

# Reflections on COVID-19 and our destruction of nature

April 1 2020, by Radhika Iyengar

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Credit: Salazar Barnz on Unsplash

In 2015 I was helping to draft a UNESCO report, Education for People

and Planet. To gather various opinions on the role of education in creating a sustainable planet, I met with a professor of ecology and biodiversity at Columbia University. In my interview with him, he said something that I have never forgotten: "Nature is not your friend—it does what it does."

I think about that now as I look at the last green pepper in my fridge. This is the last vegetable that I have after three weeks of being homebound due to the coronavirus pandemic. Two weeks back, I mustered up some courage, as if I was going out to war, and went to my local Trader Joe's. A place that I used to frequent once a week, always carrying my reusable grocery bags, and saying my usual hellos to the employees who all know my kids and me very well. My kids get stickers from the friendly cashier. However, my visit two weeks back was different. The customers made a line, six feet apart from each other, and the line spilled over the parking lot. After an hour of waiting outside, a Trader Joe's employee handed me a wet wipe to disinfect my cart and I was among the lucky 25 who got to go in. "Twenty-five at a time is the new rule." I wore my yellow kitchen gloves, didn't make any eye contact, and stayed away from people.

While I look at the last vegetable in my fridge, my last pepper, I think about how, three weeks back I attended a course on [food waste](#) management in my local library. We exchanged tips on how to use the leftover half of an avocado, or the banana that we take to work that always gets wasted. We decided to purchase only what is required and to manage our fridge better. I had discussed how I need to better educate my kids to stop wasting food. Living in India, poverty and hunger is not invisible. But my kids, that is another story. I keep reinforcing that as per Hindu philosophy, it is a sin to waste food. [Gopal Patel](#) talks about sustainability and spirituality. In the COVID-19 days, I generate no waste. In the fear of attempting another war-like situation at the grocery store, I have been rationing food supplies at home and being very

careful. It required nature to give me such a practical, mandatory lesson on food management.

I hear that [New Jersey's air quality](#) will drastically improve and the residents will breathe cleaner air than ever before. More cars stay at home and humankind will hold back on more destruction. April 18th was our town, Millburn's, Earth Day celebration, which is now postponed to September. My friends and I were planning ways to make our Earth greener, use less plastic, and "refuse, reuse, recycle" our waste. I have so many bins at home to manage my waste—trash, recycling, plastic bag recycling, compost bins. I was so busy trying to fit my waste into these bins to make this Earth greener. Now, I avoid buying, not because I want to, but because I can't. I produce much less waste, not by choice, but due to COVID-19. It took a pandemic to put me in my place.

My window tells me that spring is here. I look outside to admire the yellow blooming flowers. Open my window to get some spring air in my house. I go on my deck to get some sun. I cannot go outside, because there is nowhere to go. Probably starting my fossil fuel-filled car is already enough damage. Carlos Manuel Rodriguez, the minister of environment for Costa Rica, has called on leaders to put climate and biodiversity at the top of the agenda as they respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Probably one of those tree-hugging hippies who will soon be ignored. Greta has gone online, too. Will she be a victim of "out-of-sight, out-of-mind"? Maybe we will go back to our convenient status quo—but will it be easy this time?

For the time being, our new "normal" is here to stay. At the Earth Institute's [COVID-19 briefing](#) last week, epidemiologists asked us to prepare for the long haul. COVID-19 will not go away; the effects might get dissipated over many years to come. Many millions will be physically impacted, but Irwin Redlener noted that the impact on mental health will be as rampant as COVID-19 itself. Our communities are not prepared

for disaster management, as per Jeffrey Schlegelmilch. Professor Jeffrey Sachs in his [public briefing](#) reminded us that this is not just an health issue, but will cost 10-20% of the GDP for many countries. Therefore, it is imperative that the world has an economic plan not just for the current crisis, but also post-crisis as well.

In a recent [Mongabay India Series](#) commentary, Gopikrishna Warriar notes that with the changing climate and rainfall, new diseases are emerging. The changing climate causes more stress to [wild animals](#) who are already confronted with shrinking habitats, thus making it easier for diseases to jump from animals to humans. A [recent article](#) in the Guardian seems to suggest that human destruction of biodiversity has brought us to a tipping point, and therefore it is time to face nature's wrath.

Normally, I am so busy in my life—going to and from the office, and getting the children to school—that there is just no time to think about biodiversity. Now, I am confined to my house. Boundaries have been made. I now imagine the life of a fish, who has limited places to go to because of the plastic we threw at her. Tall trees in Taylor Park that can't move, but inhale all the bad air we give them. I imagine the lives of animals in Disney World, the cute dolphin who jumps out and kisses you and goes back to jail. We have created a new world for them, and nature now creates a new world for us. "Social distancing" is not just for people; we need to maintain a safe distance between animals and ourselves.

I will cook the last pepper with a lot of care. Maybe throw in some potatoes and some curry powder. The core goes into the compost again. The only difference is, this time there will be no food wasted on my table.

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