

EcoHealth 2014 Call to Action

EcoHealth and Climate Change: Connections for Health, Ecosystems and Society Endorsed at the IAEH BGM: 14 August, 2014

People, our fellow creatures and our mutual planet need our urgent attention in the face of global environmental change. The ecohealth community recognizes that global climate change and its impacts are profound issues requiring definitive action. This statement is a call to action on climate change for the ecohealth community in conjunction with others similarly committed to the health and wellbeing of humans, animals and environments.

The call is to build upon the strengths of ecohealth to make sustained efforts by *integrating understanding, sharing insights and tools, and taking practical steps and coordinated actions*. The statement is intended as a stepping-stone within a growing momentum that connects diverse current and future actions to respond to climate change, and orients collective efforts to a combined focus on connections for health, ecosystems and society.

Ecohealth and climate change

Ecohealth is a field of research, education and practice that integrates scientific evidence, professional expertise and community experience with a view to improving the health of humans, animals and ecosystems. A clear focus on connections and relationships among different kinds of knowledge and multiple perspectives are essential features of ecohealth approaches and are especially suited to address the complex challenges presented by climate change.

In order to develop and enact solutions we need to examine how climate change is produced and framed as a problem. We also need to foster collaborative understanding and responses across communities, sectors and scientific disciplines. A focus on health—across humans, animals and other species— offers *new* opportunities to harness synergies across disparate efforts to address climate change. While climate change is not always a primary focus for the ecohealth community, it is a universal phenomenon that overlays and impacts all of our endeavors.

The ecohealth community is called upon to take *practical steps* to change the economic, political and social practices that exacerbate climate change, and produce its inequitable impacts. This statement underscores the added-value of ecohealth approaches to foster connections, relationships and commitments toward purposeful action, and to overcome the factors that delay or dilute necessary actions. Patterns of *denial, helplessness and apathy* associated with climate change include: a) *refusal* to accept the reality of climate change and to take action if it will jeopardize ‘business as usual’ interests (commercial, political, industrial, etc.) and b) an inability to trust that actions (ranging in scale from individual through collective to global) can make an appreciable difference. The *antidote* is a conviction that things may be otherwise. There are ways that people and organizations can realign human activity to secure a livable world and provide health and wellbeing for future generations. This is not an easy task but it is feasible.

Ecohealth approaches to addressing climate change:

Ecohealth approaches have resulted in positive and measurable impacts by acknowledging and focusing on the shared social and ecological context of health. ‘Health’ in this context includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Elements of ecohealth used to strengthen health and wellbeing across species and ecosystems include: *embracing diverse cultures and forms of knowledge, fostering community engagement, focusing on equity, cultivating collaboration, prioritizing ecosystem sustainability and adaptability*, as well as *generating integrative research, assessment, planning and actions across policy domains and projects*. Health gains are achieved by linking existing scientific knowledge with cultural wisdom, refraining from practices that drive climate change, and supporting activities, values and technologies that mitigate and restore the health of social and ecological systems.

Ecohealth strategies to improve health call us to explicitly address the human drivers of climate change and join existing efforts to change “business as usual” practices. Effective action to address climate change – through prevention, mitigation, adaptation and restoration – demands collective effort, and will be enhanced by creating enabling conditions that improve health and wellbeing. Effective responses also require us to challenge financial, lifestyle, food production, energy, extractive and transportation systems that harm humans, animals and the ecosystems upon which they depend. As we respond to this complex undertaking we can be heartened by opportunities to link with other regional and global activities, coalitions with and beyond the health sector and emerging leadership across sectors and scales. The ecohealth community is well-positioned to highlight and deepen understanding of connections and relationships among environmental events, political and economic agendas, drivers of social and ecological change, and health outcomes.

Ecohealth contributions and commitments to complex challenges have been profiled in previous conference statements (Kunming 2012 and Abidjan 2013). This ‘Montreal Call to Action’ extends and focuses those considerations in its call for all members of the ecohealth community to show leadership and commitment to act to address climate change. An essential feature of the 2014 call to action is a **Gallery of Actions** ([Appendix I](#)) intended to encourage appreciation of the scope of actions that the ecohealth community and others are undertaking. The gallery is designed to link existing and generate new opportunities for collaborative action to *inter alia*:

- *Promote* atmospheric renewal using the most practical tool available: plant trees;
- *Orient* their research, wherever possible, to work directly with communities most affected by climate change: Arctic communities and small island states.
- *Address* market forces as a driver of climate change: join the international campaign for specific commitments to divest from the fossil fuel industry;
- *Work* with the many others who are acting with the same compassion toward all life on earth.

Ecohealth offers many entry points for asset and strength-based approaches to foster aggregated responses to climate change. The international track record shows a tendency to neglect the root causes driving dramatic changes to our climate and planetary home. A focus on strategies to work and learn together is critical, given that significant investments, and numerous opportunities for integration at all scales have been lost. There is an imperative to actively seek collaborations across a range of existing movements – spanning environmental, Indigenous, conservation, labour, social justice, public health and beyond. These communities are well-positioned to actively engage in coalition work, develop cross-cutting strategies, identify new forms of solidarity, and profile climate change as relevant to any work seeking to improve health.

Pathways for integrating practical steps, diverse actions and integrated wisdom

As a stepping-stone between past and future efforts, the statement launches two *pathways for action*. The **Gallery of Actions** ([Appendix I](#)) is the first pathway, to which we invite contributions in order to build confidence and cohesion in our capacity to work at the nexus of climate change and the health of humans, animals and others species. The second pathway is a distillation of references and resources *that reflect and promote integrative understanding* ([Appendix II](#)) of the relationships between health, ecological systems and societal dynamics of climate change. Both pathways are intended to promote a cascade of responses across the ecohealth community and beyond. Both pathways are *solutions-oriented and profile* the array of nested systems in which existing efforts and future actions can occur.

In sum, the ecohealth community has unprecedented opportunities to cultivate practical, hopeful action which combines the wealth of existing knowledge about the causes and impacts of climate change with a (re)emerging understanding that health is an expression of the interdependence of earth systems, social systems and the interplay of humans, animals and other species. The statement represents a renewed, ongoing commitment by the ecohealth community to build, celebrate and connect their work in short, medium and long-term initiatives.