



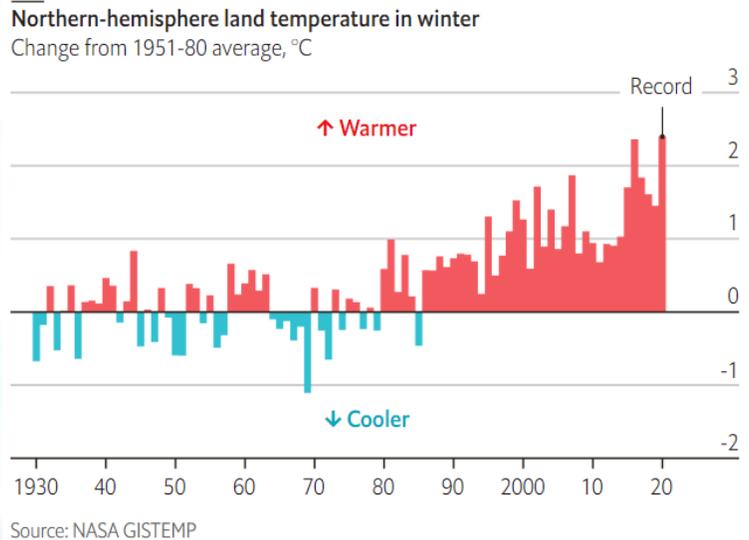
the weekly anthropocene

dispatches from the wild, weird world of humanity and its biosphere



By Sam Matey, April 1, 2020

The Warmest Winter. Almost unnoticed amid the onslaught of the coronavirus, a strange milestone was reached in the past few months. You may have noticed: across the Northern Hemisphere, from Moscow to Boston, November 2019 temperatures held relatively steady for the next few months, instead of dipping as they usually do in December, January, and February. Now, NASA and NOAA data has confirmed that the December 2019-March 2020 Northern Hemisphere winter was the warmest winter on land ever (and the second-



warmest winter for the world overall, counting ocean temperatures). Climate change is responsible: in the climate of the 1950s, a winter like this would have been effectively impossible. Even for the crazy Anthropocene climate of today, this winter was unusual-but it will likely be the norm within a decade or two. For more, see tinyurl.com/ubylvvy.

The Pass for Polluters. On epidemiological grounds alone, the Trump Administration's response to the escalating COVID-19 pandemic has been an utter and abject failure. From spreading demonstrably false and often dangerous information in press conferences, to politicizing basic healthcare and attacking states, doctors, and nurses for requesting direly needed supplies, Trump has shirked the most fundamental duties of a president, lied to and imperiled the nation, and directly enabled America's current state as the number one site of coronavirus cases in the world (over 180,000 as of Tuesday March 31st, sure to be more by the time you read this). For more on the directly disease-related failures, see tinyurl.com/TrumpCOVIDFailure.

However-almost unbelievably-Trump and the fossil fuel industry are also using this crisis to force through unprecedented and extremely damaging rollbacks of environmental regulations, which could make the current public health crisis even worse. On Thursday, March 27, Trump's EPA issued an unprecedented memo, stating that they were effectively suspending enforcement of all civil environmental regulations for an indefinite period. The clean air and water cops are off the job. And the specific language of the order makes this a clear free pass for polluters disguised as a coronavirus response. A decent administration could have shut down all active EPA work, have employees work from



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home or be put on leave, and still made it clear *the regulations can still be enforced later*-that if you spew toxins into America's common environment, and it's found out, there will be penalties. As it is, the fossil fuel lobby has taken advantage of a national crisis and a spineless president to get something they've wanted back since the 1960s: the ability to pollute however they like, without regard to the health of Americans. (Pictured: the Philipps 66 Bayway Refinery on New York Harbor in New Jersey, a repeat offender in breaking environmental regulations). This is insane, and the experts on air pollution issues are appalled. "This EPA statement is essentially a nationwide waiver of environmental rules for the indefinite future," said Cynthia Giles, who was head of the EPA Office of Enforcement under the Obama Administration. "It tells companies across the country that they will not face enforcement even if they emit unlawful air and water pollution in violation of environmental laws, so long as they claim that those failures are in some way 'caused' by the virus pandemic. And it allows them an out on monitoring too, so we may never know how bad the violating pollution was." Air pollution is known to increase the risk of influenza and the closely related SARS coronavirus, and this new pass for polluters could directly lead to more COVID-19 deaths. "EPA's decision to weaken pollution



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enforcement could make a bad situation much worse at a time when the demand for medical care is already stressed,” said Kathy Fallon Lambert of the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University. “It’s an unconscionable triple whammy that could lead to increased demands for medical care, increased respiratory illness from air pollution and increased COVID-19 cases.” For more, see tinyurl.com/rw9o6yr and tinyurl.com/w4559jk.

Then, on Tuesday, March 31st, Trump finalized the rollback of Obama-era automobile emissions standards. That sounds esoteric, but what it means is that car companies are allowed to build dirtier, more carbon-emitting, and less efficient cars. Not even the automakers really wanted this—it’s a gift to oil and gas titans who will benefit from more consumers forced to fill up gas guzzlers, which would mean even more air pollution long-term. (That’s if the new exemptions are taken advantage: many automakers will still make cleaner cars to please higher-standard markets like Europe). For more, see tinyurl.com/vg6nvlv.

And combination of air pollution and COVID-19 is potentially even more dangerous than previously thought. A recent position paper released by Dr. Leonardo Setti of the University of Bologna found that rates of new coronavirus infections in Northern Italy’s Po Valley correlate closely with levels of air pollution, possibly indicating that the virus can travel on air pollution particles like soot (as influenza viruses are known to do) or simply that, as previously thought, air pollution makes people more susceptible to the virus. This could also explain why Northern Italy is such a hotspot: the Po Valley has some of the highest levels of air pollution in Europe. It would also make social distancing and lockdown policies, which reduce air pollution through averted tailpipe emissions and energy use, even more important. Notably, this is a preliminary paper released before peer review (as is becoming the norm for time-sensitive COVID-19 related research), and the correlation is not proof of causation. For more, see tinyurl.com/u57k3hc.

It may seem tone-deaf, or unnecessarily divisive, to sharply criticize the US President while the nation faces the most dangerous pandemic in a hundred years. It is tempting at a time like this to try to “rally round the flag,” and support whoever is in charge simply because they are the ones in charge. But Trump deserves no such honor or respect. There are thousands of American heroes who are putting their lives on the line right now to protect people—doctors, nurses, Navy personnel on hospital ships—and millions more who are trying to support those around them—comforting children, caring for seniors, spreading accurate CDC and WHO recommendations, practicing social distancing to deny the virus a base in their bodies. They deserve respect, and they should be rallied around. The President’s actions dishonor their sacrifice and put more lives in danger. When the November election comes (perhaps it’ll all be vote-by-mail by then, if the outbreak continues), we must remember, and vote Trump out for the safety of the country and the world.

Again, please see the CDC and WHO for authoritative and accurate COVID-19 information. Stay safe.