

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the impact of COVID-19 on wildlife and the environment, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

Pictures of pollution-free skies, wild boar roaming the centre of Barcelona and Kashmiri goats causing havoc on the streets of Llandudno could make you believe that nature is bouncing back during the coronavirus pandemic.

For some species, lockdown may indeed be good news. There is some evidence that the number of hedgehogs killed on Britain's roads has halved, for example, while in India there has been a massive spike in the number of olive ridley turtle hatchlings emerging from beaches devoid of humans. There may be more subtle benefits, too. Urban birds have to sing more often and louder than their countryside counterparts – which is time-consuming and energy-sapping – so they could benefit from a little peace and quiet.

But for much of the world's wildlife, lockdown is anything but good news. Many countries report a catastrophic surge in poaching of rhinos, elephants, tigers and other endangered species. Poachers must be rubbing their hands in glee – with park closures, the diversion of law enforcement to COVID-19-related duties, reduced ranger patrols and no tourist eyes and ears on the ground, they've been given free rein to roam and hunt. Meanwhile, the closure of safari tourism – worth US\$30 billion a year in Africa alone – is having a massive impact on local employment, which explains an alarming increase in wildlife killing for bushmeat (just to put food on the table).

An increase in poaching and hunting during lockdown is not just worrying for wildlife. It makes future pandemics

more likely: the vast majority of emerging infectious diseases, like COVID-19, come from wild animals.

Coronavirus is also providing a handy diversion for all sorts of environmental wrongdoing. Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has nothing but contempt for the environment (and, for that matter, COVID-19) and is allowing illegal loggers and speculators to use the current crisis as a smokescreen to invade indigenous lands and protected areas in the Amazon; destruction of Brazil's Amazon rainforest is now worse than it has been for more than a decade. In the UK, the RSPB has been swamped with reports of birds of prey being killed since lockdown, with most incidents linked to shooting estates; the culprits probably feel emboldened by the absence of potential witnesses.

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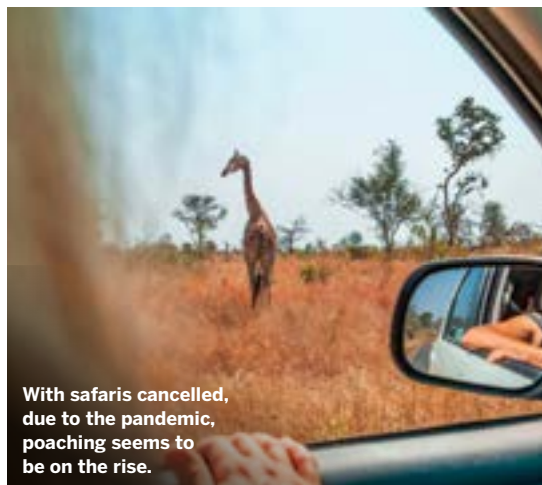
Then there is climate change. It used to be headline news but now, while the world is preoccupied with a new, marginally more immediate crisis, it has fallen by the wayside. The great fear is that we will never be able to get that momentum going again.

One thing we've learnt during lockdown is just how much is needed to tackle climate change. With industry grinding to a halt, fewer cars on the roads and planes grounded, we're living through the biggest carbon crash ever recorded. It's estimated that CO₂ emissions this year will fall by around 5.5 per cent (equivalent to the entire energy requirement of India). But here's a sobering thought. The UN is urging cuts of 7.6 per cent every year for the next decade just to keep climate change to manageable proportions. So, even if we all stayed in lockdown until 2030, we still wouldn't fix the problem. It can only be fixed with a fundamental shift in climate policy and exactly the same rapid, extensive and determined international action deployed to tackle the coronavirus.

One more positive feature of lockdown is that we seem to be appreciating green spaces and nature more than ever before. This is good for our mental health and, intriguingly, it may be going some way to offsetting the stresses of isolation. Who knows – it might even reconnect people with the things that really matter. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



With safaris cancelled, due to the pandemic, poaching seems to be on the rise.