

What the Corona (SARS-CoV 2) pandemic, climate change, and the biodiversity crisis teach us about human nature

A recent cartoon in a major German newspaper featured a drawing with a Corona truck kicking a climate change truck off the road: as the whole planet plunged into the Corona crisis, worries about our planet's climate and, as I would add, the eminent loss of biodiversity have been put on hold. The Corona pandemic is an immediate threat, and the world's response to it (state: April 3rd, 2020) can teach us quite something about human nature, especially in comparison with the almost complete lack of a response to our largest longer-term threats, namely carbon emissions and the destruction of nature. Pandemics such as Corona are an immediate consequence of the latter, or as David Quammen put it recently in the *New York Times*: "We cut the trees; we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets. We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host. Often, we are it."

As I write this editorial, the whole world is in Corona emergency mode: Countries close their borders, international travel is on hold, shops and many companies are closed, most conferences have been cancelled, and restrictions of personal freedom have been put in place, which (at least) most democratic countries have never experienced before. Many societies around the globe demonstrate their solidarity with those whose lives are most threatened by the pandemic spread of the Coronavirus, mainly older people and people with health problems. Many countries' economies are cut down and responsible governments risk an economic recession to save people's lives. In most cases, this is good news because it shows that political decisions need not always be driven by economic interests. Societies can be solidary and people in democratic countries accept temporary (!) restrictions of their personal freedom if it is for the good of the whole community. I am aware that this is the perspective of someone lucky enough to live in a free and democratic society. Unfortunately, the leaders of some countries around the globe misuse the pandemic to safeguard and fasten their power.

For many people in African countries, pandemic diseases are a threatening part of daily life. But for the economically strong European or North American countries, the Corona pandemic came out of the blue. It took a while until these countries realized the immediate threat of an exponential spread of the Coronavirus. But eventually, many of these societies responded by listening to the advice of scientific experts and thus developing more or less adequate responses to the Corona pandemic—with daily or weekly fine-tuning of the measures taken. And by now, we can see the success, for

instance in South Korea, Taiwan, and now also Italy, Austria and Germany.

Humans have been successful in evolutionary history, because we have evolved to respond to immediate threats. Corona causes a lot of suffering and many people are losing their beloved ones to the virus. All over the planet, governments of rich countries are spending billions of Euros to strengthen and prepare their countries' hospitals and health systems and to minimize the hardship of people who suffer from the consequences of the economic cut down. The German Minister for Finance, for instance, stated that after a long period of economic growth the country is well prepared and can afford to spend huge amounts of money to help people, as well as small and large companies to better cope with the crisis. This is very good news, but it also makes me think about what seemed to be impossible in the past. Over the last 20 years or so, the same governments of the richest nations in the world were unable to use just a tiny proportion of the money they are spending now to mitigate biodiversity loss and climate change. These long-term threats have been known for decades, but politics did not act. We have already surpassed the planetary boundaries of biodiversity loss without the slightest clue at which stage our ecosystems will collapse (Steffen et al., 2015). And if we do not reduce carbon emissions the rise in global temperature will likely lead to tipping points beyond which we have no more control of our impact (Lenton et al., 2019). Billions of people may die because of this. But in contrast to Corona, biodiversity loss and climate change are long-term threats, and it seems our evolutionary history did not prepare us to show an adequate response. If anything could be learned from the Corona pandemic: as soon as it is under control, governments around the globe need to continue to listen to scientists and work even harder than now to stop species extinction and carbon emissions. In other words, we need to get the Corona truck off the road to be able to focus on the two largest threats to humankind, biodiversity loss and climate change.

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