

Rebuilding Our House After COVID-19

Max Winpenny

In times riddled with uncertainty and stress, this pandemic is giving humans an opportunity to focus on our priorities. COVID-19 seems to be bringing into question the moral philosophies that dictate how we behave and what exactly we are all here for. Most importantly, the way we treat the environment has been highlighted.

Our isolation means wildlife is returning to areas where it has previously vanished, pollution is decreasing, and irresponsible wildlife trade, which is widely thought to have caused this pandemic, has come under massive scrutiny. The way the Earth has responded to our isolation shows that it is no longer an argument that the way we have treated the natural world has been unhealthy for the Earth. The pandemic itself shows that the way we treat the natural world is also unhealthy for us humans. We started a fire inside our own house and now the roof is coming down on us.

Humans using Earth's resources for our gain is inevitable and necessary, but the way we have been doing it up until now has been unsustainable and destructive. There needs to be systemic change in how we interact with our world, and the question on everyone's lips now is: How do we change?

Animal-borne diseases are nothing new

Firstly, it is important to understand that, to many, this outbreak is not a surprise. Animal-borne (zoonotic) disease outbreaks have happened before for similar reasons like this one. This includes both SARS and MERS. The way that decision-makers dealt with previous zoonotic pandemics was to ban certain animals from being traded. Our current situation demonstrates that we needed to do more. China's recent ban on open animal markets could be similarly ineffective, especially considering a new strain of coronavirus has recently been detected in pangolins, the world's most trafficked animal. This top-down policy approach is often necessary, however, bans like this are rarely the solution. In China, open animal markets are culturally significant and important for nutrition. Banning them is a big step that is likely to result in significant pushback from civilians. Additionally, there is a well-established black market in wildlife trade thought to be worth billions. Banning it is likely to push it further underground, merely making it harder to regulate.

These issues highlight one of the biggest problems with top-down policymaking: that it tends to generate rebellious behavior because it removes the autonomy of free-will. So how do we

prevent this rebellious nature at the same time as encouraging responsible behavior? The answer is that the behavior must be self-regulated by society. If people decide for themselves that they want to treat nature with more respect, then politicians and businesses will follow suit. Demand from the masses tends to dictate politics and economics.

Unscrupulous antibiotics use may be as dangerous as wildlife markets

In order to encourage this behavior without creating pushback, bottom-up policymaking will be needed at the grass-roots level. It can be notoriously challenging, however examples in public health, like changing smoking behavior, have demonstrated that it can be done. Importantly though, we cannot sit back and point the finger at other cultures. Whilst this pandemic likely originated in China, legal agricultural standards in places like the U.S.A and Europe could be just as dangerous. In the U.S.A, more [antibiotics are used on agriculture \(80%\) than people](#). This can cause antibiotic resistance which could lead to [around 10 million deaths per year by 2050](#). The next pandemic might be a bacterial disease that could have been avoided had we not overused antibiotics for the sake of meat consumption. So, we may aim to blame China for this, but we should remind ourselves that irresponsible environmental behavior is a global issue.

At our current disposal for affecting bottom-up behavioral change, are tools such as green marketing, green nudging, and education. Increased resources and research in these areas need to be a priority after this pandemic to instill the values that are needed for the long-term, sustainable management of nature. Leaders need to step up and demonstrate that they are willing to be brave and innovative. And businesses need to put aside self-interest for the sake of the planet and pivot into less damaging products and services.

Change in public attitudes is an essential driver

Ultimately, a public unwilling to change won't change, so public attitudes towards the environment are going to be an essential driver. For individuals out there looking to make a change, messages on how to act are often unclear or overwhelming. As consumers, we have a responsibility to change how we act in the coming years, but we should remind ourselves that the way we currently act isn't completely our fault. Our current lifestyle frameworks have encouraged certain behaviors. It is an unfortunate side effect of capitalism that for economies to grow consumers need to be conditioned to believe that they don't have enough. It is this notion of excess that will continue destroying our planet. Movements like minimalism and veganism have become globally popularized with millennials in particular. However, they still receive skepticism and resistance from the unconverted. As with banning wildlife markets, extreme movements in one direction will tend to generate resistance. With that in mind, a key movement to change consumer mentality will be the concept of moderation: Eating meat once or twice a week rather than with every meal. Owning key items of long-lasting clothing rather than buying new socks every week. Reducing the number of sentimental household items.

Planning meals carefully so that there is no food waste and minimal use of plastic containers. In a similar fashion to quitting an addiction, going 'cold turkey' on familiar behaviors might be challenging. Moderating our behaviors will allow us to appreciate the value of nature in a way that excess and minimalism do not. In addition, moderation allows us to make mistakes. In economically well-developed regions of the world, we have little excuse to consume the way we do but feeling shamed into change may have opposite effects. Provided there is a real desire to improve, we should forgive ourselves for not acting perfectly and aim to be better each day. Real growth takes work, time, kindness, and community. To change our obsession with excess, we will need all of these.

According to the UN environment chief, Inger Andersen, "[Nature is sending us a message](#)". Unless something changes, the messages will come thicker and they will come faster. It might feel like being back at school, but we have some big lessons to learn if we want to act on these messages before they get out of hand.

The [MAHB Blog](#) is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org