

Chapter 14: The Environment and COVID-19

If there was a “good news” story associated with the pandemic, it was the positive impact it had on the environment. As people sheltered in place, cars came off the road, planes were grounded, and production and consumption of goods decreased. As a result, daily carbon emissions plummeted [17%](#) worldwide in April. Greenhouse gas emissions dropped [4.6%](#) as of July, the largest-ever recorded reduction. Canadian scientists reported that nitrogen dioxide levels, a measure of air pollution, had fallen [30-40%](#) in Canada’s largest cities. What did these statistics mean on the ground? Better air and water quality and improved conditions for humans and wildlife. This [article](#) lists some of the amazing environmental effects including but not limited to: people in northern India seeing the [Himalayas](#) for the first time in 30 years; a [time-capture](#) of the improvement of water quality in Venice canals; and



Photo by Robin Benzrihem on Unsplash

rebouncing [turtle populations](#). Furthermore, the decrease in demand caused by COVID-19 and already reduced oil prices resulted in two major oil and gas producers, BP and Royal Dutch Shell, [announcing](#) plans to reduce their fossil fuel assets, a potentially positive sign of a global move to cleaner energy systems.

Not all the news was good news. Plastic use [increased](#) dramatically, and many countries rolled back environmental protections. In [Canada](#), the Alberta government removed regulations requiring oil companies to monitor surface water, ground water, and tailing ponds, a move that increases the risk of contaminated waterways and habitats. Some worry, [justifiably](#), that to promote economic recovery, governments will continue to degrade environmental protections and regulations. And precedence suggests decreased emissions due to the crisis might not last long. Emissions also fell during the 2008 financial crisis but quickly returned to normal levels. Some [evidence](#) suggests this bounce back started after the first few months of the pandemic.

Given the incidental positive effects that the pandemic appeared to have on the environment, many people

could not help but draw connections between the two crises. Before the pandemic, a burgeoning environmental movement, led by the youth, had been asking, with increasing vigour and momentum, for massive changes from their governments to combat global warming. The pandemic demonstrated that governments could, if motivated, make such sweeping societal changes. They could upend the economy, put cash into the hands of people and industries they wished to support, change production systems, cooperate internationally, and successfully convince their populations to accept widespread changes. And individuals could, if motivated, willingly make huge sacrifices and changes regarding their lifestyles, relationships, and economic positions. The question was obvious: why aren’t we willing to make the same sort of drastic changes in our lives to address what most would agree is a far greater

crisis? These are complicated questions ripe for sociological study. What is clear is that the pandemic has put climate change in a new light. Things that felt impossible pre-COVID—like making huge societal changes quite quickly—now feel more possible. To recover from the pandemic, governments will need to invest massively in our economy. Many [hope](#) that this represents an opportunity to move away from a fossil-fuel economy and finally make inroads to halting climate change.

As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- Why do you think people and governments fail to view climate change as an existential threat in the same way they do COVID-19 (warranting drastic measures to fight it)? Are there any lessons to be taken from the pandemic that might help change people’s reactions to climate change?
- One [study](#) provoked controversy by pointing out that reduced pollution in China during the lockdown (due to the decline in economic activity) saved 20 times more lives than the number of lives that were lost directly to the COVID-19 disease. Remembering that science is political, how do you interpret these findings? How might these findings be used by parties with different vested interests in the environmental fight: governments, environmentalists, oil-and-gas industry representatives, etc.?
- One trend on social media during the months in isolation was sharing videos of animals wandering deserted streets (some of these videos, like those of dolphins in Venice canals, were later revealed to be “[fake news](#)”). In Canada, reported [wildlife sightings](#) increased. Some people interpreted these to be evidence of a “rewilding” of nature due to decreased traffic and human interference. Is there another way to look at what was happening? Develop an alternative theory and describe how you might study it.
- Do you think the positive effects of the pandemic on the environment affected everyone equally? Consider what you’ve learned about race, class, and social location.



Additional online resources

Watch this video for Jane Goodall’s take on the connections between the pandemic and the fights against climate change.

- Berardelli, J. (2020, July 2). [Jane Goodall on conservation, climate change and COVID-19: “If we carry on with business as usual, we’re going to destroy ourselves.”](#) CBS News.

This video describes some pandemic-influenced environmental changes.

- Global National. (2020, April 22). [Earth Day at 50: The environmental impact of COVID-19](#) [Video].

This article discusses what long-term effects the pandemic may have on our willingness to address climate change.

- Kasriel, E. (2020, June 24). [A ‘mass experiment’ for the climate](#). BBC.

Single-use face masks are a source of environmental damage in China. What single-use plastics did you use more of during the pandemic? What environmental effect might these have?

- South China Morning Post. (2020, March 9). [Coronavirus consequences: disposable masks latest addition to Hong Kong’s waste woes](#) [Video].

This video examines how environmental, cultural, political, and economic factors played a role in the outbreak of this coronavirus.

- Vox. (2020, March 6). [How wildlife trade is linked to coronavirus](#) [Video].