



the weekly anthropocene



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

By Sam Matey, March 4, 2020

COVID-19. COVID-19, the new coronavirus that has spread from Wuhan, China, to dozens of countries worldwide, is possibly the world's number one news item right now. It's undeniably scary. As of March 2nd, there had been over 89,000 cases and over 3,000 deaths, and these numbers will likely rise considerably in the coming weeks and months. However, it's worth keeping those numbers in perspective: in 2016, 1.4 million people were killed by road injuries worldwide, and 1.6 million more were killed by diabetes (Stats from tinyurl.com/MajorCausesofDeath). The coronavirus epidemic is tragic, but not apocalyptic. Furthermore, unlike with climate change, which is connected to many of the major industries of human civilization and on the micro-level could be a factor in many consumer decisions (driving vs. public transport, meat vs. Beyond Meat, etc.), there's very little the average person can do about the coronavirus. We'll repeat the standard warnings here: don't panic, don't hoard masks, don't spread anti-Chinese racism, wash your hands, and don't go for internet "cure" scams.

But in the meantime, there are, believe it or not, a few positives that came out of the tragedy of COVID-19. The new coronavirus is a zoonotic disease, meaning it jumped from animals to humans (although it's still debated whether the original host species was a bat, a pangolin, or perhaps something else entirely). To prevent future zoonotic epidemics, on February 24th the Chinese government banned the eating of wild animals and trade in wild animals intended to be eaten, effective immediately. While this leaves a



big loophole for trade in wild animals for non-food purposes, like "medicine," furs, or exotic pets, it's still a massive step forward for both human health and animal welfare. China previously had a multibillion-dollar wild-meat industry, a giant market in the flesh of animals like civets, reptiles, and pangolins (which are highly endangered). (Pictured: a Philippine pangolin mother and pup. Demand for their flesh in China is-or was-a major threat to the species). Since the outbreak, civet, ostrich, peacock, and porcupine farms have been shut down. This isn't just a smart public health measure; this is a humane animal welfare measure and a good conservation policy. It's good news. For more, see tinyurl.com/ChinaWildlifeMeatBan.



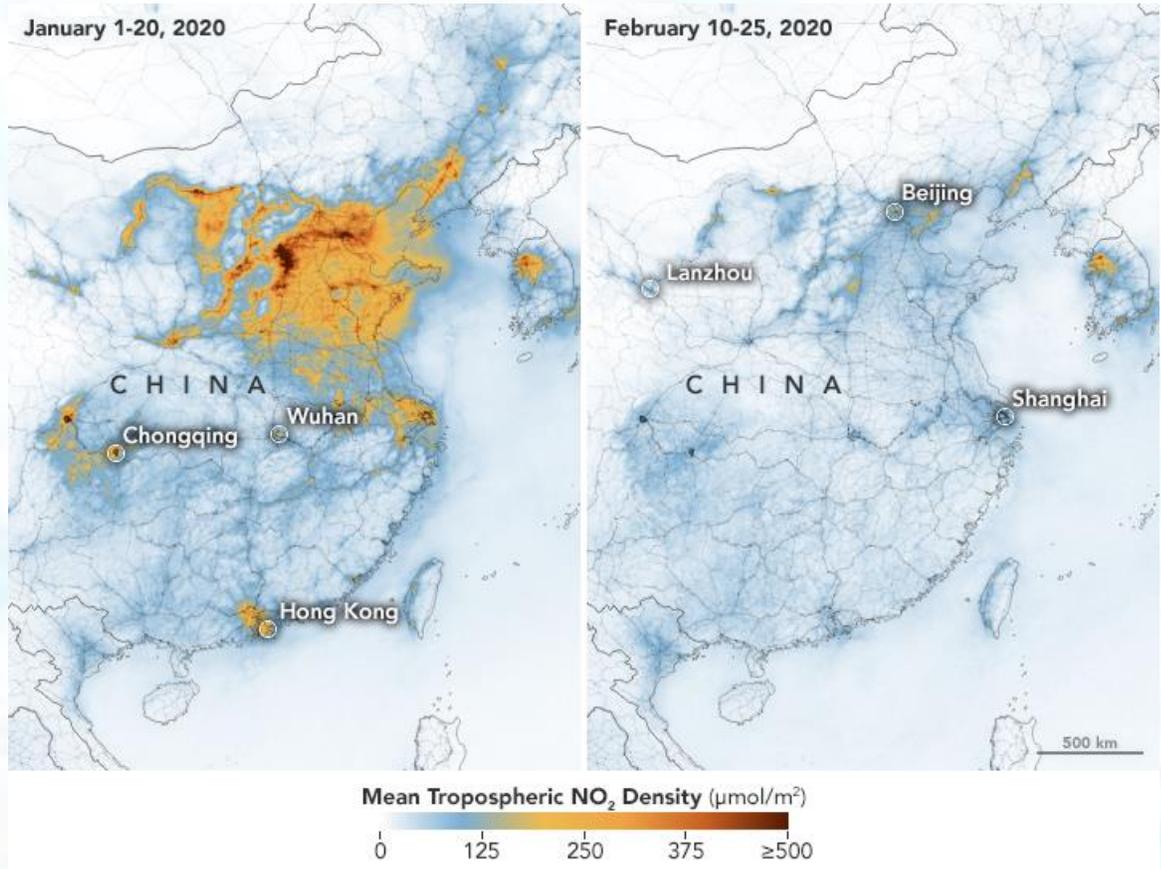
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Furthermore, pollutant emissions across China have plummeted, as workers stay home and economic demand decreases. Coal use is at a four-year low, and overall CO₂ emissions are down by 25%. NASA Earth Observatory has found a dramatic reduction in levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂, another pollutant from fossil



fuel burning) across China, as can be clearly seen in the map at right. For an in-depth look at this phenomenon from CarbonBrief, see tinyurl.com/ChinaEmissionsDecrease. For NASA's post, see tinyurl.com/ChinaNO2.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from the COVID-19 pandemic is a timeless lesson: global problems require global solutions. As Harvard cognitive scientist and scholar of human progress Dr. Steven Pinker recently wrote, "The Coronavirus Pandemic is one of many reasons neo-nationalism is destructive & ultimately futile. Viruses (like greenhouse gases, cybercriminals, dark money, terrorists, pirates, & technology) don't care about lines on a map." In short, "America First" just means America alone. A better slogan came from ex-presidential candidate Andrew Yang. The threats of the Anthropocene, from climate change to pandemics, require a politics of "Humanity First."

For regular updates on the new coronavirus from reliable sources, check out the World Health Organization's COVID-19 page at who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019 and the US CDC's at cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html. (As I'm sure most readers know already, social media, word of mouth, and the current US President do not count as reliable sources). Stay safe-and try to look on the bright side



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The Fight to Finish Fossil Fuels. Overlooked during the drama of COVID-19 and US elections, the last few weeks saw major victories in the fight to finish fossil fuels and move to renewables.



On February 27, in a landmark court ruling that may go down in history as a pivotal moment in climate change action history, a Court of Appeal in **Britain** ruled that the proposed expansion of London-area Heathrow Airport was unacceptable because it would be a highly carbon-intensive project and as such would jeopardize Britain's Paris Agreement emissions-reduction targets. This is a really big deal. It's the first time anywhere in the world, ever, that the Paris Agreement has "had teeth" in a court of law. (Pictured: in a photo from the Guardian, local MPs cheer alongside victorious campaigners). The threat of climate change was ruled sufficient legal justification to stop a major infrastructure project. That's how it should be, but almost never is! This could start a wave of legal actions to prevent carbon-bomb projects. Great news! For more, see [tinyurl.com/HeathrowClimateRuling](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/27/heathrow-airport-expansion-legal-challenge) .

On February 23, mining company giant Teck Resources withdrew its applications to dig a giant new tar sands oil mine in Alberta, **Canada**, citing "the growing debate" around tar sands oil's massive carbon emissions. (Albertan tar sands, and their carbon emissions, have been a polarizing political issue in Canada for years). The proposed mine would have cost over \$15 billion to dig and at full capacity would have produced 290,000 barrels of oil per day in addition to contributing further to the devastation of northern Alberta. Stopping it is a win! For more, see [tinyurl.com/StopTarSandsMine](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/23/teck-resources-withdraws-tar-sands-mine-applications).

On February 25, after strong opposition from environmental activists and local indigenous peoples, oil corporation Equinor announced the end of its noxious scheme to drill for oil in the **Great Australian Bight**, a highly ecologically sensitive area. Great news! For more, see [tinyurl.com/GreatAustralianBight](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/25/equinor-great-australian-bight).

Also on February 25, the city-state of **Singapore** announced that it would be joining Britain, Norway, and a few others in phasing out internal combustion engines entirely. Singapore plans to phase out all gas and diesel-powered cars by 2040, and to expand its electric vehicle charging network from 1,600 points today to 28,000 by 2030! The island nation is also setting aside \$5 billion for a coastal and flood protection fund. Awesome! For more, see [tinyurl.com/Singapore2040](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/25/singapore-2040).

And on February 18th, Indian coal and mines minister Pralhad Joshi said that **India** would stop importing thermal coal (the kind burned for energy) from fiscal year 2023-2024. While this is paired with a plan to rely more on Indian coal, it's still a positive step, and could reduce damaging coal mining in places like Australia. For more, see [tinyurl.com/IndiaCoal](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/18/india-coal).

The movement to build a sustainable Anthropocene is the fight of our lives-and we're stronger every day. Onward!