



# the weekly anthropocene

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



By Sam Matey, May 13, 2020

**India.** The response to COVID-19 will be a critical moment in the fight to stabilize Earth's climate, as economies, governments, and societies undergo profound structural change-with the outcomes still uncertain. One of the most important countries to watch is India, home to over 1.3 billion people and likely to become the most populous country in the world, surpassing China, within four to eight years. How India chooses to provide its people with power will be a big determinant of how much the world warms. Early signs weren't good: In 2018, the International Energy Agency forecast that India's demand for coal would double by 2040, a highly disturbing finding that seemed to augur decades more of increasing use of the dirtiest fossil fuel. Since then, renewable energy, particularly solar power, has expanded and grown cheaper in India much faster than previously expected. A recent auction purchased 2,000 megawatts of solar capacity for about \$34 per megawatt hour of power. The average cost of coal power from India's National Thermal Power Corporation recently stood at \$45 per megawatt. Critically, coal costs will likely just keep going up as power plants age and operational costs mount, but solar power gets cheaper ever yet. Furthermore, as in the rest of the world, renewable energy is weathering COVID better than fossil fuels. According to CarbonBrief, coal-fired power generation in India fell 15% in March and 31% in the first three weeks of April, while renewables generation increased by 6.4% in March and decreased by only 1.4% in the first three weeks of April. The lockdown-induced lull in Indian cities' chronic air pollution and smog is beginning to increase awareness of fossil fuels' overlooked negative externalities. The Indian government is already discussing support for renewables as part of coronavirus relief, and is urging states to incentivize solar cell and wind turbine manufacturing hubs. They have an incredible opportunity here to transition their country to a source of energy that is not only cheaper and more reliable, but will allow them develop without destabilizing the planet. Stay tuned! For more, see [tinyurl.com/IndiaRenewables](https://tinyurl.com/IndiaRenewables) and [tinyurl.com/IndiaPowerCOVID](https://tinyurl.com/IndiaPowerCOVID).

India also has a growing culture of climate activism, perhaps best exemplified by the incredible work of Licypriya Kangujam. Ms. Kangujam is 8 years old and began taking action with a solo protest in front of India's Parliament in July 2019 (pictured), urging the MPs and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to pass a comprehensive climate change law. (India, like the US but unlike nations such as Britain and New Zealand, still does not have a national legal commitment to address climate change). The law didn't pass, but Ms. Kangujam was undeterred:



she spoke at the COP 25 climate conference in Madrid in December, her work has already directly inspired the Indian states of Rajasthan and Gujarat to add unprecedented lessons on climate change to their school curricula, and she is currently setting up a group called Child Movement. With such incredible citizen leaders, India stands a good chance of forging a brighter future. For more, see [tinyurl.com/Licypriya-Kangujam](https://tinyurl.com/Licypriya-Kangujam) and [tinyurl.com/LicypriyaKangujamInterview](https://tinyurl.com/LicypriyaKangujamInterview).



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**Brazil.** Brazil's Amazon Rainforest is beset by an array of interlocking and escalating threats. The obvious one, COVID-19, is hitting the region hard. The virus is spreading rapidly through infrastructure and healthcare services-poor Amazonia, with isolated indigenous peoples particularly at risk. As of May 12, there were 222 confirmed cases and 19 confirmed deaths among remote indigenous communities. Beyond that, deforestation is reaching new highs: deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has risen steadily for the past 13 months, with deforestation in January-March 2020 51% higher than in January-March 2019. Even worse, low rainfall is forecast for the upcoming May-October dry season, meaning a high risk of wildfires. The resulting smoke and soot would weaken respiratory systems, worsening the spread of COVID-19. (For more, see [tinyurl.com/AmazonDeforestation2020](https://tinyurl.com/AmazonDeforestation2020) and [tinyurl.com/AmazonPerfectStorm](https://tinyurl.com/AmazonPerfectStorm)).

This nightmarish "perfect storm" scenario is admittedly awful. The worst crisis of all, though, is a crisis of governance: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is actively worsening both deforestation and COVID-19 and is coming up with all-new threats. He actively minimizes the threat of coronavirus beyond even what Donald Trump has dared (choice quotes include describing the virus as "a little flu" and infamously replying "So what?" when confronted about a record 474 COVID-19 deaths in Brazil in one day). He has recently fired his health minister and his well-regarded justice minister, Sergio Moro, has resigned. On April 19, in what was possibly a deliberate provocation to detract attention from his many failures, he joined a pro-dictatorship rally of fringe protesters calling for the shutdown of Brazil's congress and supreme court. Now, he's using a catastrophe partially of his making-Brazil's mushrooming, uncontrolled COVID-19 epidemic-to distract attention from a new disaster he's trying to make happen. Since his inauguration in January 2019, as this newsletter has reported, Bolsonaro has fulminated against environmental protection generally and indigenous peoples' land reserves specifically, doing all he can to encourage illegal loggers and miners. Now, he's forced FUNAI, Brazil's indigenous lands agency, to publish a new rule that allows outsider land claims in 237 indigenous territories still in the process of gaining recognition. Together, that's 37,830 square miles, an area larger than Indiana. In a move reminiscent of the darkest days of the United States' westward expansion, this change effectively legalizes land grabbing from indigenous peoples. Any illegal logger or miner can invade these lands, claim a parcel, and get it legally recognized. This appears to be a violation of Brazil's constitution, so the courts may yet redress this craziness. For the commentary of a Brazilian indigenous leader, see [tinyurl.com/AmazonVoice](https://tinyurl.com/AmazonVoice). For more, see [tinyurl.com/AmazonDeforestation2020](https://tinyurl.com/AmazonDeforestation2020).

There is one bright spot: Brazil's somewhat more respected Vice President, ex-army general Hamilton Mourão, announced on May 11<sup>th</sup> that the Brazilian army was beginning an intervention to restore some semblance of order in the increasingly lawless Amazon. 3,800 troops are to be mobilized and deployed to bases in three Amazonian cities to act against illegal logging and other crimes. (For more, see [tinyurl.com/BrazilArmyDeployed](https://tinyurl.com/BrazilArmyDeployed)). It remains to be seen how the Amazon and its people will fare in this bizarre year.