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COVID-19 lockdown: A time to reflect on our impact on biodiversity



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The novel coronavirus, COVID-19, has brought to the forefront new challenges and, therefore, opportunities in our lifetime. While we often feel invincible with our advanced technology, it is times like these that remind us we are powerless against nature. Millions of people around the world, working from home and watching the news, are stuck inside and feel disconnected from their environment. But the reality is the opposite – our impact on this planet over the past generations has a direct connection to the spread of this disease.

Deforestation and habitat reduction have driven wild animals out of their natural homes and into areas of human habitation. Continued demand for wildlife products means people encroach further into protected areas to extract wildlife and natural resources. The illegal wildlife trade, which is driven by human consumption, sees people (especially the poor and vulnerable at the lowest level of this supply chain) risking their health and safety to make a living.

As we expose ourselves to animals and plants in the wild and bring wildlife into urban areas as part of the wildlife trade, we increase the ways zoonotic diseases can hop from animals to humans. In our crowded world, viruses with high mutation rates can (relatively) quickly [switch hosts in new ecosystems](#). In particular, the unregulated nature of illegal wildlife trade provides easy opportunities for pathogens to spread.

In 2012, journalist Jim Robbins wrote a prophetic piece in the [New York Times](#). Disease, he observed, “is largely an environmental issue. Sixty percent of emerging infectious diseases that affect humans are zoonotic – they originate in animals. And more than two-thirds of those originate in wildlife.”

Was the decision by the United Nations [to call 2020](#) a “super year for nature and biodiversity” also prophetic? Perhaps amongst the devastation caused by COVID-19, we will find the time and energy to consider our impact on this planet and its biodiversity. While the pandemic has delayed important international meetings on the environment and biodiversity, an increased focus on public-awareness and campaigning could bring positive impacts overall.

In February, COVID-19 drove the Chinese government to take drastic measures to stem illegal markets and ban wildlife consumption. Yes, there are loopholes that will continue to negatively impact wildlife. No, this was not a simple solution to the problems posed by illegal and unregulated wildlife trade. What remains to be seen is if consumer behaviour will change as a result of these regulations, and if pressure will reduce on some of the world's most threatened and protected species.

Beyond the many lessons we will learn about public health and safety, we must keep in mind the impact we have on our environment. This too shall pass – and one day soon we will look back on COVID-19 as part of history. Will our attitude towards wildlife have changed? Will we have learned our lesson, and slowed exploitation of our planet's biodiversity? Let us not take this lesson for granted and use this time to re-evaluate our actions on this planet and make sustainable choices now.

