

# The Planet Is Sick: Where do the coronavirus and environmental issues meet?

## **Whatever Happened to the Climate Crisis?**

Back in early February — can you remember that far back? — the climate crisis was drawing public (and mainstream media) attention, and environmental activists were planning for the 50<sup>th</sup> Earth Day celebration scheduled for April 22.

Then came COVID-19, and the global pandemic took up all the oxygen in the room. Environmental organizations that had been on the front lines of the climate crisis quickly found themselves on the sidelines as they wrestled with how to contribute and stay on mission during this public-health crisis.

When Save The Bay realized it was sitting on a stockpile of thousands of rubber gloves normally used for the shoreline cleanups it conducts throughout the year, the Providence-based nonprofit knew exactly what it had to do. It donated the gloves to the National Guard to aid those on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic.

But, as to its own operations during the pandemic, the organization has had to retreat on some fronts, closing down its three locations and asking staff to work remotely from their homes. And, with the General Assembly no longer meeting, Save The Bay's legislative advocacy efforts are on hold.

While Save The Bay and several other environmental advocacy groups in Rhode Island have had to hit pause on some of their advocacy work and programs, the Sunrise Movement has taken its activism online.

## **“Panic or Prepare”**

Will societal response to the coronavirus pandemic ultimately provide a roadmap to tackle the climate crisis?

ecoRI News asked this question of James Prochaska, a URI professor of clinical and health psychology who is well known for creating a system-of-stages model showing the progression that leads to changes in behavior, such as quitting smoking or exercising regularly.

Although COVID-19 and the climate crisis both require global solutions, the pandemic has created urgent and immediate health and economic needs that impact the planet's entire population now, Prochaska said.

The climate crisis, on the other hand, requires near-term action, but the impacts aren't being seen and felt by all people, all at once. And the benefits from that action, such as curbing greenhouse-gas emissions, may take years to be appreciated.

“Immediate consequences are much more effective in changing behavior,” Prochaska said.

He hopes that some of the behavioral changes created out of necessity by the global pandemic will become common practices for reducing carbon emissions, such as driving less and working and schooling from home. He said this experience will make people better prepared to respond to other

emergencies, because, ultimately, the best solution to any crisis starts with robust planning. Reaction and emotion caused by the event itself are less effective and more costly.

“Panic or prepare’ is what I’m telling people,” Prochaska said.

### **Food for Thought**

The coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated the importance of local food systems that, unlike global and national food-supply chains, are nimbler than their large-scale counterparts and can adapt quickly to disasters.

“The fact is, we have a national and global food system and, whether it’s from a virus or another disaster, that food system is going to be interrupted and disrupted more as we move into the future,” said Nessa Richman, network director of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council. “And what that means is that the more robust a local and regional food system we can develop, the more secure and safe and healthy our food supply will be.”

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed that the move toward local food isn’t just a trend used to market “farm-to-table” food at fine-dining establishments, it’s a necessity when global supply chains break down.

To help farms and fisheries that rely on wholesale to get their products to consumers, Farm Fresh Rhode Island, which normally delivers produce orders for restaurant clients from a variety of local farms, opened up its Market Mobile service to the public.

### **It’s in Our Natural Best Interest**

For the past four weeks, thousands of people in southern New England have stampeded into nature preserves and natural management areas, seeking solace from quarantine life.

Yet, as David Gregg, executive director of the Rhode Island Natural History Survey, an organization dedicated to understanding the state’s biota, noted, these areas are routinely taken for granted or simply ignored.

Two months ago, Gregg said, many of the people now going on nature walks and rushing into natural areas wouldn’t have set foot in these places. He didn’t mean that as an insult. The pandemic has forced a frenzied society to slow down. Appreciation for natural places has been renewed.

But should we preserve nature for human enjoyment or for nature’s sake?

The importance of nature goes well beyond providing refuge for anxious humans during an historic pandemic. Protecting nature’s biodiversity is critical to human existence.

Protected natural places provide ecosystem services such as filtering stormwater runoff, protecting from storm surge and erosion, and mitigating the impacts of a changing climate.

A natural world teeming with life is much more likely to provide the antiviral that treats an unknown virus unleashed on an unprepared world. And disruptions in natural systems, like deforestation and human encroachment on wildlife habitat, increases the spread of disease.

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