

What will happen to the environment after the pandemic?

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Downtown Los Angeles, California, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, on April 15, 2020. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) data from March shows that Los Angeles had its longest stretch of air quality rated as "good" since 1995 as Safer-at-Home orders were issued in response to the spread of COVID-19. Photo: Mario Tama/Getty Images

In April experts in health care, economics and policy met virtually to discuss a global issue. But their focus was not been the COVID-19 pandemic or worldwide outbreak. Instead, they were talking about climate change.

Positive Environmental Impact During Lockdown

Though the pandemic is less than six months old, there is already evidence that the way we are reacting to it is affecting the world's environment. For example, China's carbon emissions dropped 18 percent between the beginning of February and mid-March. Carbon emissions refers to the carbon dioxide produced by planes, cars and factories. Gases such as carbon dioxide trap heat in the atmosphere, contributing to global warming, or an overall increase in temperatures around the world.

Pollution in India has decreased dramatically too, according to satellite images from NASA's Earth Observatory. And in the United States, drops in air and automobile travel have also lowered emissions.

But researchers say many of these changes are temporary. For example, the drop in China's carbon emissions is related to how factories stopped operating during the country's lockdown. As the country reopens, emissions are expected to increase again. This is similar to how global emissions grew rapidly after the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009.

Scientists are hoping to find ways to address climate change in the long term. They are looking at how people's behavior has changed, as well as changes in policy decisions that might affect goals for a cleaner environment.

Long-Term Policy Changes Needed

Environmental activists say the pandemic is a reason to push environmentally-friendly policies right now, and they worry that years of climate policy victories could be lost. The Environmental Protection Agency announced last month that it will not enforce environmental regulations during the pandemic.

"What we have to worry about is whether ... policy changes are going to be long-term or short-term," said Christopher Jones, director of the CoolClimate Network at the University of California, Berkeley. "If we roll back standards and they remain in place when the economy comes back, we are going to have a real problem."

Researchers say officials should include climate change issues in the government's efforts to address the pandemic. They say this could help the U.S. bounce back from the devastating economic impact of the pandemic.

Many environmentalists look at President Barack Obama's 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act as an example of how government initiatives can encourage climate-friendly industry. That bill, which gave \$90 billion to promote green energy, is widely credited with launching the renewable energy industry in the U.S. Renewable energy comes from naturally replenished resources such as sunlight and wind.

Kenneth Gillingham, a professor at Yale University, is less optimistic and notes that the pandemic itself has slowed renewable energy efforts.

"There's a slowing down of building new solar farms, of new wind facilities," he says. "Some projects are hitting the pause button. Other projects may not happen for a long time."

Connecting Human Behavior And The Environment

Scientists are pushing awareness about the connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate. For example, both the pandemic and climate change disproportionately affect people of color and other groups that experience discrimination and exclusion. Dealing with environmental issues will be critical for helping people most affected by the coronavirus, said Dr. Aaron Bernstein, a pediatrician at Boston Children's Hospital and a professor at Harvard Medical School.

He says there is hope in the way the world has responded to the pandemic. For example, people have changed their behaviors by sheltering in place and wearing masks.

"We are able to mobilize the entire global economy and population for an imminent threat," Jones said. "Everybody is willing to make personal sacrifices to protect the most vulnerable. I think that's quite new."

The question is whether people will see climate change as an immediate threat. Climate researchers see a direct connection between human behavior and the world's increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters, but research shows that most people feel disconnected from both the impacts and causes of climate change.

However, researchers say there is still a chance for people to change their behaviors in response to climate change. They think this is possible because people changed their behaviors in response to the pandemic.

"It can make people feel that what was previously unthinkable is plausible," Jones said. "They know what the experience feels like."

Quiz

1 What is the relationship between the following selections from the article?

For example, China's carbon emissions dropped 18 percent between the beginning of February and mid-March. Carbon emissions refers to the carbon dioxide produced by planes, cars and factories.

Pollution in India has decreased dramatically too, according to satellite images from NASA's Earth Observatory. And in the United States, drops in air and automobile travel have also lowered emissions.

- (A) They are both central ideas related to scientists' concerns about how environmental policies will affect the economy.
- (B) They are both central ideas related to the contrast between environmental policies in different countries during the pandemic.
- (C) They are both supporting details for the central idea that the world's reaction to the pandemic is positively affecting the environment.
- (D) They are both supporting details for the central idea that a reduction in global travel is most responsible for a drop in carbon emissions.

2 Which of these statements would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?

- (A) The Environmental Protection Agency must reverse its decision to stop enforcing environmental regulations.
- (B) Researchers and activists say the pandemic is a good time to push for environmentally friendly policies.
- (C) The decision to meet virtually to discuss global issues shows that scientists take the pandemic seriously.
- (D) Renewable energy investment would be an ideal way to help the environment during the pandemic.

3 How are the opinions of Christopher Jones and Dr. Aaron Bernstein connected to each other?

- (A) Jones's opinion that economic issues are related to climate change issues is directly disputed by Bernstein's opinion.
- (B) Jones's opinion that climate change was previously unthinkable for most people is developed by Bernstein's opinion.
- (C) Bernstein's opinion contradicts Jones's opinion that people should worry about whether climate policy changes are long-term or short-term.
- (D) Bernstein's opinion supports Jones's opinion that the behavior of people during the pandemic provides hope for fighting climate change.

4 How is the coronavirus pandemic different from climate change?

- (A) Most people have recognized that the pandemic is an imminent threat.
- (B) Most scientists agree that policies are needed to deal with the pandemic.
- (C) The pandemic disproportionately affects groups already facing discrimination.
- (D) The pandemic carries the potential to greatly affect the entire global economy.