

# What coronavirus tells us about climate change on Earth Day's 50th anniversary

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The Seattle Times headline on Seattle's first Earth Day, on April 22, 1970, was prescient. So much so, it could have been written on this year's 50th anniversary of Earth Day.

"Pollution to Overheat Earth, Says Expert" was the headline stripped across the top of Page One. "The release of increasing quantities of carbon dioxide and thermal pollution into the atmosphere threatens to

change global weather and melt the Antarctic ice cap, flooding wide areas," the story reported.

Fifty years later, the pace toward warming predicted in the story by the late climatologist J. Murray Mitchell continues unchecked.

Organizers for Earth Day's 50th anniversary envisioned a 1-billion-person, global commemoration marked with gatherings, marches, speeches, concerts and more. Years of work in the organizing—now canceled by the coronavirus pandemic. But the global standstill itself is a profound statement of nature's power, and human vulnerability, not only now in the pandemic but as the planet hurtles toward a warmer future.

"COVID is a real warning that when Mother Nature decides to act, we are pretty puny," said Gene Duvernoy, who helped organize 50th anniversary events for Earth Day Northwest 2020. COVID-19 is the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, which as of Friday had claimed . Today, humankind faces not only the emergency of the coronavirus pandemic but the catastrophe of global warming. In the scale of geologic time, it is happening just as fast, and already for some species and communities is more destructive.

Denis Hayes, today president of the Bullitt Foundation, was at age 25 the national director of the first Earth Day. While many of the Earth Day 2020 events are now online, the day is still intended to mark an international commitment and call to get serious about climate change, Hayes said.

Perhaps now some of the changes people have been forced to undertake because of the pandemic can take root even after the virus passes, Hayes said, from working at home more, to flying and driving less, to growing and cooking more food at home.

All of those changes help reduce [fossil fuel emissions](#) and climate warming that—if it continues unchecked—ultimately will lead to an even bigger disruption and suffering than is being experienced already from the coronavirus pandemic.

The basic cause and the threat of global warming has been understood since long before the first Earth Day.

## Looking back

The Irish physicist John Tyndall in the mid-1800s was the first to understand the heat-trapping capacity of carbon dioxide and other gases found in the atmosphere. The Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius in 1906 worked out nearly to the decimal point the relationship between amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and degrees of warming. Alexander Graham Bell named the Greenhouse Effect in 1917. And Rachel Carson warned in her book "The Sea Around Us" in 1951:

"The evidence that the top of the world is growing warmer is to be found on every hand. The recession of the northern glaciers is going on at such a rate that many smaller ones have already disappeared. If the present rate of melting continues others will soon follow them."

Through it all, people have kept burning more fossil fuel, and today, atmospheric carbon levels are at record levels. Reductions because of the pandemic will prove only temporary if after this crisis passes, people return to the same routine.

Earth Day has been a potent catalyst for change.

In the 10 years following the first Earth Day, the growing environmental movement and political activism it galvanized led to passage of many of the nation's foundational environmental laws, Hayes notes in a recent op-

ed in The Seattle Times. From the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act to the Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act, and the first national fuel-efficiency standards for cars, a decade of landmark legislation has since radically cleaned up the air and water from the days when Cleveland's Cuyahoga River caught fire in 1969.

Emissions from burning [fossil fuels](#) are the main cause of climate warming. Now critics of continued expansion of the fossil fuel industry and its infrastructure—including projects close to home, such as the controversial Transmountain Pipeline Expansion that will nearly triple the pipeline's capacity—see opportunity.

The pandemic, combined with other world events, has created a global crash in the demand and price for oil. Right now, a barrel of Western Canadian Select crude out of Alberta, Canada, goes for less than a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. A lot less.

"There is no precedent for this level of disruption," said Eric de Place of the Sightline Institute, a nonprofit sustainability think tank. "We have the opportunity to enter a brave new world.

"The fossil fuel industry has been growing out of control for many decades ... and now all of a sudden, not because we made a series of wise policy choices but because of this tiny virus, we have been overtaken by events and the energy economy is going to be fundamentally restructured.

"The bigger issue is not so much what happens to demand this year, but what are the long-term effects?"

## Looking ahead

Climate strategist Don Sampson sees a message in the coronavirus

calamity coinciding with this half-century Earth Day anniversary.

"This is definitely a shot across the bow from Mother Nature, telling us it is time to wake up, humans, this is just a precursor of what will happen," said Sampson, a traditional chief of the Walla Walla Tribe of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. He heads the climate change program for the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, a nonprofit representing 57 tribes in the Pacific Northwest.

"This is a setback, but it's also a reminder. Mother Nature is talking to us. We better start listening to her."

The coronavirus is an emergency that cratered the economy across the globe. This near-total shutdown of daily life and commerce is no one's idea of a workable strategy for blunting [climate change](#). But the battle against the virus still offers lessons to carry forward, as the world emerges from the present crisis, that can help win the war against climate catastrophe, said Fawn Sharp, president of the National Congress of American Indians, and president of the Quinault Indian Nation.

"We can realize it is within our ability as consumers to have a direct impact, to clean up an environment," Sharp said. "Not only can people physically see that difference in the cleaner air. It is a chance to hit the restart button, reflect on what we can do individually and collectively to make good choices going forward, make sure we come out of this pandemic smarter and wiser and take these valuable lessons learned.

"This is an emergency but it is also an incredible opportunity to change our path that was ultimately going to lead us to even greater destruction."

Grace Lambert, 17, is a senior at Jackson High School in Mill Creek who has no idea what comes next for her now that the pandemic has shut down her school year. But it is the planet that, as co-executive director of Washington Youth Climate Strike, she is more concerned about.

"The question is, are these changes we are making now for the short term? Will people continue to act this way, work from home more often, use cars less, use everything a lot less? We will see," Lambert said.

"And it isn't just ultimately the economy that is going to be nothing if we don't act on the climate crisis. It is going to be even worse than this is."

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