

ACTive Citizenship – why caring about our environment is more important than ever

Most people have probably heard about the changes Covid-19 has brought on the environment – pollution has reduced, and carbon emissions are the lowest they have been in years. This is mainly due to the lack of transport being used. In New York pollution levels have dropped by almost 50%. Coal use in China has fallen by 40% and the number of days with ‘good quality air’ has increased rapidly. The difference in Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) above Italy, Spain and the UK is visible from space.

So while the economy has stumbled, many people have become infected, and jobs have been lost, it seems that the environment’s health has taken a turn for the better. But will it stay this way? Julia Pongratz, a scientist at the University of Munich, says the events are likely to have a similar environmental effect as the Wall Street crash of 2008 and 2009. At this time transport and industry was reduced immensely and carbon levels dropped as a result, but soon after pollution skyrocketed as the economy started back up, and reached an all-time high.



Many people argue that after the pandemic is over, lots of people may revert to old habits, most notably in terms of travel. Not only will people start commuting to work again, they may take long flights abroad to make up for lost holidays and ‘coronavirus cabin fever’. It is a well-known fact that aeroplanes use a lot of fuel and contribute a lot towards our carbon footprints, so it is important that we are responsible when we can travel again, and think carefully about whether our previous habits are really sustainable, or whether it is time to change our society for the better. Pollution from cars will also increase, as more people are able to commute to work and are wary about using public transport before the pandemic is over.

Furthermore, less attention is being given to the climate crisis since the public is more concerned about the pandemic. Greta Thunberg has urged for digital activism to replace regular climate protests. The COP26 summit is still due to take place in November, and hopefully this will help remind people that climate change is still a huge issue and did not stop due to coronavirus. However, if social change and activism take place now, there is still hope that the environment will recover and improve. Many social experiments have determined that intervention is more effective in times of huge change. For example, a study led by Satoshi Fujii at the Kyoto University in Japan found that when closed motorways forced people to use public transport, after the roads had reopened more people were inclined to use public transport instead. Hopefully, similar situation will occur after the pandemic – during this crisis it is more important than ever that we take time to think about our actions and how we can change our lifestyles for the better in the future.