



the weekly anthropocene



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

By Sam Matey, April 8, 2020

COVID-19: The Climate Conference. On April 1, the UN stated that the COP 26 international climate conference will be delayed from November 2020 to sometime in 2021. This conference is an important one, where countries will present their updated emissions reduction policies (“Nationally Determined Contributions”) but postponing all in-person international events is unquestionably the smart, evidence-based, ethical decision at this juncture. UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa said “COVID-19 is the most urgent threat facing humanity today, but we cannot forget that climate change is the biggest threat facing humanity over the long term. Soon, economies will restart. This is a chance for nations to recover better, to include the most vulnerable in those plans, and a chance to shape the 21st century economy in ways that are clean, green, healthy, just, safe and more resilient. In the meantime, we continue to support and to urge nations to significantly boost climate ambition in line with the Paris Agreement.” Wise words-and a blueprint for the next decade. For more, see unfccc.int/news/cop26-postponed.

COVID-19: Animal Transmission. Nadia, a Malayan tiger currently resident at the (now closed) Bronx Zoo, has tested positive for COVID-19. Six other big cats at the Bronx Zoo, including Nadia’s sister, two Siberian tigers, and three lions, have similar symptoms (including coughs and a lack of appetite) but have not yet been tested. This is the first-ever confirmed case of COVID-19 in a wild animal. (In case you’re wondering, the Bronx Zoo is pretty much the antithesis of the nightmarish and exploitative facility described in *Tiger King*: it’s a reputable conservation leader). Furthermore, it appears the common domestic cat can also contract COVID-19, as has been found in both real-world cases and lab studies. This last is concerning, not just from an animal welfare perspective, but because it could lead to a new reservoir for the virus. Another point of concern is great apes: gorilla and chimpanzee populations have been ravaged by Ebola in the recent past, and they would likely be susceptible to COVID-19 due to their close relationship to humans. Conservationists are on the job, though: many African national parks preemptively closed a while ago to protect their great ape charges. For more, see tinyurl.com/AnimalsandCOVID19 and tinyurl.com/GreatApesandCOVID19.

The Great Barrier Reef. The Great Barrier Reef is currently experiencing its worst coral bleaching event ever. Aerial surveying found that a stretch 1,500 miles long, down its entire length, was severely bleached. Coral bleaching occurs when too-hot waters force corals to expel their colorful symbiotic algae, leading to a bleached-white appearance and lasting damage. This once-rare danger is now common due to climate change and will likely grow worse yet. As Greta Thunberg so cogently puts it, “normal was a crisis.” For more, see tinyurl.com/GreatBarrierReefBleaching2020



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COVID-19: The Rise of “Healing Earth” Fake News. Regrettably, unscrupulous people on the Internet are taking advantage of people’s yearning for hopeful stories in these dark times to spread fake news about a “healing of the Earth” due to reduced human activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly all of these stories are false. You may have seen the Twitter story of swans and dolphins returning to the Venetian canals? The swans were there already, and the picture of the dolphins came from Sardinia, hundreds of miles away. Ducks in Roman fountains? Again, they’re there normally. “Drunken elephants” in a Chinese tea field? There were elephants, but they’re again in the area normally, and they didn’t get drunk. Wild boars in Italy? Wild boars have been recolonizing Europe for years, part of a broader trend where disused European farmland is reverting to forest. A photo of deer hanging out on a highway in India? The photo was taken years ago in Japan. Note that most of these stories involve real animals that were present anyway, not “returning” due to COVID-19. (For more, see tinyurl.com/FakeAnimalNews and tinyurl.com/MoreFakeAnimalNews).

Another reader emailed me about a story that the ozone layer is healing itself due to reduced pollution in the time of coronavirus. Short answer: the ozone layer is indeed healing itself, but not because of coronavirus.

Long answer: The healing of the ozone layer is one of the great environmental achievements of human civilization. In the 1980s, human-caused emissions of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) from products ranging from aerosol sprays to refrigerators were accumulating in the atmosphere and degrading the layer of ozone (O₃) in the stratosphere. (This was a serious threat, because the ozone layer helps protect life on Earth from cancer-causing ultraviolet radiation). In 1987, the world’s governments signed the Montreal Protocol, phasing out CFCs. Ozone degradation soon began to decline. It is indeed great news. But it’s nothing new: Al Gore wrote about the Montreal Protocol’s success as an example of international action to solve environmental problems in his book *An Inconvenient Truth*, published in 2006. A study in 2018 (note the year!) provided conclusive proof that the reduction in CFCs had directly caused the ozone layer restoration (see tinyurl.com/OzoneLayerClosing). Much of the current hype stems from misinterpretation of a recently published study that further confirms this and examines the effect on local wind patterns (see tinyurl.com/OzoneWind).

In sum, the idea that the world is rapidly healing itself due to the coronavirus is categorically false-and carries with it the disturbing and unethical implication that mass human deaths are good for the environment. I understand that a lot of people are looking for stories of hope in these troubled times, but this is fake news. The good part is, in reality, humans have done some incredible things for the environment in the last few decades, from creating a world where animals like deer and dolphins can flourish in human-dominated spaces to staving off crisis by beginning to close the hole in the ozone layer. These are stories to be proud of, and evidence that humans can build a world in which we coexist equitably with the rest of the biosphere. Don’t give the credit to the coronavirus! It’s both accurate and even more hope-inspiring to point out that we can do this all on our own, no worldwide pandemic required.