



the weekly anthropocene



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

By Sam Matey, May 6, 2020

Renewable Energy. A new report from the International Energy Agency has found that global energy demand is set to fall by an astonishing 6% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated “Great Lockdown.” As a result, carbon dioxide emissions are set to fall by an unprecedented 8%. It’s important to remember though, that this alone will not stop climate change or even slow it down much: there’s already way too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and any increase at all just keep the ball rolling. A rapid replacement of fossil fuels to renewables is needed. That’s why the next part of the report is such good news: the IEA also found that renewable energy is weathering the socio-economic damage of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic impressively well. Demand for renewables is expanded to grow by 1%, as use increases by 5%. These are smaller increases than forecast before COVID, but an immense contrast to the collapse of fossil fuel use. Anecdotal evidence adds context to this picture: on April 20th, solar generated a record 40% of Germany’s electricity, while the UK has gone a record 25 days (and counting!) without using any coal at all. America’s largest battery energy storage project ever is moving forward (Southern California Edison’s new contracts) as is the world’s largest solar farm (Al Dhafra Solar PV project in the UAE).

Notably, even the vaunted “free market” speaking doesn’t halt Republican corruption: investigative journalism has found that US fossil fuels companies have already received over \$50 million in COVID relief from the government—including \$28 million to three coal companies with ties to Trump Administration officials, while US taxpayers already subsidize the fossil fuel industry to the tune of \$20 billion per year. (For more, see tinyurl.com/COVIDCoalCorruption). Overall, though, the renewables revolution is powering ahead, keeping the lights on and the air clean in these dark times. Great news! For more, see tinyurl.com/RenewablesRevolutionSurge and tinyurl.com/RenewablesRising. For the full IEA report, see www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-2020.

Greta Thunberg. Renowned climate activist Greta Thunberg (pictured) continues to be an extraordinary human being. After being awarded \$100,000 by the Human Act Foundation for her work, she has donated the entire sum to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to help protect children worldwide from coronavirus-related food shortages, violence, and educational and healthcare limitations. “Like the climate crisis, the coronavirus pandemic is a child-rights crisis,” said Ms. Thunberg. “It will affect all children, now and in the long-term, but vulnerable groups will be impacted the most. I’m asking everyone to step up and join me in support of UNICEF’s vital work to save children’s lives, to protect health and continue education.” Incredible work! For more, see www.unicef.org/coronavirus/join-greta.





the weekly anthropocene



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

By Sam Matey, May 6, 2020

Great Apes. Great apes (the chimpanzees, bonobos, two species of gorilla, and three species of orangutan that are humanity's closest relatives) have been severely harmed by diseases caught from humans on many occasions in the recent past. A 2004 Ebola outbreak killed 95% of one population of eastern lowland gorillas (although they have begun to recover, see tinyurl.com/GorillaEbolaRecovery). Human respiratory viruses are already the leading cause of death among chimpanzees at Gombe Stream National Park, the site of Jane Goodall's pathbreaking and transformative research. Against this background, COVID-19 poses a serious threat. If it jumps to a great ape population, fatalities would likely be extremely high: great apes live in tight-knit family groups and would have no concept of "social distancing." Conservations across the worldwide are scrambling to preemptively protect these species: national parks across Africa have been shut down to prevent the entry of COVID-infected tourists, and the Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Program has released 300 orangutans rescued from the illegal pet trade into two forest areas that previously had no orangutans, creating two new isolated populations to increase the chance that some orangutans escape the virus. In a particularly above-and-beyond example, researchers at Ivory Coast's Tai National Park are working to test chimpanzees' feces for COVID-19, and in the event that prevention fails and the apes become sick and weakened, they're planning to sleep nearby (suitably masked, of course) to protect them from leopards and poachers). For more on these heroic efforts, see tinyurl.com/GreatApesCoronavirus.

Botswana. The Okavango Delta is a vast and biodiverse wetland in northwestern Botswana, an unusually peaceful and democratic country in southern Africa. It's also home to the last few black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*, pictured) in the country, descendants of a population reintroduced from South Africa after the species was driven locally extinct in 1992. However, as safari tourist numbers have plummeted since the onset of COVID-19, the Botswanan government is concerned that poachers may be emboldened to attack this rhino stronghold, especially given unusually high poaching activity in recent months. They recently announced plans to capture all of the Delta's rhinos and evacuate them to a secure undisclosed location to keep them safe. The rhinos are being spotted from the air and then found and transported by truck. It's highly encouraging to see this dedicated effort to safeguard an endangered species! Furthermore, the overall picture for the critically endangered species is also guardedly positive: a new study found that black rhino numbers rose from an estimated 4,845 wild individuals in 2012 to an estimated 5,630 wild individuals in 2018. For more on the evacuation plans, see tinyurl.com/BotswanaRhinoRescue. For more on the new study, see tinyurl.com/BlackRhinoStudy.



