



# the weekly anthropocene



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

By Sam Matey, March 25, 2020

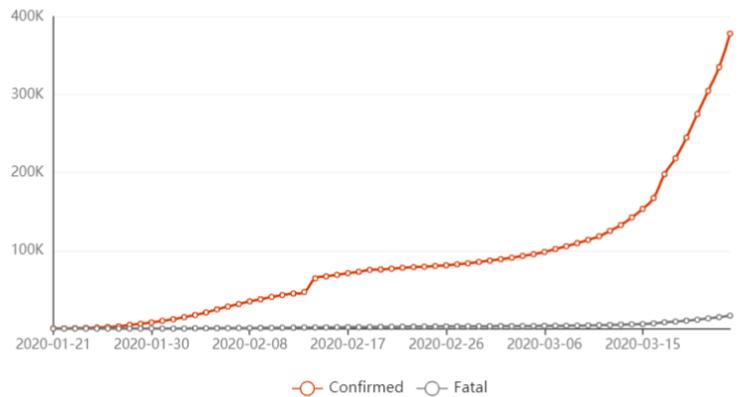
**COVID-19.** This was going to be a normal Weekly

Anthropocene, with stories offering a mix of news about renewable energy, environmental policy, wildlife science, and creative actions to build a better world. (If that sounds like what you're looking for, check out [tinyurl.com/RepopulatingTundraAnimals](https://tinyurl.com/RepopulatingTundraAnimals), [tinyurl.com/NewSharkSpecies](https://tinyurl.com/NewSharkSpecies), [tinyurl.com/GiantSeaweedBioenergy](https://tinyurl.com/GiantSeaweedBioenergy), and a truly

epic project at [tinyurl.com/AustraliaSolartoSingapore](https://tinyurl.com/AustraliaSolartoSingapore)). But these are not normal times. Human civilization is currently dealing with the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, one of the greatest crises since World War II. The number of cases worldwide has doubled within a week, and even seemingly-radical social distancing measures are not enough. It's useless to look to the American President for leadership or even baseline sanity—he's talking about ending social distancing measures while the virus is still spreading, apparently out of a desire to boost the stock market at the cost of human lives. (Again, for all your coronavirus-related decision-making, please consult the CDC at [cdc.gov](https://cdc.gov), the World Health Organization at [who.int](https://who.int), or Microsoft's tracker at [bing.com/covid](https://bing.com/covid), not social media or Republicans!). (Pictured above: the bare-bones graph of COVID-19 cases from Microsoft's tracker). In a recent official statement, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said "We are facing a global health crisis unlike any in the 75-year history of the United Nations — one that is spreading human suffering, infecting the global economy and upending people's lives. A global recession – perhaps of record dimensions – is a near certainty.... We are in an unprecedented situation and the normal rules no longer apply...We are at war with a virus." (For more, see [tinyurl.com/UNSecGenStatement](https://tinyurl.com/UNSecGenStatement)).

In a way, the COVID-19 crisis is like an eerie, sped-up doppelganger of the climate crisis. A big, human-caused change in the natural world (greenhouse gas emissions, mass consumption of wild animals) has unleashed something that could hurt a lot of people (the climate crisis, COVID-19). It escalates rapidly, but dealing with it would require big changes in daily life, which could harm the economy in the short term. The world's scientists say that this is really dangerous and we need to address it now. Political leaders are criminally slow to act. Trump obfuscates the science, and often just spouts straight-up lies of the top of his head. Greta Thunberg is a voice of sanity on Twitter. (Check out her COVID-19 response). The lesson from both of these crises? When scientists are warning you of a big threat ahead, it's better to deal with it as fast as possible than to ignore it and hope it goes away (For more on the connections between climate change and the coronavirus, see [tinyurl.com/ClimateandCoronavirus](https://tinyurl.com/ClimateandCoronavirus)).

Global - Spread Over Time





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Best case scenario, it's possible that this pandemic eventually leads to the widespread adoption of positive changes to society, from replacing more flights with virtual meetings to localizing food production and critical manufacturing services to instituting legal bans and cultural taboos on eating wild-caught meat. In particular, the opportunity to restructure energy infrastructure could highlight the strengths of renewable energy. There



are some hopeful signs for this from China, the first country to experience COVID-19. When the Wuhan outbreak was at its height, in January-February 2020, thermal electricity production in China (mostly coal) fell by 8.6%, but wind energy production only fell by 0.2%, and solar energy production actually grew by 12%. This was due to renewable energy's inherent marginal cost of zero—it costs money and worker hours to mine more coal and ship it to a power plant, but it costs nothing to leave the solar panels and let them gather free energy from sunlight. (For more on this story, see [tinyurl.com/ChinaCOVIDSolar](https://tinyurl.com/ChinaCOVIDSolar)). (Pictured: an awesome-looking fishery/floating solar panel power station in Tiangang Lake, Jiangsu Province, China). Furthermore, stimulus packages to get the economy back on track, if done right, could also be a spectacular boost for the transition to renewable energy. President Obama's 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act included some funds for clean energy investments, and it paid off massively in terms of new jobs and clean power. For more info on what a climate-smart coronavirus stimulus could look like, see [tinyurl.com/CleanStimulus](https://tinyurl.com/CleanStimulus).

Unfortunately, COVID-19 disruption is also screwing up supply chains for vital technologies like electric cars and wind turbines. It's also possible, if not likely, that reality-denying governments, with which the world is plentifully stocked right now, will use "coronavirus recovery" as a catch-all excuse to shovel taxpayer money into slush funds for the dirty and dying fossil-fuel industry. As this newsletter was written, Trump and Republicans were trying to do this in the upcoming US stimulus bill (though Democrats are working tirelessly to stop them). Stay tuned.

For more regular updates on the intersection of the climate and coronavirus crises, check out [grist.org/series/climate-in-the-time-of-corona/](https://grist.org/series/climate-in-the-time-of-corona/). And to all readers, good wishes for the safety of yourself and your families. This is going to get a lot worse before it gets better. Stay safe out there.