

The Day / Op-Ed/Guest Opinions

Earth Day 50: applying lessons of pandemic to climate change

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By **Judy Benson**

Earth Day 2020 promised to be a significant event. This Wednesday, April 22, marks the 50th anniversary of a special day set aside to promote appreciation and conservation of nature, and a more conscientious approach to consumption.

Mystic Seaport led planning for a major celebration on April 18 that would involve some two dozen local groups, including Connecticut Sea Grant. At the University of Connecticut Avery Point campus, the EcoHusky Club planned to host activities Wednesday for students and the community. Sea Grant would be part of that, too.

Like so many other plans, though, the ones made for Earth Day have been swept aside by coronavirus. But that doesn't mean the reason for the events should be forgotten. Perhaps, it's more relevant than ever.

Lately, as I take respite walks from my computer screen and rare excursions in my car for necessary trips, the 2007 bestseller "The World Without Us" comes to mind. Alan Weisman's book is hard to categorize – the New York Times called it a "nonfiction eco-thriller." As I pass empty playgrounds, shuttered schools and lifeless shopping centers, I think about Weisman's descriptions of how nature would retake the landscape if humans were to suddenly disappear, and of the toxic legacy we would leave behind. It's sobering and strangely hopeful at the same time, as it explores nature's great capacity to heal itself – to a point.

The great pandemic of 2020 will surely yield many lessons along with all the tragedy. I hope that one of them is a deeper understanding of the

human relationship with nature. We are animals, after all, vulnerable to deadly epidemics just like other living species – American chestnuts and the blight, bats and white nose syndrome, and West Nile virus and crows are just three examples. As domesticated and technologically advanced as we have become, we are still subject to the powers of nature. Some of these provide solace and inspiration, and some bring disaster and death. We might benefit as a species from greater humility about our place on the planet, taking better care to live as part of nature rather than above it.

That brings me to the biggest environmental challenge of our age – climate change. Decades of fossil fuel emissions have altered the delicate chemistry of Earth’s atmosphere that made life possible. Humans and all other modern species evolved before the accumulation of all that excess carbon dioxide, and whether and how we and other plants and animals adapt to the resulting warmer, more volatile climate remains an open question.

But, just like with coronavirus, figuring out how to survive this reality means first acknowledging our vulnerability. To slow the pandemic, behavior changes and economic sacrifices had to be made. Similarly, slowing and ultimately stopping climate change will require behavior changes and rethinking of our economy. Large-scale conversion to renewable energy is surely a key step, but an overall reduction of human impact on the planet requires a broader shift. Or so says economist Kate Raworth. Instead of systems that encourage ever-increasing consumption, she envisions future economies that foster human thriving.

“So this double-sided challenge to meet the needs of all within the means of the planet, it invites a new shape of progress,” she says, “no longer this ever-rising line of growth, but a sweet spot for humanity, thriving in dynamic balance between the foundation and the ceiling.”

You’ll find this quote in her TED talk: <https://bit.ly/2yeGWJj>.

It’s just 15 minutes long, and now that so many of us are staying home for the good of ourselves and the rest of humanity, what better time to ponder a better future?

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