

## Opinion – Why COVID-19 Will Not Be ‘Good’ for the Environment

Written by Andrew Heffernan

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# Opinion – Why COVID-19 Will Not Be ‘Good’ for the Environment

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ANDREW HEFFERNAN, APR 30 2020

The global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has brought countries around the world to their knees. While it has been suggested that the virus does not discriminate, in that it knows no borders and affects young and old, rich and poor alike, it has also been demonstrated that it *does* in fact discriminate in that it affects society's most vulnerable most acutely. This of course means the elderly and those with underlying health conditions, as we continue to tragically witness. However, it is also true for countries less well prepared, minorities living in poorer neighbourhoods and in general those whom societies have to some degree or another failed to adequately protect.

This targeting of the vulnerable has led to the health crisis that has unfolded over the past several months and to-date the only way to effectively stem the spread of the deadly virus has been to impose social distancing restrictions that see people staying home. This means less people going to work, fewer people travelling, less use of all forms of transportation and less industry churning. As the worst of the health crisis seems to be either near or already slightly past in most parts of the world, the next big question is when and how to begin reopening economies? There are many who worry more about the long-term detrimental impacts of the inevitable recession – if not depression – that will come. These fears and subsequent calls for reopening have been buoyed by concerns for mental health, lost childhood education and development, domestic abuse and the many other issues being aggravated by people being forced to stay home.

Among all of this chaos and the seemingly endless list of issues created either directly or indirectly by fallout from COVID-19, many have pointed to a possible silver lining of sorts – could this crisis be the push we needed to finally effectively counter the harmful affects of climate change and avoid surpassing the 2 degree limit outlined by the IPCC? Optimists have rightly pointed out that with more people staying home there will be less cars on the road, less planes in the sky, and even less boats in the water. This undeniably has to lead to improved environmental conditions, right? For evidence they point to satellite imagery that showed lower concentrations of GHGs above China only weeks after the initial shutdown began in Wuhan and from there spread. Similar images have been shown around the world and there have been recent reports that the ozone layer is even repairing itself at unprecedented levels. Below the stratosphere, people have been sharing pictures of visibly clearer waterways and news outlets have been avidly sharing stories of animals reclaiming areas they have not been seen in years or in some cases decades.

To be sure, all of these are positive signs, and all of these can be claimed as wins of sorts. The most optimistic thing about all these changes is evidence that with changes in human behaviour, we do have the power to reverse the harmful effects of climate change. Furthermore, these changes should offer proof to those who continue to deny that global climate change is a human induced phenomenon. However, despite these positives that can be seen, ultimately, the planet, and the fight against climate change, will be net losers as a result of the novel coronavirus.

As Ryan Katz-Rosene, a leading climate change academic in Canada, recently argued, global Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions are only expected to drop by 5% this year, and because of the way these gases remain in the atmosphere for a long time (over 100 years for some), this year will still represent a warming of the atmosphere by a considerable margin. Despite shutting down major parts of the global economy for anywhere from several weeks to several months, we will still not see an immediate demonstrable impact in the fight against climate change. That

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being said, as the IPCC has importantly stated “Every action matters. Every bit of warming matters. Every year matters. Every choice matters.” Thus, this represents a pivotal moment in the fight against climate change in which each and every person should re-evaluate their consumption and daily habits and think carefully moving forward about what part of their lives contributes to a sustainable future and which do not. While a drop in 5% in GHGs this year will not be nearly enough to prevent catastrophic climate induced changes in the no longer so distant future, sustained shifts in our actions will – as will consistent decreases in emissions.

The main reason that the global pandemic will not be ‘good’ for the climate – at least in so far as our current economic and political systems are structured – is paradoxically due to the economic fallout from the widespread shutdowns. Sadly, to this point in history the fight against climate change has largely been viewed and treated as a luxury. It is generally the countries around the world with the most stable economies who have taken some of the strongest actions in the fight against climate change and those which have produced the most innovation. Alternatively, as has been clear from ongoing debates at the IPCC Conference of the Parties (COP) summits, countries in the Global South generally do not possess the means to mitigate continued carbon pollution nor do they have the resources to adapt to the resultant harmful effects.

While not always overtly connected we can further see this connection to economic well being and the fight against climate change play out in populist movements that have developed across much of the western world and even in some developing countries. While these movements are often predicated on feelings of nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiments or doing away with ‘the establishment’, they are also often largely based on urban-rural divides which coincide both with economic disparities and with disparities in the reliance on fossil fuels. In Canada, where the government has recently imposed a carbon tax which has been hotly debated for years now, recent polls have demonstrated that while Canadians are overwhelmingly in support of efforts to combat climate change, they are much less willing to do so if it will affect their pocket book. Moreover this was at the peak of an economy that had been strong and stable for years.

Economists broadly agree that we are entering into what will be a very deep recession. What remains to be seen is the length of it. If the recession is deep but quickly overcome and the economy bounces back, the worst of the economic outcomes as a result of COVID-19 could potentially be avoided. Many however, worry that it could not only be a deep recession but also one that takes years to get over which would cause a great deal of global economic hardship. Regardless of which of these paths we follow it is clear that many will suffer economically and unfortunately, it is likely that efforts at combatting climate change will as well.

Already there are broad calls from industries, lobbyists and right-leaning leaders around the world to relax environmental regulations in order to allow companies to survive and at some point become competitive again. Airlines – one of the heaviest emitters of GHGs – specifically are calling for a relaxation of plans put in place to help them become more sustainable. The oil industry in many places is asking for similar forgiveness and amazingly enough are asking for *more* government subsidies in a time when we are supposed to be collectively figuring out how to move beyond our reliance on fossil fuels altogether.

These are the types of difficult decisions that policy makers are going to have to make in the coming weeks and months as we collectively attempt to stave off a global depression. It is hard to say to what degree public and private debt will explode during this period, but it is certain to balloon historic levels. This will undoubtedly worsen the economic situation of many and will likely provide fuel for populist fires that continue to burn and which will call for the removal of any sort of price on pollution or any other green initiatives that will be seen by many as ‘luxuries’ that we can no longer afford.

This clarifies the reason why we have been collectively failing at adequately addressing climate change to date – because too often it is treated as a luxury that we can choose to deal with when it is suitable for us and when we feel we can afford to do so. As the years tick by however, and as the global average temperature continues to rise at unprecedented rates, what may once have been a luxury is increasingly becoming an immediate imperative. While I do not foresee COVID-19 being good for the environment, it does present us with an opportunity to ask some difficult questions, make even tougher decisions and ultimately to rebuild the global economy in a more sustainable manner...

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or not. The choice is up to us.

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### About the author:

**Andrew Heffernan** is a PhD candidate in the political studies department at the University of Ottawa, Canada. He is author of ‘The official discourse of the Moroccan authorities and their allies in the greening of their public policies: modernization of authoritarianism, international insertion and the fight against climate change’ (Relaciones Internacionales, 2019) and ‘Africanizing the State: Globalizing the Discipline’ (Nokoko, 2019). He is also a contributor on the ongoing project The Future of Protein with fellow colleagues at the University of Ottawa and has published several online policy briefs including ‘The Globality of Community-Based Natural Resource Management in Namibia’ (CIPS, 2020) and ‘Sustainable development and good governance through responsible natural resource development’ (IMPACT, 2019). Follow him on Twitter @heff\_andrew.