

## What Can the Coronavirus Teach Us?

By [Bill McKibben](#) March 5, 2020



*The streets of Wuhan, China, are nearly deserted on a day in early February. Wuhan is at the center of the global coronavirus outbreak. Photograph from Getty*

There's nothing good about the novel coronavirus—it's killing many people, and shutting millions more inside, with fear as their main companion. However, if we're fated to go through this passage, we may as well learn something from it, and it does strike me that there are a few insights that are applicable to the climate crisis that shadows all of our lives.

Some of these lessons are obvious: giant cruise ships are [climate killers](#) and, it turns out, can become floating sick wards. Other ideas evaporate once you think about them: China *is* [producing far less carbon dioxide](#), for the moment, but, completely apart from the human toll, economic disruption is not a politically viable way to deal with global warming in the long term, and it also undercuts the engines of innovation that bring us, say, cheap solar panels.

Still, it's worth noting how nimbly [millions](#) of people seem to have learned new patterns. [Companies](#), for instance, are scrambling to stay productive, even with many people working from home. The idea that we need to travel each day to a central location to do our work may often be the result of inertia, more than anything else. Faced with a real need to commute by mouse, instead of by car, perhaps we'll see that the benefits of workplace flexibility extend to everything from gasoline consumption to the need for sprawling office parks.

Of course, that's a lesson that can be learned in reverse as well. The best excuse for an office is people bouncing ideas off one another, and the best excuse for a society is just people bouncing off one another, something that's getting harder right now, as events start cancelling. But the "social distancing" that

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epidemiologists now demand of us to stop the spread of infectious diseases is actually already too familiar to lots of Americans. Living lives of comparative, suburban isolation, we already have [fewer](#) close friends than we used to. (Health-care authorities [warned](#), on Thursday, of a serious epidemic of loneliness, which older Americans are more vulnerable to. The research shows that, when controlling for all other variables, older Americans who reported being lonely are twice as likely to die prematurely than those who aren't.) But the patterns that produce this solitude in our culture are so ingrained that we've come to take them for granted. Perhaps, in an odd way, the prospect of forced isolation may lead us to embrace a bit more gregariousness when the virus relents. I can't imagine what it's like to be penned up in a Wuhan apartment; I can guess, though, that liberation will feel sweet when it comes, not only because people presumably will be safe but because they can be social. A certain kind of environmentalist has long hoped that we'll learn to substitute human contact for endless consumption; maybe this is the kind of shock that might open a few eyes. (Also, strained global supply chains are a good reminder that local agriculture has very practical benefits.)

This might also be the moment when we decide to fully embrace the idea that science, you know, *works*. My grandfather was, for many decades, doctor to the tiny town of Kirkland, Washington, now a suburb filled with software execs, which has turned into an American coronavirus [ground zero](#). So I'm thinking frequently of the brave nurses and paramedics carrying out front-line care, and also the researchers who have scrambled with remarkable [speed](#) to produce prototype vaccines. Élites seem a little better when they come bearing cures. And that should probably carry over to other realms: Americans, polling shows, are wary of Trump's cavalier disregard for reality when it comes to global warming; now he's claiming that the virus is a hoax, as well. Given his contention that maybe a "miracle" might make it "disappear," I'd expect that skepticism to keep growing.

And one would also expect a growing awareness that what happens elsewhere matters—that there's no real way to shut out the rest of the planet. That's true for the virus, which seems to have seeped through most of the world's borders in a matter of days. It's even truer, of course, for the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule. Not even a guy

in a hazmat suit, clutching a temperature gun, can slow down the warm air cascading up to the Arctic, or the hurricane headed across the Atlantic. So maybe it's a moment when we remember that coöperation with the rest of the world is a boon, not a trap.

Above all, I think, a physical shock like *COVID-19* is a reminder that the world is a physical place. That's easy to forget when we apprehend it mostly through screens, or through the cozy, contained environments that make up most of our lives. We seem to have a great deal of control, right until the moment that we don't have any. Things can go very, very wrong, and very, very quickly. That's precisely what scientists have been telling us for decades now about the climate crisis, and it's what people have learned, from Australia to California, Puerto Rico, and everywhere that flood and fire has broken out. That planets get sick slightly slower than populations do—over a few decades, not a few weeks—doesn't change the basic calculation. Biology doesn't really care what we think of it, any more than physics or chemistry does. Reality is capable of biting, and biting hard.

## Passing the Mic

*Jerome Foster II just finished Week 57 of climate-striking, every Friday, in front of the White House. The high-school senior has become a force—just last month, the Audubon Naturalist Society gave him its [Youth Environmental Champion](#) award (and, since youth are now driving the environmental movement, this is no niche prize). This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**What's the essential message that young people would like to get across to older people about climate change—what do you think older generations are not understanding correctly?**

Two things. In order for substantive progress to take place to stymie the climate crisis, humanity needs to operate from a standpoint of intergovernmental solidarity, empathy, equity, and moral clarity. These should be the pillars on which we forge the pathway to a sustainable future. Also, what older generations are not understanding is the meaning of the Native American proverb, "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children."

**What was it like to walk in that crowd in Washington, D.C., last September, during the Global Climate Strike, and realize: I helped make this happen?**



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I felt a great sense of optimism, community, and belonging, but I also felt mad, because we invited our elected officials to speak and none of them could provide us a real plan to get us out of this crisis. What I hoped for was not just for fifteen thousand people or twenty thousand people to show up. I wanted a real policy announcement from our national representatives, saying that we have your back and we will make sure to hold the fossil-fuel industry accountable.

## **Tell me about OneMillionOfUs, which you helped start last March.**

It is a national nonprofit youth voting and advocacy organization, which is working to educate, empower, and mobilize a million young people to register and turn out to vote in the upcoming 2020 elections and after. So far, OneMillionOfUs has partnered with the Climate Strike Movement to facilitate mass voter registration on April 24th, the third day of planned Earth Day climate strikes, from April 22nd (a.k.a. Earth Day) to April 24th. Also, we have partnered with March for Our Lives, the Women's March Youth Empower, 350.org, March for Science, Black Lives Matter, and many more to create a plethora of events before November. To find out how you can start a OneMillionOfUs chapter at your high school, college, or community center, go to [www.onemillionof.us](http://www.onemillionof.us).

## **Where are you headed next year for school?**

I don't know yet. I haven't heard back from any colleges. :-(

Climate School

Thinking twice about touching that subway pole? A new [study](#) details just how much worse it is for the climate to hop in an Uber or a Lyft: about sixty-nine per cent worse than the average emissions of the ride it replaces, including driving your own car, taking mass transit, walking, and, charmingly, "simply staying put." That's largely because the ride-sharing-app driver is "deadheading," which includes circling while waiting for the next fare.

Media Matters for America [reported](#) that broadcast coverage of climate change on the evening news and Sunday-morning news shows increased sixty-eight per cent over the previous year. This means, in practice, that climate-change coverage occupied 0.7 per cent of the news hole, or two hundred and thirty-

eight total minutes of the news year this past year on NBC, ABC, CBS, and Fox. And that, actually, was slightly less than in 2017. Someday, historians will look back on these numbers in wonder.

The *Financial Times* [covered](#), in real depth, one of the sadder sagas of the moment: the shale revolution is producing vast quantities of natural gas, which, as we are increasingly coming to understand, we don't want to burn in power plants (or even in [kitchens](#)). So now the industry has decided to use all of that gas to create new mountains of cheap plastic, even though "doubts are emerging about the wisdom of a huge expansion in capacity that will leave the world awash in products that can take hundreds of years to decay," according to *F.T.* Perhaps wise public policy would involve just leaving it in the ground. An in-depth essay in *Rolling Stone* this week brought home the scale of the problem—you'll have a visceral sense when you look at the [picture](#) that accompanies it.

## **Scoreboard**

There was a big win on the infrastructure front, as environmentalists, many of them in upstate New York, [forced an end](#) to the Constitution Pipeline, which would have carried fracked natural gas from Pennsylvania. Their eight-year battle persuaded the Oklahoma-based company that was backing the project to throw in the towel, because the return on the investment "had diminished in such a way that further development is no longer supported." The win came too late for one family in Pennsylvania: to make way for the pipeline, work crews had already [cut down](#) five hundred and fifty trees on its land, including the family sugar bush.

In the U.K., a court quashed plans for a third runway at Heathrow Airport. Campaigners have fought this plan for many years, and their victory was all the sweeter because the judges explicitly cited climate change as the reasoning behind the ruling. The government, the judges said, had failed to consider the obligations imposed on them by joining the Paris climate accord, a first major ruling for any court in the world, and one that, [the Guardian](#) reported, "may have an impact both in the UK and around the globe by inspiring challenges against other high-carbon projects."

On the divestment front, Britain's Jesuits and psychiatrists chose the same day to announce that they were selling off their stock in fossil-fuel

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companies. As one psychiatrist [pointed](#) out, “Greenhouse gas emissions are driving us towards a future that looks terrifyingly bleak, with children’s mental health and well-being a major casualty.”

A very scary [study](#), reminding us how much we’ve already screwed up the planet’s workings, looked at the effects of an unprecedented “blob” of hot water that hung off the West Coast, for seven hundred days, beginning around the middle of the last decade. The hot Pacific altered everything: millions of seabirds died—an “off the charts” event, ornithologists said—and species from cod to sea lions and humpback whales took big hits, too. At the moment, there are signs that the hot-water patch is reappearing off the coast of California.

And Elizabeth Warren did it again, breaking new ground with a [plan](#) to use the Dodd-Frank Act, oversight legislation drawn up in the wake of the mortgage crisis, to try to limit financial institutions in their support of fossil fuels. It’s a smart policy, because the “carbon bubble” now inflating is larger than the housing bubble that brought us low in 2008—and if we don’t pop it, we pop the planet. Perhaps she could run some sort of permanent Presidential campaign, because it seems to yield remarkable ideas on an almost daily basis.

Congratulations to Bob Weighton, from Yorkshire, who has become the oldest living man, at a hundred and eleven. He is described by the [Daily Mirror](#) as a “climate change warrior,” and he told its reporter, “All power to Greta Thunberg.” He spends some of his time building tiny wooden windmills.

## Warming Up

I don’t know many activists who get more done than [Emily Johnston](#), a Seattle-based [poet](#) who has helped gather kayaktivists to fight Shell in the Arctic and turned the valve off on a tar-sands pipeline. She wrote to me and recommended a daily listen to Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes singing “[Wake Up Everybody](#),” so it’s probably a good prescription.



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