

CORONAVIRUS vs. CLIMATE

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The Prequel

Although it looked like a local problem that was born in Wuhan, China, the new form of the coronavirus Covid-19 spread like wildfire across the globe. The total number of coronavirus cases is nearing 3 million (April 24, 2020) and unfortunately, the death toll is almost 200,000.

The virus is thought to have originated in a wet market in Wuhan. Wet markets are popular and common in East and Southeast Asia. The problem is not the market itself but the vendors that sell live wildlife for human consumption. Covid-19 is theorized to have been transferred from bats to pangolins, and from pangolins to humans via consumption.

Consumption of wildlife, or bush meat, occurred in China historically. However, the Great Leap Forward years saw mass starvation of people and causing somewhere between 16 and 45 million deaths. During this period people ate anything they found like sawdust, soil, and rotting meat. Dogs, cats, and even the national gem the giant panda were eaten. Also, some animals were seen as pests such as the sparrows, and these birds were decimated which later on brought large numbers of vermin eating the crops (swarajyamag.com). The great famine years made people realize that these methods were not sustainable.

Ongoing Effects

The shops, restaurants, cafes and some other stores are closed. The supply chain has come to a halt. People working at these businesses are staying at home.

The planes sit and wait. Almost all countries have closed their borders. No people from abroad are allowed inside anymore. Also, the vast majority of internal flights are cancelled. Tourism and tourism industry are hibernating.

Home-office working has become a widely accepted reality. Some companies put their workers on a cycle and only a fraction of their workforce are present at the work place at a given time. These people stopped commuting. Inner city buses, metros, trains etc. run far less frequently.

Children are now home schooled. Distant education is provided from TVs and via the internet. Millions of young citizens do not go to their schools or their sport, music or other art events.

The result of this change of habits brought demand for oil to a vast decrease. Smog levels dropped as combustion engines are parked at their garages.

A striking example of air quality increase can be seen in the photo below. The left side of the photo is from November 2019 and the right side of the photo was taken in March 2020 in India. The three week long lockdown brought down the hours of unhealthy pollution levels to a mere quarter of the previous times. Seoul in South Korea experienced a drop of more than by half in in PM2.5 levels. In Wuhan the air quality increased by more than 40% (cnn.com).



Image: Air pollution in New Delhi, India, November 2019 vs March 2020 (cnn.com)

Impact on the climate change

First of all, the optimist approach tells us that people learnt how to deal with a global crisis and can actually act upon it when need be.

- Less food is wasted.
- Local consumption is higher.
- Commuting is less and companies could possibly continue having their employees continue working from home.
- The response to the Covid-19 pandemics happened within weeks, this passion can be called upon the response to climate change.
- A carbon neutral future can be built.
- The flaws in our economic system can be fixed (news.yahoo.com).

On the contrary, the pessimist thought brings the worries of reduction in investment in greener energy sources as the economies shrank and less funds are diverted towards this cause. The climate change will not happen tomorrow or the day after; this limits the public response as things happen gradually.

- More immediate actions can be favored rather than long term.
- The politicians in the world acted slowly upon the pandemics i.e. a bad sign for the future.
- Polluting industries may receive the larger chunk of stimulus funds.
- Emissions will be back to their “normal” levels as soon as the lockdowns end.
- The public saw the imminence of the pandemic, yet the climate change is taking place slowly but surely (news.yahoo.com).

We are yet to see the whole effects of the climate change. Scientists advised us to take action for many years. The recent responses we gave to the pandemic made it indisputable that we need to be in the middle of the crisis to act upon. Moreover, there is one positive point to this – we still have some time to act (nbcnews.com).

Conclusion

Although we have been warned about the climate change for many decades, we have been reluctant on reacting. We saw a rapid decrease in the demand for oil in the general industry (due to shut down factories and diminished demand for goods), in the transport sector (due to travelling limitations and halted commuting), in tourism, and other related sectors. This slowed trend does not look everlasting and as the limitations and lockdowns end, eventually, the humanity will go back to its “normal” times and start polluting again.

However, the global awareness and most people’s readiness and willingness to isolate themselves and start living at a slower pace give hope for the future. Perhaps, when the climate change shows itself before our eyes by leaving no way for denial, although it would be too late to cancel out all the bad results of the change, we might still reverse some deadly effects.

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