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Time for some home truths about deforestation

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Bioko island, Equatorial Guinea. 'In much of west Africa, forest cover actually increased over the course of the 20th century.' Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

To prevent future pandemics, we must stop deforestation and end the illegal wildlife trade. Do you agree? Of course you do, because what's not to like? The buck stops with the evil other. The question is, will doing those things solve the problem? And the answer is, probably not. They will help, but there's another, potentially bigger problem closer to home: the global north's use of natural resources, especially its reliance on livestock.

The story that epidemics are punishment for upsetting the natural order of things is not new. But it's a peculiarly modern, postcolonial twist on it to imagine that the source of that upset is somewhere far away from most of us – to wit, the parts of the world that were forested, until recently, and that conveniently coincide with the poorer bits. And it turns out that this narrative may be interfering with our attempts to protect ourselves from novel diseases, as well as with efforts to tackle climate change and the erosion of biodiversity.

As the French environmental historian Guillaume Blanc argues in a new book that has yet to be translated into English, L'invention du colonialisme vert (The Invention of Green Colonialism), the idea that Africa was once covered by a vast, primary forest is a myth invented by colonialists in the early 20th century. Over a period of several million years, the continent's tree cover waxed and waned as the climate warmed and cooled. After humans came along, they cleared some trees and planted others, such that by the time Denys Finch Hatton took Karen Blixen for a spin in his Gipsy Moth – a scene immortalised in Sydney Pollack's 1985 film Out of Africa – the Kenyan landscapes they soared over were thoroughly human-sculpted.

Starting in the 1930s, colonialists created national parks to protect the forests from the locals who were supposedly destroying them as their populations grew. But the hypocrisy is double-barrelled, because by then it was the colonialists who were responsible for large-scale destruction. Between 1850 and 1920, across Africa and Asia, Europeans and their descendants cut down 95m hectares of forest to make way for their farms – between four and five times more than was destroyed in the previous century.

The myth of the vanished forest persists. As the American environmental historian James McCann has shown, the former US vice-president Al Gore's laudable and Nobel prize-winning fight to alert the world to climate change – in part through his 1992 book Earth in the Balance – borrowed spurious statistics according to which Ethiopia's forest cover shrank from 40% in the 1950s to 1% in the 1990s (Ethiopia was never colonised). The 40% figure is based on breezy guesstimates put out by Europeans in the 1960s; no systematic study of that country's forests has ever been conducted. In much of west Africa, meanwhile, the British anthropologists Melissa Leach and James Fairhead have shown that forest cover actually increased over the course of the 20th century. In Asia, too, research has cast doubt on the assumed link between local population growth and deforestation.

So powerful is the myth, we simply accept the inconsistencies that flow from it. The fact, for example, that the carbon footprint of a tourist from the global north visiting an African or Asian national park dwarfs that of a local farmer who travels on foot and uses no electricity. Though there is no evidence of major human-induced destruction of Africa's flora and fauna until the arrival of colonialists, we have internalised their distinction between "good" and "bad" hunters. When Thomas Cholmondeley, scion of a well-known white settler family in Kenya, was convicted of the manslaughter in 2006 of Robert Njoya, many journalists observed that Britain's colonial past had been on trial with him, but few questioned his description of himself as a sports hunter and conservationist, while Njoya, a black man, was a "poacher".

Conservation and over-exploitation of the world's resources were born in the same time and place, Blanc argues – Europe during the Industrial Revolution – and have proceeded in parallel ever since. Both spring from Europeans' search for Eden after they had destroyed it at home. And the myth of that other Eden has returned with a vengeance, now that we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic.

We know that greater intensity of human-animal contact is accelerating the emergence of new human diseases of animal origin, some of which have pandemic potential, and we know that in many cases – including coronaviruses – the virus reaches us from a wild bat or rodent (the natural reservoir) via a farmed animal (the intermediate host). We blame the wildlife trade – the bad hunters – and deforestation for increasing encounters between people and natural reservoirs, but say nothing about the bridge. The elephant – or rather the cow, camel or civet in the room – is livestock.

Here self-delusion segues into cynicism, because industrial-scale farming businesses, many of which are located in the global north, know very well the risk they represent – that's why they conduct surveillance of their flocks and herds for new pathogens. So far, they happen to be better at it in the US and Europe than in China. But all over the world, those businesses are pushing their smaller-scale counterparts closer to the forest. Sometimes they even push the small-scale farmers out of business and into the wildlife trade.

Deforestation is real, in some places, but where it is happening the capital and the mindset driving it can often be traced back to the global north – as it could a century ago. It's our rapacious consumption that is the problem – and that applies to climate change and biodiversity loss, too. The global south is well aware of this. That's why it took 20 years from the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro for an international organisation to be created to address the biodiversity problem. North

and south were wrangling over whose values should dominate the conservation agenda. It's also why there is an ongoing struggle over ownership of the world's genetic resources.

Sometimes, as Blanc notes, the south makes the north's hypocrisy work for it, as in the case of the African governments that treat national parks as cash cows. But nobody is fooled. From aid to conservation, the south knows to be wary of the white saviour complex, because of the ugly truths it hides.

Finding solutions to our genuine problems is going to be fiendishly difficult, but the process has to start with a recognition that nature is one big interconnected skein, of which we in the global north form a part, and that we're the ones currently pulling it out of shape. We're not all white – and we can argue about where the global north begins and ends – but if a northerner is writing this, and citing another northerner called, appropriately, Monsieur Blanc, it's because it's our myth that's making the world sick – and we should bust it.

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