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Reflections: Environmental History in the Era of COVID-19

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Libby Robin

Bunkering down in the New Normal

I am writing today—April 22, 2020 (the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day)—from the bunker of COVID-19 lockdown, deeply conscious of the environment within, of bodies as vectors of change, of the vulnerability and unlikeliness of survival in a world of invisible threats to present and future life. Isolation shrinks us, frightens us, and closes us inwards. We do what we can to send uplifting readings and poetry to distant friends, as e-mails lengthen back to letters. The world is both intimate and hostile. Screen conversations and “zoom drinks” circle around personal safety in a global world. We struggle to understand the institutions that hold us in this new world. Sometimes we talk about national responses, but increasingly it is about what smaller units can (and cannot) do: states, cities, ourselves. #StayHome is the message on my phone. Our homes are our last safe biomes.

Trust in numbers, to use Theodore Porter’s phrase, is paramount. We all “pull together” to “flatten the Covid-curves.”¹ As the world becomes increasingly dependent on digital technologies, “virtual solutions” are touted: online teaching at universities and schools, surveillance apps for citizens, online shopping, and uber delivery. But are these real, long-term solutions? COVID-19 is immediate and personal: we care about those we know and love; we worry how they are negotiating the horrors of the very present moment. One of my friends says the week now only has three days: yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We seize on the philosophies of Mr. Dick, in *David Copperfield*, who could always choose just one thing to do in times of paralysis: let’s make a cup of tea—a next step.

Isolation enforces being right here, in the present, now. Yet we also want a future. Political talk is turning to the endgame: what happens when we begin again on the unknown “other side” of hibernation? What will happen to Western economies that run on growth? The mismatch between scale and aspirations is disorienting. And we worry anxiously about what happens if there is no “other side.”

In Australia, we had no time between the long bushfire season and the arrival of the plague. Our traditional long beach holidays were canceled: the roads were closed. People escaped from the coast under

police patrols. The shocking air quality closed our universities, our museums, and our businesses. From December 20, 2019 to January 3, 2020, Canberra, our “bush capital,” set in the blue hills of wild bushland, became the world’s most polluted city. It achieved severe air pollution completely without manufacturing or heavy industries, right through the Christmas shutdown when there were hardly any cars on the roads.

The new normal is ever-changing crisis. We are suffering a new sort of post-traumatic stress disorder—a present traumatic stress dystopia. We are not managing a crisis but, rather, living with uncertainty and the unexpected, not knowing how long each crisis will continue before another arrives. Crises overrun each other and compound the pain. For the two years before the fires, there was no rain. Many Australian farmers had been tied to home, hand-feeding livestock daily. There was a mass fish kill in the lower Darling River. Whole towns like Pooncarie ran out of water. The drought was terrible, even “unprecedented,” just like all that has happened since. The changing rainfall patterns that brought the drought fanned the fires and then, on January 20, 2020, dumped a hailstorm on Parliament House that ruined twenty thousand cars and all the greenhouses and skylights at my university and at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation. It took two weeks to get damaged vehicles towed away, by which time, on January 25, we had our first four reported cases of COVID-19, the day before our major summer public holiday, Australia Day. The plants under shattered glass all died, the research was lost, and there has not been a moment since to restart it. After closing the university because the poor air quality affected computer systems, the hailstorm broke the windows, then a major flood burst into the damaged buildings in February. Our university campus is now closed completely for COVID-19 until the end of June. Some of the buildings are being repaired. Other new building works have been stopped completely. Cost cutting is happening everywhere.

How can environmental history help us navigate the predicament of a global virus, of life locked down by multiple Anthropocene forces? Julia Adeney Thomas comments that, while a problem might be solved by experts—a vaccine might solve COVID-19, for example—the Anthropocene predicament demands something else.² We are all in this together (as they keep saying). The whole of society participates in the path traveled, and yet the pain is unequally shared. This is a moral dilemma, not just a health crisis. What sort of a society will come after COVID-19? While history is good at “uncertain” and copes well with eclectic sources and imperfect data, environmental history enables a nuanced sense of place and of situatedness and yet stretches imaginatively to global society and planetary consequences. The idea of the environment itself was coproduced with the idea of globalization in the postwar years of “world-mindedness,” the decade

that invented the World Health Organization, global financial markets, and the scientific Soil Conservation Service.³ The rational idea of “global” has been around for seven decades, but global soul-searching has taken a new twist. What does a planetary morality look like in a world where humanity is a geological force and an invisible virus stirs the inequality pot in new ways? We need to scale up morality and imagination, not just numbers.

The hibernation pause forces new choices, and the isolation offers us a different place from which to think. What should be started again, and what should be restarted differently? Not just poor countries are unequal, as the Gini index reveals.⁴ The United Nations’ Millennium Ecosystem Assessment argues that we need “significant changes in policies, institutions and practices that are not currently under way.”⁵ Environmental history takes us beyond technological solutions, beyond the horrific present and the uncomfortable immediate future. Fifty years after the first Earth Day, surely we can bring to the discussion a longer, more ecologically nuanced view of our predicament and how our political and economic systems create and foster it. The Anthropocene is neither safe nor just, but our perspective on the planet can change choices, and, as the plague has revealed, small early choices can have exponential later consequences.

As my thinking has turned toward deep futures, I have found strength in reading David Farrier’s *Footprints*, a book launched virtually in COVID times.⁶ In his search for future fossils, Farrier returns to the fundamentals of being human, to questions of “narrative, myth, image and metaphor” and what they will look like in the deep future, in the future fossils of collapsed ecosystems. His question asks: how might I be a good ancestor? He argues for a role for poets, not just palaeontologists. Fossils of the future, the stratigraphic markers of the Anthropocene, such as mass plastic, nuclear traces, or the concrete left behind by megacities, will reveal the moral and imaginative priorities of our times.

Being here now is a privilege. The world has stopped briefly, and how it starts again is still full of possibilities. We need to be thinking and writing and reflecting on what we have and what we stand to lose. What matters? What do we love and care about? I have a clear view out my window of autumn color. The air is clear. The choking smoke will return next summer or the one after, but, right now, my local kookaburras, magpies, and currawongs sing up the garden. An eastern spinebill hovers on red trumpet flowers filled with nectar. There is a lot happening, even without the noise of passing planes. In this strange time of isolation, I watch and listen and read and think. I try to read the garden. Reading nature is one way to travel into deep futures that matter, perhaps. It is worth a try. It is the only travel possible right now.

Libby Robin is co-author, with Paul Warde and Sverker Sörlin, of *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018). She is emeritus professor in the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University. Libby's interests include the history of ecology and climate science, environmental humanities, and museums. She has worked closely with artists and has curated environmental ideas in museums in Australia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In 2019, with Tom Griffiths, she was awarded the American Society for Environmental History 2019 Distinguished Career in Public Environmental History Award at the Columbus Ohio meeting.

Notes

- 1 Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- 2 Julia Adeney Thomas, "Why the Anthropocene Is Not Climate Change and Why It Matters," *AsiaGlobal Online*, January 10, 2019. <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/anthropocene-climate-change/>.
- 3 Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).
- 4 "Global Economic Inequality," *Our World in Data*, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/global-economic-inequality>; Kate Raworth, "A Safe and Just Space for Humanity," Oxfam Discussion Paper, February 2012, https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/dp-a-safe-and-just-space-for-humanity-130212-en_5.pdf; Will Steffen and Mark Stafford Smith, "Planetary Boundaries, Equity and Global Sustainability: Why Wealthy Countries Could Benefit from More Equity," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 5 (September 2013): 403–08. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2013.04.007>.
- 5 United Nations' Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005, as cited by Thomas, "Why the Anthropocene."
- 6 David Farrier, *Footprints: In Search of Future Fossils* (London: Fourth Estate, 2020), 23–24. The Greenhouse in Stavanger, Norway, hosted a charming interview with Farrier about his book during the lockdown, available at <http://newnatures.org/greenhouse/events/greenhouse-online-book-talk-farrier/>.