

COVID-19 AND THE ENVIRONMENT: What are the consequences?

The world could be described as a movie that has translated from one season to the other each passing day. As the suspense grows through each episode, certain characters rear their ugly heads to occupy the discussions on the major streets and the ghettos. Whilst some may describe the unfolding of events as 'perfectly imperfect', others may label it as 'a process in the rightly unknown direction'. Prior to some few months ago, challenges such as climate change, water scarcity, gender inequality and poor sanitation had been the "protagonists" for this seemingly unending movie.

From local to international colloquy, they had mostly been at the center of every episode, until **COVID-19** showed up as the "villain". Today, its name floods every home and reports told in the number of lives claimed. To many who still "admire" the earlier characters, they envisage an "enjoy while you last scenario for COVID-19. However, while COVID-19 reigns, one of the major questions that has popped up at the "green table" is: "**what are the environmental consequences of COVID-19**".

For most environmentalists, even though COVID-19 is not a pleasant guest, its appearance tends to present the right footing for bringing the world back into an ecological balance: especially; the fight against air pollution, as major sources of air pollutants: transportation and industrialization have slowed down. It is of no doubt that the bans on public movement in all parts of the world (figure 1&2) have led to the noticeable change in air quality in most polluted cities and in highly industrialized areas such as Asia, the USA and Europe.



Figure 1&2: Major streets in USA, Asia and Europe sleep in silence

Today, the once busy streets full of human activities have become hubs for animals that are labelled "wild" to waggle. In northern India, a herd of deer was caught on camera walking the streets of Haridwar during the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown. Catalonia was lighted up with boars descending from the mountains, whilst Wales have seen mountain goats causing havoc on the streets of Llandudno



A Small Indian civet was spotted in Kerala's Kozhikode | Photo: Twitter

All these sound like good news! Nonetheless, before we start counting our eggs, one has to reflect on how, many years of pollution could be resolved within few weeks or months; thus probing its sustainability. Li Shuo, senior global policy adviser at Greenpeace in Beijing says: “The ones that are celebrating the environmental improvements during the Covid-19 crisis are shortsighted”. Would one be too hasty to agree or disagree with Li?

Also, according to Zhao Qunying, director of China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment's emergency management office, Hospitals in Wuhan, for example, produced over 200 tons of waste per day during the peak of their outbreak, compared to an initial average of less than 50 tons. This position clearly reflects the situation of medical waste in most hospitals and isolation centers across the world.

Due to the risk of spreading the virus, various waste management strategies that had been put in place have been halted. Most people who are locked up at home have resorted to online purchases which come in plastic packages and there have been a tremendous rise in the usage of hand sanitizers, nose masks, hand gloves and protective clothing: most of which are used once and discarded. Where do the waste end up?

Washing of hands has now become a winning mantra in the fight against COVID-19. With the UN estimates of 2.2. billion of the world's population lacking access to drinking water and more than half of the world's population lacking proper sanitation facilities, it is only prudent to inquire how most households especially in developing countries are coping with lock downs and how this impacts the environment.

Opinions have been laid bare and I guess imaginations and thinking have been stirred. The linkage between COVID-19 and environmental consequences has been placed on trial. What do you think? Should the world rejoice or brace up for the aftermath?

Get interactive, share your views and let us keep the discussion going as we prepare to tackle the world's challenges together.

Have a green-filled day!

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