



A COVID-19 Crisis Silver Lining

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Abstract

Although it is abundantly clear that the COVID-19 crisis is exacting enormous global medical and economic tolls upon humanity, a silver lining has emerged in that the situation is causing a growing segment of our society to recognize that the time has come to rethink our relationship with all life on this planet—other humans, nonhumans, and the earth, a life form in itself. As we begin to find our way through this crisis, it is imperative for us as a species to reflect deeply upon what this and other related human health crises are telling us about our role in these increasingly frequent events and about what we can do to avoid them in the future. Failure to do so may result in the unwitting extermination of all or a good part of our species from this planet.

Keywords: COVID-19; Public Health; Epidemiology; Pulmonary disease; Neurology

Description

As referenced in the original article [1], the alarming increase in frequency of lethal zoonotic diseases relates in large part to our human-dominated ecosystem with increasingly unnatural human-animal close contact, grossly aberrant crowding of animals for human purposes, destruction of animal habitats, and vast numbers of highly mobile humans to swiftly carry these diseases throughout the world [2].

SARS (an earlier severe acute respiratory syndrome), AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) and COVID-19 (as currently understood) are all examples of how the hunting, capturing and selling of wild animals for human consumption, particularly in connection with live animal markets, constitute major public health risks [3,4]. Another well-recognized source for increasingly lethal human zoonoses is the massive overcrowding of animals for human consumption in industrial “factory farm” environments—also known as concentrated animal feeding operations, which have led to numerous highly destructive outbreaks [5] such as H5N1 (bird flu) and H1N1 (swine flu) and a growing global health crisis associated with antibiotic-resistant infections [6]. These factors, along with habitat destruction which has been compounded by having much of the land being lost to deforestation converted to land for raising more animals for human consumption, constitute fundamental sources for the increasing threat of pandemics and other human health crises [2]. Medical experts are well aware of other pandemic threats such as H7N9 [7] that already exist with potentially more destructive power than COVID-19 or even the great pandemic of 1918 that killed an estimated 50 million people [8].

Rather than simply attempting to react to crises like COVID-19 after death and destruction are already upon us, we need to have the vision, wisdom, and compassion to address fundamental underlying causes and act now to mitigate and prevent the numerous disasters that are literally waiting to happen. The Chinese government should be applauded for taking the much-needed step of banning the trade and

consumption of wild animals in China on February 24, 2020. Although shutting down this USD74 billion wildlife farming industry has been decried by some as economically harmful, such harm pales overwhelmingly in comparison to the vast health and economic threats to China and the world involved in continuing to allow business as usual. Other nations throughout the world should also prohibit such practices, particularly in association with live-animal markets.

Intensive confinement of animals in factory farm operations should be discontinued worldwide for the sake of animals, humans, and the environment, and we should rapidly evolve to eating other forms of protein that are safer for humans, including a wide range of time-honored plant-derived sources as well as the more recently developed plant-based meat, dairy and egg alternatives and cultured meat (produced by culturing animal cells). Additional investment in plant-based agriculture to grow crops to feed humans rather than livestock for human consumption would feed more people while utilizing far less land and water, allowing for the preservation of vital ecosystems for innumerable species.

The COVID-19 crisis has provided us with a wake-up call, an opportunity—and it will be important for us as a species to awaken to the imperative for us to change and to act in ways that are beneficial to all life forms. What is good for nonhumans and the earth is virtually always in the best interests of humans, given the profound interconnectedness of all life. All that we do depends upon abundant plant and animal life as well as clean air and water. Each of us can have a positive impact upon these fundamentals by demonstrating and inspiring an enhanced mindfulness, beginning most basically with what we eat and how all of our daily choices and actions may be affecting animals and natural habitats. Ultimately, the survival, not only of other life forms on this planet, but also of our own, will depend upon humanity’s ability to recognize the oneness of all that exists and the importance and deeper significance of compassion for all life.

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