal plants found in its forests. Research efforts in the country are exploring the potential of these resources for healthcare. Initiatives like the Pakistan Forest Institute (PFI) have been instrumental in documenting and conserving forest-based medicinal plants and promoting their sustainable use. Collaborations between traditional healers, researchers, and healthcare practitioners are on the rise, aiming to integrate traditional knowledge with modern medical practices to harness the healing potential of forests in Pakistan.

In conclusion, forests are not only vital for mental and physical well-being but also play a significant role in healthcare. Traditional and modern medicine alike benefit from the resources found within these natural havens. Pakistan, with its rich forested landscapes, is poised to make significant contributions to forest-based healthcare, fostering a deeper connection between nature and well-being.

## **VI. Conservation and Sustainable Living**

Forests are not just a resource to be exploited; they are a legacy to be preserved for future generations. Conservation and sustainable living are critical components of maintaining the balance between our needs and the well-being of our planet.

### **6.1. Importance of Sustainable Forest Management**

Sustainable forest management is paramount for the long-term health of our forests. It involves practices that ensure we do not deplete resources faster than they can naturally regenerate. Sustainable forest management helps maintain biodiversity, conserve ecosystem services, and preserve the cultural and social values associated with forests. It also ensures that we continue to benefit from forest resources like timber, while simultaneously safeguarding the ecological integrity of these ecosystems.

### **6.2. Role of Community Engagement in Forest Conservation**

Forest conservation is not solely the responsibility of governments and environmental organizations; it's a collective effort that must involve local communities. Engaging communities in forest conservation empowers them to become stewards of their

natural surroundings, promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility. Community involvement can lead to the development of sustainable livelihoods that are intertwined with forest conservation, creating a win-win scenario where both people and nature thrive.

### **6.3. Successful Conservation Projects in Pakistan**

Pakistan has seen notable conservation projects that emphasize the importance of sustainable living and community engagement. The Chilgoza pine forests in northern Pakistan provides an example. Local communities have been involved in sustainable harvesting practices, which not only conserves the pine nut resource but also supports their livelihoods. The Indus for All Programme is another initiative focusing on the conservation and sustainable management of wetlands, which are critical ecosystems for both wildlife and local communities (WWF-Pakistan). Pakistan's mangrove forests, particularly in the Indus Delta region, have witnessed successful conservation efforts, with local communities actively participating in mangrove plantation drives and conservation awareness campaigns.

The conservation and sustainable living principles are integral to the well-being of our planet and the communities that depend on forests. Sustainable forest management and community engagement in forest conservation are key strategies for ensuring that forests continue to provide benefits for generations to come. Successful conservation projects in Pakistan demonstrate that a balance between human needs and environmental protection is achievable through collective efforts and shared responsibility.

## **VII. Challenges and Future Prospects**

Pakistan's forests, vital to its environment, economy, and the well-being of its people, face numerous challenges. These challenges not only threaten the forests themselves but also pose risks to human health and the overall sustainability of the country.

### **7.1. Challenges Faced by Pakistan's Forests:**

**Deforestation:** One of the most pressing challenges is deforestation, driven by urban expansion, agricultural expansion, and illegal logging. This diminishes forest cover, disrupts ecosystems, and reduces the ability of forests to provide critical ecosystem services.

**Illegal Logging:** Illicit timber trade remains a significant problem, depleting valuable forest resources and undermining conservation efforts.

**Climate Change:** Climate change poses a growing threat, altering precipitation patterns, increasing temperatures, and contributing to more frequent extreme weather events. These changes can harm forest health and resilience.

**Resource Extraction:** Unsustainable resource extraction, including grazing and firewood collection, can lead to forest degradation, impacting biodiversity and ecosystem services.

**Lack of Awareness:** A general lack of awareness about the value of forests and the services they provide hampers conservation efforts and sustainable forest management.

### **7.2. Risks to Human Health if Forests Are Not Conserved**

The degradation and loss of forests in Pakistan have significant implications for human health:

**Air Pollution:** Reduced Forest cover can exacerbate air pollution in urban areas, leading to respiratory illnesses and other health problems.

**Loss of Medicinal Resources:** Many medicinal plants and herbs found in forests are essential for traditional and modern medicine. The decline of these resources can impact healthcare.

**Climate-Related Health Risks:** Deforestation and the alteration of local climate patterns can increase the risk of climate-related health issues, including heat-related illnesses and vector-borne diseases.

**Reduced Mental Well-being:** The loss of green spaces can deprive communities of the mental health benefits associated with nature, potentially increasing stress and mental health issues.

### **7.3. Future Prospects for a Greener Pakistan**

Despite the challenges, there are opportunities for a greener and healthier Pakistan:

**Reforestation and Afforestation:** Implementing reforestation and afforestation projects can help restore lost forest cover, increase carbon sequestration, and enhance the resilience of Pakistan's forests.

**Sustainable Practices:** Promoting sustainable forest management practices, including community-based conservation and controlled logging, can balance human needs with conservation objectives.

**Climate-Resilient Forests:** Developing climate-resilient forests by planting diverse tree species and restoring degraded ecosystems can help mitigate the impacts of climate change.

**Education and Awareness:** Raising public awareness about the importance of forests and their direct link to human well-being can foster a culture of conservation and stewardship.

Pakistan's forests face significant challenges that require immediate and coordinated efforts to address. Recognizing the interdependence between forest conservation and human health underscores the urgency of these conservation endeavors. By addressing these challenges and embracing sustainable practices, Pakistan can secure a greener, healthier, and more sustainable future where forests continue to thrive and provide essential services for both the environment and its people.

## **VIII. Conclusions & Recommendations**

This article has explored the profound connection between Pakistan's forests and human health. It has highlighted the vital role that forests play in our lives, from purifying the air we breathe to providing medicinal resources, and even contributing to our mental well-being. However, it has also pointed out the formidable challenges that these forests face, including deforestation, illegal logging, and the looming threat of climate change. Throughout our discussion, it has become abundantly clear that the relationship between forests and human health is not one of mere coincidence but of essential interdependence. The loss of forests threatens our physical and mental well-being, and neglecting these natural sanctuaries can lead to dire consequences for both our health and the environment. As we reflect on the importance of this symbiotic relationship, we must take it upon ourselves

to appreciate and protect Pakistan's forests. This entails not only supporting conservation efforts but also fostering a culture of responsible forest management, sustainable living, and environmental stewardship. Reforestation, sustainable forest practices, and public awareness campaigns are key components of securing a greener and healthier future for Pakistan.

**In light of this, we recommend the following actions:**

1. Support and participate in reforestation and afforestation projects to restore and expand forest cover.
2. Advocate for sustainable forest management practices that balance human needs with conservation goals.
3. Engage in educational initiatives that raise awareness about the value of forests and their direct impact on human health.
4. Promote community involvement in forest conservation, recognizing the importance of local stewardship.
5. Collaborate with researchers, policymakers, and organizations to develop and implement strategies for climate-resilient forests.

By taking these steps, we can ensure that the symbiotic relationship between Pakistan's forests and human health thrives, leading to a greener, healthier, and more sustainable future for our nation and its people.

## **IX. Acknowledgments**

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our readers for dedicating their time and attention to this article. Your interest in the symbiotic relationship between forests and human health is a testament to your commitment to a greener and healthier future for Pakistan. We would also like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of our co-author, Urooj Khan, a medical student whose unique perspective from the field of human health has enriched the depth and breadth of our discussion. Her dedication to understanding the intricate ties between our well-being and the forests that surround us has been instrumental in shaping this article.

Together, we embark on a journey of appreciation and protection for Pakistan's forests, recognizing their pivotal role in sustaining not only our environment but also our physical and mental health. Your support and engagement in this endeavor are essential as we work towards a greener and healthier future for our nation. Thank you for joining us in this meaningful exploration.

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