



Radhika Iyengar • Mar 30 • 10 min read

What has led to COVID19? A compilation of responses from a public call

We recently sent out a request to crowdsource reactions to a recent Guardian Article- ["Tip of the iceberg: is our destruction of nature responsible for Covid-19?"](#). The underlying question that we need to consider while we read the responses is- What are the connections between COVID19 and climate change? Has rapid biodiversity loss led to this pandemic? These are some questions that we had posed in our public call. All views are their own and have nothing to do with their professional affiliations.

By Jahnvi Bhatt, a creative writer from Millburn, New Jersey. When I offer 'well-meaning' advice to my teenage college-going kid, she often pushes back with the phrase 'Mom, stay in your lane.' I found it offensive at first, but I was so caught up by the imagery and implication of that phrase that I started using it myself. How nice it would be if we all stayed in our lanes, charted our own course, and focused on our own destination. There would be no cutting lanes, no honking, no rush to get somewhere and most important of all, no accidents.

Now, imagine these lanes as ecosystems. The current pandemic and ones that preceded it have all been the result of not staying our course. In the name of progress, we have made incursions into forests, polluted the oceans and ravaged natural habitats. Illegal mining and deforestation have rendered miles of biodiverse areas into wastelands, destroying wildlife and rendering indigenous communities homeless. The article in the Guardian talks about how our encroachment into the habitat of other species has become a threat to our own existence. As we lock ourselves in our homes and fear for our lives, I hope we acknowledge the karmic load that has brought us all to this precipice.

We are part of the generation that will go down in history for its greed, consumerism, and misuse of natural resources. We have 20 pairs of shoes in our walk-in closets and perhaps 20 more in landfills. We have one refrigerator in the kitchen and another one in the basement. We are consuming copious amounts of meat and encouraging unethical practices of the meat industry. In fact, there are many among us who are eating animals that have historically never been a part of our food chain. We are trading their body parts which are used as youth enhancers and aphrodisiacs.

Nature is a great leveler and from time to time it confounds the best of us. George Herbert, a metaphysical poet, wrote in one of his poems: "If goodness leads him not yet weariness/ May toss him to my breast." This means that if good sense does not guide us to coexist with nature, we will be compelled in other ways to respect this relationship. In our frenzied quest for comfort and convenience, we have failed to respect nature but the current pandemic has forced us to confront the grim outcome of our transgressions. It's sad that this realization has come at an enormous human and economic cost. Thousands of lives have been lost and the world economy is on the verge of collapse. Now, as we isolate ourselves from the rest of the world, we are beginning to appreciate what is really important: our health and our relationship with others and the natural world. Hopefully, we will all slow down, take the occasional detour and enjoy the scenic overlook without sullying it. We will stay in our lane.

By Ozge Karadag Caman, Health researcher at the Center for Sustainable Development, Earth Institute This article has directly reminded me of the "One Health" concept, which is generally defined as a trans-disciplinary approach to achieve optimal health and well-being by recognizing the interconnections between people, animals, plants and their shared environment. As a public health professional, I truly believe that there should be more emphasis on this concept, especially in school curricula and starting with pre-school years, not later. If we can educate the next generation with a special emphasis on the concept of "One Health", their awareness of this interconnectedness in our world can be much higher than in our generation. Wouldn't it be a much better world if more people could see that human, animal and environmental health are all connected? Wouldn't it be better if more policymakers and decision takers made policies or took decisions by taking into consideration the impact of the newly adopted policy, law or practice on humans, animals, plants and the surrounding environment, I mean all at the same time? Wouldn't it be amazing if we had more institutions, where physicians, public health professionals, veterinarians, botanists, and ecologists worked under the same roof to do research, write reports and advice in a collaborative manner? If we do not want to experience future outbreaks like COVID-19 or if we would like to control them in a successful manner, then we should seriously start acting now, not tomorrow or the day after. In my opinion, our first priority should be kids and our first step should be to include the concept of "One Health" in all school curricula. The biggest investment should be for creating a new generation with a different mindset. We can then use the remaining resources to try changing the attitudes and behaviors of our business-as-usual-minded adults.

By William Bertolotti, Science teacher at Plainedge HighSchool, New York. 1. What are the underlying causes of zoonotic disease? An overlooked factor: The quote by Kate Jones really summed up the cautionary message: *"The resulting transmission of disease from wildlife to humans, she says, is now "a hidden cost of human economic development. There are just so many more of us, in every environment. We are going into largely undisturbed places and being exposed more and more. We are creating habitats where viruses are transmitted more easily, and then we are surprised that we have new ones."* Likewise, Thomas Gillespie: *"Major landscape changes are causing animals to lose habitats, which means species become crowded together and also come into greater contact with humans. Species that survive change are now moving and mixing with different animals and with humans."*

2. Economic pathways serve as vectors for the spread of disease: *"Wet markets make a perfect storm for cross-species transmission of pathogens," says Gillespie. "Whenever you have novel interactions with a range of species in one place, whether that is in a natural environment like a forest or a wet market, you can have a spillover event."* But even the US, I'd be really keen to explore how COVID has been transmitted via in-person conferences, airline flights, and crowded supermarkets. My thinking is that local economics bring people together, thereby increasing the likelihood of spread.

3. We must invest in the resilience of global communities if at the very least, for the economic reason those faraway communities are our first-line defense against the next potential pandemic.

By Christina Kwauk, Research Fellow at Brookings Institution, Washington DC. I am 100% in agreement that our human activity and disregard for the environment is putting humanity at greater risk for outbreaks like the one we're currently experiencing. As the human world encroaches more and more into the more-than-human world and disrupts the balance and harmony (and respectful distance) between the two, we should expect similar outbreaks to be a regular occurrence of the future. Environmental destruction and outbreaks go hand in hand; the health of the planet and the health of humanity go hand in hand.

By Radhika Iyengar, Education researcher at the Center for Sustainable Development, Earth Institute, Columbia University. In 2015 I was helping to draft a [UNESCO Report- Education for People and Planet](#). To get various opinions on the role of education to create a sustainable planet, I had met with a Professor of Ecology and biodiversity at Columbia University. In my interview with him, he said something that I have never forgotten. "Nature is not your friend, it does what it does".

I look at the last capsicum in my fridge, this is the last vegetable that I have in my three weeks of being homebound. 2 weeks back, I mustered up some courage, as if I was going out to war, and went to my local Trader Joes. A place that I used to frequent once a week, always carrying my reusable grocery bags, and saying my usual hellos to the employees who all know my kids and me very well. My kids got their stickers from the friendly cashier. However, my visit just 2 weeks back was different. The customers made a line, 6 feet apart from each other and the line spilled over to the parking lot. After an hour of waiting outside, a Trader Joe's employee handed me a wet wipe with my cart and I was among the lucky 25 who got to go in. "25 at a time was the new rule". I wore my yellow kitchen gloves, didn't make any eye contact, and stayed away from people.

I looked at the last vegetable in my fridge, my last capsicum. 3 weeks back I had attended a course on Food Waste Management in my local library. We exchanged tips that half an avocado or the banana that we take to our offices in our bags always get wasted. Therefore we decided to purchase only what is required and manage our fridge better. I had discussed how I need to better educate my kids to stop wasting food. Living in India, poverty, and hunger is not invisible. But with my kids, that is another story. I keep reinforcing that as per Hindu philosophy, it is a sin to waste food. In my recent conversation with [Gopal Patel](#) he links sustainability and spirituality very well. In the COVID19 days, I generate no waste. In the fear of not attempting another war-like situation, when I start my car to drive to a grocery store, I have been rationing food supplies at home and am being very careful. It required nature to give me a practical mandatory lesson on food management.

I hear that [New Jersey's air quality](#) will drastically improve and the residents will breathe cleaner air like never before. More cars stay at home and humankind holdback on more destruction. 18th April was our town, Millburn's, Earth Day celebration which is not postponed to September. My friends and I were planning ways to make our Earth Greener, less of plastic and emphasizing the "Refuse, Reuse, Recycle" strategy. In my daughter's school Wyoming elementary, the Green Team conducted class to class educational programs on what to recycle and what to throw as trash. I have so many bins at home to manage my waste-trash, recycle, plastic bag recycle, compost bins. I was so busy trying to fit my waste into these bins to make this Earth greener. Now, I avoid buying, not because I want to, but because I can't. I produce much less waste, not by choice, but due to COVID19. It took a pandemic to put our practices in their place.

My window tells me that Spring is here. I look outside to admire the yellow blooming flowers. Open my window to get some Spring air in my house. I go on my deck to get some sun. I cannot go outside, because there is nowhere to go. Probably starting my fossil fuel-filled car is already enough damage. Carlos Manuel Rodriguez, the Minister of Environment, Costa Rica has [called on leaders](#) to put climate and biodiversity at the top of the agenda. Probably one of those tree-hugging hippies who will soon be ignored. Greta has gone [online](#) too. Will she be a victim of out-of-sight-out-of-mind? Maybe we will go back to our convenient status-quo, but will it be easy this time?

Meanwhile, our new "normal" is here to stay. At the [COVID19 briefing](#) of the Earth Institute, Epidemiologists are asking us to prepare for the long haul. COVID19 will not go away, the effects might get dissipated over many years to come. Many millions will be physically impacted, but Irwin Redlener noted that the impact on mental health will be as rampant as COVID19 itself. Our communities are not prepared for disaster management, as per Earth Institute's [Jeffrey Schelegelmilch](#). Professor Jeffrey Sachs of the Earth Institute in his [public briefing](#) reminded us that this is not just a health issue, but will cost 10-20% of the GDP for many countries. Therefore, it is imperative that the world needs to have an economic plan not just for the current crisis, but also post-crisis as well. In a recent [Mongabay India Series](#) commentary, Gopikrishna Warriar notes that with the changing climate and rainfall, new diseases are emerging. The changing climate causes more stress to wild animals who are already confronted with shrinking habitats and thus causing a suitable environment to transmit diseases.

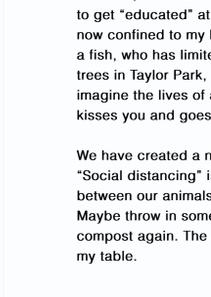
Spring is not my daughter's favorite season. She says bees come inside her house and she is very scared. "Mama I hate bees". So said the world! Is preserving biodiversity for the scientists alone? It is great to see Instagram photos of a scientist going out into the wild wearing a white cap, and heavy boots collecting samples in knee-deep waters or from high-up in the mountains. However, that's not me! I am so busy in my life, office to go to, and children need to get "educated" at schools. There is just no time to think about biodiversity. I am now confined to my house, boundaries have been made. I now imagine the life of a fish, who has limited places to go to because of the plastic we threw at her. Tall trees in Taylor Park, who can't move, but inhale all the bad air we give them. I imagine the lives of animals in Disney World, the cute dolphin who jumps out and kisses you and goes back to jail.

We have created a new world for them and nature now creates a new world for us. "Social distancing" is not just for people, but we need to maintain a safe distance between our animals and us. I will cook the last capsicum with a lot of care. Maybe throw in some potatoes and some curry powder. The core goes into the compost again. The only difference is this time there will be no food wasted on my table.

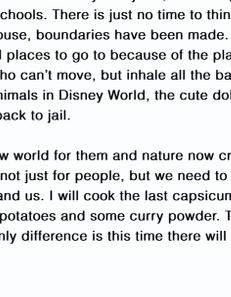
By Matthew A Witenstein, Assistant Professor, Educational Administration, University of Dayton As I reflected through reading this meaningful piece- I kept coming back to a couple of sentences- *"We must make people aware things are different now. I have learned from working in Sierra Leone with Ebola-affected people that local communities have the hunger and desire to have information," he says. "They want to know what to do. They want to learn."* My insight into this dynamic issue is working together. There needs to be a call for participatory practices tied together with working from the bottom up. Often, there are policies and procedures enacted by higher-levels of government- and these are often executed in reactive measure versus proactively. As the quoted person mentioned- people want to learn and often do not have certain pieces of information- people with specific types of formal educational training may have. However, those with the formal training typically lack local knowledges, ways of knowing and understanding of how communities make decisions. By respecting local communities and working together with them, larger pandemic catastrophes may have a better chance of mitigation/prevention. It offers an opportunity for people to work together, teach each other/learn together and solve meaningful problems. I aspire for a more dignified, reflexive and dynamic exchange where the Global North holds high regard for the desires and knowledges of those in the Global South. And I believe this can help foster more proactive and sounder decision-making which serves and preserves all aspects of the global community.

147 views

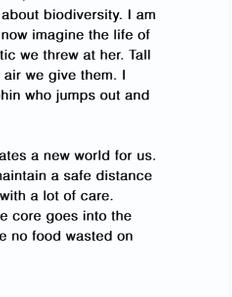
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