

## Genetic engineering and species protection during the corona crisis: More precaution!

What does COVID-19 mean for genetic engineering?

9. April 2020 / Every crisis is an opportunity to learn for the future. So, what does COVID-19 mean for the ongoing debate around genetic engineering and the protection of biodiversity?

Currently, we have various stakeholders strongly advocating the genetic engineering of natural populations, e.g. insects, trees, rodents, corals and microorganisms. Amongst others, genetically engineered insects or microorganisms might be released to combat malaria. Other applications include genetically engineering honeybees and their gut bacteria. These are all deep interventions into natural systems, without being able to determine or control the consequences of interactions in the ecosystems.

Particularly the new genetic engineering tools, such as CRISPR/Cas, could in the near future and in rapid succession, lead to releases of many different organisms which have never been subjected to evolutionary processes. Indeed, even small changes can have an enormous impact.

In a report drawn up last year for the Deutsche Naturschutzring, DNR, Testbiotech warned that an uncontrolled mass release of genetically engineered organisms could lead to increasing destabilisation in ecosystems. If genetic engineering is not sufficiently regulated, it will become a threat to species protection.

At the same time, an escalation in the destruction of nature means an increase in associated risks, ranging from outbreaks of diseases to full-scale pandemics: a report published by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, IPBES, recently highlighted the importance of protecting biodiversity for human health. The issue was subsequently taken up by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment and Nature Conservation (BMU).

Against this backdrop, Testbiotech is demanding that releases of genetically engineered organisms are strictly regulated, independently of whether additional genes are inserted or not. Releases of genetically engineered organisms that cannot be controlled in their spread, should be prohibited. Moreover, interactions with humans and the environment must be much more rigorously assessed than at present.

Genetic engineering and species protection remain immediately relevant in the times of the corona virus: the crisis is changing our perceptions. On the one hand, the role of genetic engineering in diagnosis, development of vaccines or therapies is being highlighted. At the same time, the virus is impressively demonstrating just how difficult it is to assess or control the associated biological risks. New biological risks are indeed a threat, in particular with uncontrollable releases. These risks should not be equated to viral infections. They can have serious consequences for the environment and species protection and, therefore, ultimately have severe consequences for human health. In future, the precautionary principle must be strengthened.

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**Further information:** [Report for the Deutschen Naturschutzring \(DNR\)](#) [2]

[IPBES report](#) [3]

[BMU press release](#) [4]

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### Links

[1] <mailto:info@testbiotech.org>

[2] <http://www.testbiotech.org/aktuelles/gentechnik-gefaehrdet-den-artenschutz>

[3] <http://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

[4] <http://www.bmu.de/pressemitteilung/schulze-weltweiter-naturschutz-kann-risiko-kuenftiger-seuchen-verringern>

