Science & Technology

A Time-Out for the Planet

Grappling with COVID and climate on the 50th anniversary of Earth Day.

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NASA

On April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day unfolded against the backdrop of a war that was killing thousands. Writing for the *Spectator*, sophomore Michael Gerrard ’72CC reported on the day’s activities, in which students and faculty participated in teach-ins on pollution and overpopulation (at that time, the global population was 3.7 billion; it is 7.5 billion today) and heard speeches by civic leaders and high-ranking officials from General Motors, Standard Oil, and Consolidated Edison.

“Most radical students considered the teach-in an effort to co-opt the anti-war movement and ignored the day’s events,” Gerrard wrote. “Few challenges were raised to the positions expounded by the politicians and businessmen.”

Fifty years later, with the planet in the grips of a pandemic that, in two months, has killed nearly 200,000 people, including more than forty thousand Americans, Earth Day rallies are cancelled, and the issues of climate change and ecological destruction have taken a backseat to the exigencies of COVID-19. Gerrard, now a professor of environmental law at Columbia and director of the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, worries that the public’s attention, while rightly absorbed in the coronavirus disaster, has been diverted from an overarching, more abstract, and ultimately more destructive crisis.

“Before the pandemic began we were seeing a tremendous buildup of momentum around climate change driven by young people,” Gerrard says. “We saw an increase in awareness and concern in public-opinion polls, and I personally saw it in a spike in enrollment in my climate-change law class. And, very importantly, it was becoming a key issue in the Democratic primaries, with candidates trying to outdo each other in the strength of their climate-change platforms. But attention is now completely focused on the pandemic. The question is, once it passes, will the climate momentum resume?”

It *must* resume, experts say, or we are bound to be hit with even larger calamities. “A central lesson that should be taken from this health emergency is that we must listen to the warnings of scientists,” Gerrard says. “I don’t know whether people will heed that lesson — it’s quite dismaying to see the emergence of the same anti-science coalitions forming with the pandemic that have been such an impediment to action on climate change.”

According to both Gerrard and Jacqueline Klopp, co-director of Columbia’s Center for Sustainable Urban Development, the two issues should not be viewed as separate phenomena, but as interrelated events whose causes and effects have striking commonalities. “COVID is showing us what the climate crisis could look like,” says Klopp, who teaches in Columbia’s undergraduate sustainable-development program. “We’re going to see lots of people, particularly the most vulnerable, suffering across the globe from a common cause, at a huge human and economic cost.”

Klopp says virus outbreaks now and in the future will likely intersect with climate-driven impacts like drought, flooding, tornadoes, and fires, sending people to shelters where they could be more exposed to the disease. “Climate is the multiplier of risk, and is likely to result in other diseases moving into new places where people are not prepared.”

The processes of climate change and ecological plunder, like deforestation, are putting humans at greater peril, Klopp says, pointing out that habitat destruction has increased the incidence of zoonotic disease. “I think COVID-19 should make us step back and draw that connection between health and the environment. People should understand that the fight isn’t just for trees and bees — it’s for you and your children and your future so you don’t have to suffer through this death and destruction.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has halted much human activity: airplane and automobile traffic have decreased; manufacturing has slowed; and waste-dumping cruise ships have gone to port (in 2019 the *Financial Times* reported that the Carnival fleet pollutes ten times more than all the cars in Europe). All of which has led to dramatic reductions in pollution levels and carbon emissions.

This glimpse of an alternative state of existence is forcing society to contemplate how to reorganize itself economically once the virus is under control. Klopp, for one, rejects the notion that we need to sacrifice the environment at the altar of job creation. “If have cleaner air now we should be able to enjoy cleaner air with a vibrant economy,” she says. “We shouldn’t have to shut down our economy to get this clean air — and all the evidence suggests that we don’t need to. The green transition that must be undertaken to address climate change will help us clean our air and water and produce good jobs. What’s keeping us back are people who want to hold on to an old, dirty economy and aren’t willing to support those who are working in that economy to make a transition that is fair and just.”

The alleged necessity of a tradeoff of pollution for jobs is a false choice, Klopp says. “That’s the message that has been pushed in some quarters: if you increase regulation it will wreck the economy. But a lot of evidence suggests that when you improve regulation you spur innovation: people step up to address those higher standards. We should not have a rush to the bottom and go backwards. We should expect, even demand, very high health and environmental standards, and find creative ways to meet them. We just need to incentivize them rather than tax them, and actually move forward.”

But how do we enact these ambitions at the policy level? In 2014-15, a Columbia-associated group called the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, co-led by economist and University Professor Jeffrey Sachs, released a series of technical reports on engineering solutions for decarbonization. Gerrard, along with John Dernbach, a law professor at Widener University, took that report and set out to review how the law needs to change in order to realize the proposals. They gathered fifty lawyers from around the country to write a book called *Legal Pathways to Deep Decarbonization in the US*, published last year by the Environmental Law Institute, containing 1,500 recommendations for federal, state, and local actions to decarbonize the economy.

Gerrard and Dernbach assembled a team of pro bono lawyers to draft the model laws, then created a website on which to post them. It's a compilation of ready-made legal roadmaps that can be adopted by policymakers, who can then customize them to their particular localities. The next step, says Gerrard, is to contact lawmakers nationwide and provide them with this remarkable tool.

For Klopp, the push to legislate new environmental standards, both in the US and globally, is nothing less than a public-health imperative, one made all the more urgent by the pandemic. "Air pollution is linked to respiratory and cardiovascular illness and cancer. Ambient air pollution causes four million premature deaths a year worldwide, and pollution inside homes, which can be linked in poor communities to burning biomass such as firewood, kills three million. So those of us who work on air pollution were not surprised by the recent Harvard study, which shows that air pollution appears to have led to an increase in COVID deaths."

In 1970, the year that saw the passage of the Clean Air Act and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, air quality in New York was extremely poor. A major smog episode in 1966 was estimated to have killed some two hundred New Yorkers, and even today, despite enormous post-EPA improvements, the American Lung Association still ranks New York among the smoggiest cities in America.

Air pollution was at the forefront on the inaugural Earth Day at Columbia. One speaker, labor mediator Theodore Kheel, as Gerrard noted in *Spectator*, "argued that most private cars in New York City should be eliminated or heavily taxed and the emphasis placed on efficient public transportation." The auto-industry spokesmen sharing the dais with Kheel replied that his proposal was "unrealistic and impractical."

Fifty years later, Jacqueline Klopp hopes that anti-pollution laws will get a fresh airing in the wake of COVID-19. “We need to stop pretending that how we operate our economy is not linked to pollution and climate change and human health,” Klopp says. “If we can bail out the oil and gas industry, we can help green industries that are also suffering, and we can decide that the future is in green energy and green business.”

The cost-benefit analyses that officials still use to dismiss forward-looking proposals as “impractical” are, in Klopp’s view, smokescreens. “There are people who claim they’re fighting for a narrow consumer benefit, when actually they’re just protecting the status quo. They know things need to change, but they’re trying to delay it to make more money. And that’s just not acceptable anymore.”

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