



## THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND THE INVISIBILITY OF NATURE

*As rampant urbanization increasingly severs humanity from the living world,  
naturalist Michael McCarthy explores the ways  
in which the “anthropause,” ushered in by the coronavirus,  
has—on an unprecedented scale—made nature visible again.*

Some key turning points in human history are not taught in schools, and here's one. You could reasonably say it was with the invention of farming twelve thousand years ago that we began to separate ourselves from the natural world. Previously we had been an integral part of it.

With farming came food surpluses, and with surpluses came settlements, and settlements became towns and then cities; and now towns and cities hold more than four billion people, where we are so far separated from the natural world that nature is not only forgotten but increasingly invisible.

The growing invisibility of nature is a topic that is little regarded by the general public, since such public concern as there is focuses—understandably—on nature's degradation and destruction. This year we have seen the most drastic estimate yet of the damage human society is causing to the web of life across the globe: the biennial Living Planet Report, published in September by the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society of London, estimated that between 1970 and 2016, global populations of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, and reptiles plunged on average by 68 percent. It is scarcely to be believed: in less than a human lifetime, more than two-thirds of the vertebrate wildlife of the world has been wiped out.

This is such a monstrous situation, so demanding of our attention, it is no surprise that outside the specialized area of ecological writing, there is little interest in the seemingly lesser question of nature disappearing from view, for much of humanity; and yet it is happening, and it matters just as much. The natural world is not only being destroyed but is also becoming lost to us—we who were formed by it over immensely long periods of time and still carry from it, within us, great and vital inheritances.

The idea of the consoling power of nature is of course very old, and the regenerative benefits to us of exposure to the natural world had long been supposed, though often in a sort of obvious, generalized, slightly patronizing way: of course a walk in the park will do you good, like a nice cup of tea. It was not until 1984 that we began to open our eyes to the true dynamic character of the link between nature and our psyches, with the publication of Roger Ulrich's groundbreaking paper in the journal *Science*, "View Through a Window May Influence Recovery from Surgery."

Ulrich was an architect specializing in hospital design, and while working at a hospital in Pennsylvania, he discovered something uncanny: over a period of nine years, patients who underwent gallbladder surgery made substantially quicker and better recoveries if they had a natural view from their beds. Some of the windows of the hospital wing looked out onto a group of trees and some onto a brick wall, and those patients

lucky enough to have the tree view, Ulrich found, recovered faster, spent less time in hospital, required fewer painkillers, had better evaluations from nurses, and experienced fewer postoperative complications than those who had only the wall to look at. The data were indisputable: they showed that contact with nature, even if only visual, clearly had a measurable effect on people's well-being.

Ulrich's remarkable finding sparked an explosion of research into the human-nature connection, and there is now a vast literature illustrating the effects of exposure to the natural world on our physical and, especially, our mental health, which is increasingly becoming part of clinical practice. Nature, it has become clear, is the biggest reliever of stress because the natural world is where we originated, and for our psyches, it remains our home.

So it is an awful irony of history that just when we are at last starting to unlock the deep reasons why the natural world matters to us so very much, we are losing sight of it; it is becoming invisible, in every country.

Two great forces are driving this. The first is urbanization, which is rapidly increasing all around the globe. From now on, most people on the planet—indeed, two-thirds of them in thirty years' time, six billion out of an anticipated nine billion souls—will live urban rather than rural lives.

In the cities, nature can be very hard to find. An urban life, especially if your town or city is big, means that you are much less likely to have access to the rhythms of the growth cycle; to quiet; to the visibility of the stars; to clean air; to nonindustrialized rivers and natural forests; and to wildlife—to birds and wild mammals, to insects and wild flowers.

Instead, you must march to other rhythms, such as the inconvenient working shift, and the snatched lunch break. Neon lighting, taking garishness to new heights, in many cities replaces the stars; smog replaces clean air; and traffic replaces biodiversity, which becomes a folk memory of wild plants and creatures freely existing, seen merely in visual representations.

Perhaps the biggest loss of all in living an urban life is the intimate feel for the natural calendar, a feel that was one of the key attributes of our prehistoric ancestors and that has persisted among people living in the countryside.

Not entirely lost, perhaps: even in a world of high-rise blocks you know it is warmer and sunnier in summer than in winter—but something subtler has gone. I mean the feel for the switches and the transformations, for the tiny signs, easily stifled by traffic noise

and electronic music or submerged by pollution, that changes are underway with the Earth, above all in the great rebirth of spring—signs that have produced intense pleasure, excitement, and indeed reverence in us since we began to be human, and that even today can be among the greatest generators of happiness and of hope.

That's what gets lost with urbanization.

What is driving the even further distancing of nature for those of us who have left behind the fields and woods is the second great force: the influence of the electronic screen.

It began in the 1950s with the increasing popularity of television, but then, starting in the 1980s with the advent of the personal computer and the computer game, our lives became increasingly dominated by the screen; and this process was given an enormous boost with the arrival of the internet in the 1990s.

The great turning away from nature that the screen has helped bring about has been best illustrated with children, especially by the author Richard Louv in his landmark book *Last Child in the Woods*. Louv documented vividly—and much subsequent research has confirmed—how young people were leaving the world of outside, no longer playing in the fields and woods and parks where their parents played; for their leisure time, they were retreating to the world of the screens, back inside the house.

Even in the '80s it was starting to happen: Louv quotes a boy from San Diego, who said, "I like to play indoors better 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are." By the turn of the century, the results of children's consequent alienation from the natural world, Louv said, included diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses; and he gave the syndrome an unforgettable name, which really is applicable to us all: "nature-deficit disorder." Nature's invisibility is intensifying far beyond what Louv documented among children fifteen years ago.

**In nature, 2020 was not a lost year. Just the opposite.**

It is in this context that the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, this great world-historical event, assumes a significance other than that of destroyer of countless lives and demolisher of national economies; for across the globe, directly or indirectly, it has frequently made the natural world visible again, and led people to look upon it, and reflect.

It is hard, and to some it may well seem inappropriate, to draw positive conclusions from such a tragic set of circumstances, which have produced such heartache for countless families in country after country, with more than a million dead across the world. Yet with the environment, it is simply the case that the impact of COVID-19 has in many ways, albeit bizarrely and incongruously, been constructive.

The main reason, of course, is the “anthropause,” as it has quickly become known: the great hiatus in human activity resulting from the pandemic-inspired lockdowns in many nations in the first half of the year, which are thought to have involved nearly four billion people in total. In environmental terms, the 2020 anthropause is a colossal event, one of the biggest and most significant ever to have happened to the natural world, certainly since human society began despoiling it on a large scale after World War II. It is a planet-sized breathing space.

The COVID-19 anthropause involves the entire globe; it involves large parts of the gargantuan nature-destroying human enterprise, worth more than \$80 trillion, slowing down and coming, if only temporarily, to a halt. Before it happened, it was unthinkable that it might. Now that it has, we look upon it openmouthed. We can get a sense of the gigantic scale of this event from a study released in October on the resultant fall in global emissions of carbon dioxide: in the first six months of this year, the total was an 8.8 percent decrease from the same period in 2019.

The effects on the natural world have, in some cases, been spectacular, and nowhere more so than in the city of Jalandhar in India, whose inhabitants awoke one morning in April to find that their northern horizon had been transformed into something white and shimmering and ghostly—almost a vision, but nonetheless real. It was the snowcapped Himalayas, more than a hundred miles away.

There have been many other ways in which nature came to people’s notice once again during the anthropause—largely cases of the natural world prospering, of natural processes resuming, when pressure from the mammoth human enterprise was lessened. Birdsong, drowned out by the noise of modern life, became audible again in many places in many countries. In Venice the canals, no longer churned up by tourist boats, were clear enough to see fish again. Wild boar and deer came back into car-free European cities; in Llandudno in North Wales, wild goats roamed the streets. Jackals appeared in broad daylight in the urban parks of Tel Aviv; pumas were sighted in the center of Chile’s capital, Santiago; and baby sea turtles made it safely to the water on Brazilian beaches empty of sunbathers, joggers, and dogs.

Yet perhaps the most significant way of all in which nature has come back to us during the pandemic is that people have turned to it themselves. Just as working life in the human world was hitting the buffers, life in the natural world was flourishing as never before, and this almost certainly intensified the renewed interest in nature from people seeking lockdown diversions.

The natural world was available to us, even at such a traumatic time. It had not been thrown off course, it had not been knocked out by the pandemic, by this enormous event that was knocking out everything else, which was making 2020 a lost year in human affairs. At this time of chaos in the world of people, nature was a constant, as it has always been. COVID-19 had wrecked, if only temporarily, so many human artifacts; it had stopped business, trade, travel, sports, education, entertainment, and social gatherings of all kinds—but it hadn't stopped the spring. In nature, 2020 was not a lost year. Just the opposite.

If you saw it like this, you suddenly saw once again the unique worth of the natural world, which produced us and shaped us, which holds our origins, and which remains the true home of our psyches, as Roger Ulrich began to discover—and which, even today, when so many have turned their backs on it, continues to give us everything, from the air we breathe to the water we drink and the food we eat. You saw anew its fantastic power and resilience. You saw the wonder of it. And let me say, you also saw the need for its benefits to be available to everyone, and for the issue of equitable access to nature to rise up the political agenda.

In December, pandemic or no pandemic, the winter solstice comes to us all, which I think of as an immensely happy day, because then the light begins to come back, and nothing can stop it. This sense of nature as an unstoppable force has been strongly impressed on me (and doubtless on many others) by the great world-historical event of the coronavirus, tragic paradox though that may be; nature, which has been lost to sight so widely, has suddenly been made visible once again by the pandemic, by the extraordinary circumstance of the anthropause, and most of all, by people's own need to seek out nature as a relief from unprecedented stress. Those who have sought it have not been disappointed in the natural world, in its ability to console us, repair us, and recharge us; most of all, in its ability simply to be there, often unrecognized and unacknowledged, but giving life to every one of us, even as human artifacts are crumbling all around.

Michael McCarthy  
(excerpts)