COVID-19 AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction: The new coronavirus (SARS-CoV2) has generated an unprecedented impact in most countries of the world. The virus has affected almost every country on the planet (213 in total), spread to more than 2 million people, and caused around 130,000 deaths. Currently, most countries have tried to fight the spread of the virus with massive COVID-19 screening tests and establishing public policies of social distancing. It is clear that the priority revolves around people's health.

For this reason, the indirect impact of the virus on the environment has been little analyzed. The first studies estimated a positive indirect impact on the environment. On the one hand, climate experts predict that greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions could drop to proportions never before seen since World War II. This outcome is mainly due to the social distancing policies adopted by the governments following the appearance of the pandemic.

For example, in Hubei province (China), strong social distancing measures were implemented in late 2019. These measures affected the country's main economic activities. As a result, power plants and industrial facilities halted their production. Also, the use of vehicles decreased considerably. All this led to a dramatic reduction in the concentrations of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO_2) and Particulate Matter that have a diameter of less than 2.5 μm (PM 2.5) in the main Chinese cities.

The COVID-19 crisis has forced activity freezes. Lockdowns and calls to shelter-in-place have closed schools and non-essential businesses. Minimal activity from industrial sites, factories and construction sectors has minimized the risks for toxins to escape, in turn improving air quality.

Travel bans have similarly restricted international flights. Canceled conferences, festivals, concerts and other public events have diminished interest in tourism, reports the US travel association. Airline ridership has slumped, and airports are as near-empty as they were in the 2001 aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. As such, aviation emissions — which accounted for 2.4% of global carbondioxide emission in 2018. Still, the EPA says vehicular activity contributes more to greenhouse gas emission than airlines do. Presently, fewer people are commuting, not just in

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major cities, but all over the world. Traffic nowadays centers mainly around immediate household supply runs to nearby stores, trucking supply transports to retailers or wholesalers, plus commutes by those in essential industries.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Canadian traffic has also declined, GEOTAB disclosed. As for the U.S., not only has road travel decreased, but congestion has all but disappeared. With substantially less vehicular movement, air quality has improved by leaps and bounds. Numerous sources have covered how air quality indices of the globe's largest metropolitan areas have improved extensively since strict coronavirus lockdowns were issued. Even NASA satellites from outer-space show the significant reductions in air pollutants, which supports EcoWatch's observation that the novel coronavirus pandemic has delivered the silver lining of decreased air pollution.

The Guardian added, "In China, the world's biggest source of carbon, emissions were down about 18% between early February and mid-March – a cut of 250m tonnes, equivalent to more than half the UK's annual output. Europe is forecast to see a reduction of around 390m tonnes. Significant falls can also be expected in the US, where passenger vehicle traffic – its major source of CO2 – has fallen by nearly 40%. Even assuming a bounceback once the lockdown is lifted, the planet is expected to see its first fall in global emissions since the 2008-9 financial crisis."

Reduced carbon emissions and global warming

Just last week, Carbon Brief (CB) published that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted energy use worldwide, which could cut carbon emissions by an estimated 5% of 2019's global total. That means the coronavirus crisis is so far "trigger[ing] the largest ever annual fall in CO2 emissions in 2020, more than during any previous economic crisis or period of war." While this is encouraging news, experts say it still may not be adequate for meeting Paris Agreement goals to keep global warming from rising above 1.5 degrees Celsius.

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Conclusion

Environment change is one of the biggest and most vital challenges of the 21st century. In spite of all their efforts to restore the nature during the last few decades, humans could only move a few steps forward. But during the last few months, consequences of the pandemic have successfully recovered the environment to a large extent that should definitely set positive impact on global climate change. Whatever be the cause or origin, the occurrence of COVID-19 has emphasized to improve the mutually-affective connection between humans and nature. At this point of time, it is indispensable to control the source of disease, cut off the transmission path, and use the existing drugs & means to control the progress of the disease proactively. Like all the preceding disasters on the earth, let all be optimistic enough that, human beings will definitely win over the pandemic in due course of time, but they should know the limits to which they can thrust nature, before it is too late.

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