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Environmental Humanists Respond to the World Scientists' Warning to Humanity



## At the Bottom of the Barrel: A Response to the Recent World Scientists' Warnings

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# At the Bottom of the Barrel: A Response to the Recent World Scientists' Warnings

by Simon Estok



## Abstract

*COVID-19 has taught us that it is possible to make sudden social changes that result in radical reductions of greenhouse emissions, changes that decades of climate change activism have failed to achieve. At the core of this failure are three main problems: firstly, climate change discourse is simply more abstract than the easily digestible realities of COVID-19, with its daily infection, death, and recovery counts; secondly, there are some deeply engrained, counter-productive ideologies lurking in the very discourses we use calling for action on climate change; and thirdly, because there are no immediate tangible rewards for committing to broad changes, motivating people through climate change discourse presents challenges that COVID-19 simply does not face. Moving forward will mean facing these three problems, but it will also mean facing the reality that slow-downs or shut-downs disproportionately affect poor people and nations. The people barely surviving from the pittance they receive in the sweatshops—the places that sustain the electronics and garment industries, that are the supply chains and processing centers, and that form the blood and guts of industrial capitalism—are the people who suffer most. There are many lessons in COVID-19 for climate change activism, and we do well to take heed of them.*

*Keywords: climate change activism, COVID-19 environmental effects, ecomedia, pandemic lockdowns*



## About the Author

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# At the Bottom of the Barrel: A Response to the Recent World Scientists' Warnings

*Simon C. Estok*

We were warned and warned and warned, but making the changes necessary to stop the mad trajectory of climate change was just too much for us to achieve. There are reasons for this, and we need to understand them. The coronavirus pandemic<sup>1</sup> took us a long way to achieving the oft-dreamt-of changes. Again, there are reasons for this, and we need to understand them. In response to the articles “World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency” and “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice,”<sup>2</sup> I will show three things: firstly, that climate change discourse—unlike news about COVID-19—is riddled with paralyzing abstractions and an inability to produce a clear object against which to focus our energies; secondly, that it is critical right now for us to understand how deeply engrained counter-productive ideologies are in the very discourses we use to evoke change; and finally (and this involves the first and second points) that making information about environmental issues appealing enough for broad audiences to commit to broad changes is a challenge that we still haven’t met—a point surprisingly and disappointingly clear in the huge move toward veganism that is transforming so many lives, but for all the wrong reasons.

We must begin first with the coronavirus and the transformations it has engendered. As early as March 10, 2020, Adele Peters (and mainstream media such as CNN) had observed that the coronavirus had “transformed everyday life so significantly that effects [were] already visible from space.” Wildlife is thriving, as I write. Leaving the university lab where I record my online classes, I was confronted by a wild boar in the parking lot in mid-April—and my university is on a small, forested mountain in central Seoul (the Seoul Capital Area has a population of 25.6 million). Birds are happier than they have been in decades: there is increasing evidence that “migratory birds are benefitting from measures taken against the novel coronavirus” (Bir 2020). Sea life is happy. One report explains that “Examining the feces of right whales—a species of baleen whale that can reach 15 meters in length and weigh up to 70 tons—

researchers found that fewer ships in the waters along the US-Canadian coast correlated with lower stress hormones” (Deutsche Welle). These researchers note also that “noise pollution affects any number of creatures ranging from frogs, to shrimp, to fish, mammals, mussels and snakes” (Deutsche Welle). Globally, the air is cleaner. In a matter of months, we have done what many people—but by no means all—doubted we could do. Indeed, scientists, activists, scholars in the environmental humanities, and others have long known what Ripple et al. (2017) argue in their “Second Notice”—namely, “that we can make positive change when we act decisively” (1026). And we’ve done it! If there is one positive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, then it is surely this. The question we must face now, however, is about how to maintain the changes that we have made. We have hit the reset button, and how we move forward from here is critical. Understanding why we have been compelled to hit the reset button will determine how well we will do in making a green recovery from COVID-19.<sup>3</sup>

Scientists, activists, scholars in the environmental humanities, and many others have tried for decades to curb greenhouse gases and stop climate change. We’ve known about the problem for a long time. When I was an undergrad in the 80s, I read an article written in 1959 entitled “Carbon Dioxide and Climate,” which stated unequivocally and with healthy logic and evidence that “long term temperature records will rise continuously as long as man consumes the earth’s reserves of fossil fuels” (Plass, 47). The problems aren’t new.

Despite 40 years of global climate negotiations, with few exceptions, we have generally conducted business as usual and have largely failed to address this predicament (Ripple et al. 2020, 8–9).

Why? One of the reasons is that climate change does not give a body count in quite the same way that other perceived enemies do. We can attribute such-and-such a number of deaths to COVID-19, to the Nazis, and to drunk driving. So we mobilize against these threats, but we tend not to mobilize against abstractions. Even as an ardent spokesperson for change, I am struck, for instance, by the vagueness of the “World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency” and “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice”—again, even as I support the authors and their work. They say that “an immense increase of scale in endeavors to conserve our biosphere is needed to avoid untold suffering due to the climate crisis” (IPCC 2018), and I roll my eyes. Immense increase of scale? How immense, and what scale? Endeavors to conserve? What endeavors? Conserve what? Conserve how precisely? Untold suffering? Why untold? Tell it. Even with the “six critical and unrelated steps” the authors insist that we must take, my eyes roll. And so do yours. Not to diminish the intent or value of these articles or the work of their authors and signatories, but it is critical to

understand why we haven't been able to take action, to learn the lessons that the COVID-19 pandemic are teaching us, and to recognize that it is the clear causal relationship between the threat and the threatened that produces action; so even though it is true that human-produced environmental problems (including climate change) have killed more people this year than the coronavirus, locating precisely the "cause of death" in environmental threats is not nearly as cut-and-dried as with the coronavirus.<sup>4</sup> And, as far as we know, COVID-19 hasn't wiped out any species; climate change, on the other hand, wipes out a hundred or so species *per day*.

After decades of politicians whinging and mithering about how much economic damage cutting greenhouse gases would be, about how difficult it would be to just shut things down, and about how catastrophic it would be for the world economy to make the immediate changes that so many people have recognized as being necessary, suddenly it has all happened. When Ripple et al. observed in 2017 that humanity has failed to cut greenhouse gases and that things were "getting far worse" (1026), no one could have foreseen just how very capable we are as a global community in putting everything on pause. The present moment surely is a critical one: we can either go back to business as usual, or we can get used to some of the changes, painful though they have been to enact. We can follow the plea articulated in "An Environmental Humanities Response to Coronavirus: An Open Letter" and do our utmost "to sustain this reprieve from climate change" and work toward structural transformations. The authors and signatories of this letter are well aware that an important part of this means "starting with ourselves."

Starting with ourselves means looking at many obvious things (being mindful of diet, consumption of commodities, flying, use of energy in general, and so on), but there are more intimate issues at which we also need to look. The deeply ingrained ethics and attitudes that are embodied in our speciesist and misogynist discourse, for instance, must be addressed, especially since both are ecophobic. As there has been a drive to eliminate sexist and racist language for the harm that such language does, why is there not a similarly embracing move to eliminate ethically complicit language within environmental circles? How is it that Ripple et al. (2017) can use a phrase such as "dogged opposition" (1026)<sup>5</sup> without even a hint of irony—or awareness of the implicit speciesism in the phrase? If we are going to question the "farming [of] ruminants for meat consumption" (1026) on the one hand, then surely we want the right hand to know what the left is doing? Using a phrase such as "dogged opposition" is far from innocent. And when journalist Mary McKenna—in the Netflix series *Coronavirus Explained* (April 26, 2020), "Episode 1: This Pandemic"—states that "Mother Nature is the ultimate bioterrorist," we need to understand two things: 1) Nature is neither male

nor female, and calling it “Mother” is simultaneously both sexist and ecophobic, relying on the dual notion firstly that people (men, actually) can and should control women and the environment and secondly that the environment is bad, something that humanity transcends, and 2) Nature is not a bioterrorist. Sexism and ecophobia may sell well but cannot yield up accurate descriptions of Nature. Starting with ourselves means being mindful of our language and of how it translates our speciesist, sexist, and ecophobic thinking to other people, thinking that itself invariably translates, eventually, into action. Again, not to damn Ripple et al. for their important work, we need nevertheless to take the opportunities their work offers no less than we need to take the opportunities COVID-19 offers.

Clearly a great challenge that Ripple et al. reveal in their warnings, albeit perhaps inadvertently, is that we need to reach a very broad audience and to do so with compelling evidence—evidence sufficiently compelling to warrant broad changes in behavior. There are two problems here, one of which I’ve already mentioned: climate change is an abstraction in a way that, say, Kim Jung-Un isn’t. The second problem is a little bit more complex. Most people are not scholars, scientists, doctors, or ethicists; indeed, it is reasonable to say that most people are not even particularly rigorous thinkers. So, bluntly, how do we dumb it down sufficiently without watering down and out the important material? Explaining material slowly and carefully to people who have had a long day at the office or factory or parenting probably isn’t a viable answer. An answer that does seem more plausible, however, is to make the material appealing enough for a broad audience to commit to broad changes. This, too, has its traps.

Consider the current move toward veganism. It is great. So many choices for us vegans. So long in the making. So much hope. Such a great step toward the vision of Ripple et al. (2020) and so many others: “Eating mostly plant-based foods while reducing the global consumption of animal products, especially ruminant livestock, can improve health and significantly lower GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions” (11). Indeed, “promoting dietary shifts towards mostly plant-based foods” (Ripple et al. 2017, 1028) is what companies such as Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods are all about—and they have been profoundly successful. It is no secret that the remarkable recent merchandizing success of veggie burgers is owing in large part to the facts that “the packaging for these products don’t include veggie or vegan anywhere on them” (Valinsky 2019), and that the products are in the meat aisle rather than in the vegetable section. The distancing from vegetal realities is a clear marketing bonus, as the vegan-promoting film *The Game Changers* (2018) makes plain: CNN’s Daniel Gallan explains that “terms like veganism and vegetarianism are deliberately avoided” (2019).<sup>6</sup> But in appealing to a large consumer base, is it not counter-productive to ignore the vegetality

of vegetables? Isn't it rather like a woman forced to pretend to be a man so that she can fit in and receive fair treatment from a patriarchy? Moreover, it is not simply the meat-aisle ethics<sup>7</sup> to which the new veganism appeals; there is also a whole lot of sexism to which it panders—and it's not just the associations of meat with masculinity that the veggie patties in the meat aisle exploit: the vegan-promoting film *The Game Changers* also drips sexism and presumably seeks to thereby garner a huge appeal.

*The Game Changers* falls into the category of what Laura Wright (2015) presciently describes as “attempts to reconceptualize veganism as an alternative ultramasculine choice” (124). The film is all about high performance athletes and the importance of a vegan diet. It uses (or at least gestures toward some) science. It is a film backed by some powerful names,<sup>8</sup> and it undoes a lot of misinformation about how to get proteins. It refutes claims that vegetarians and vegans are weak. To be fair, so far, so good. At the same time, however, it is a documentary dripping muscular veganism, replete—as if in parody of itself—with a penis measuring scene! Three men consent to measuring their penises after eating meat and again after eating only vegetables, all under the supervision of Dr. Aaron Spitz of the American Urological Association. Result? Eat veggies and your penis will grow bigger and harder for longer periods of time. If you don't have a penis, then you are probably not the intended audience to whom this film is marketing its message about virile veganism and muscular heterosexuality.<sup>9</sup> One thing is clear here: doing all of the right things for all of the wrong reasons may not be what is actually effective.<sup>10</sup>

So, then, back to the question about making the broad changes that COVID-19 has achieved. One thing is certain: it is a question that we will have to answer, unless we go back to business as usual after the pandemic passes. There are hopeful signs that we won't. According to a CNN report of April 20, 2020, “The world is learning to live with less oil. It may never look back” (Horowitz). The report also states that “citizens in once polluted cities, having become accustomed to blue skies, demand tougher emissions controls, encouraging governments to redouble efforts to tackle the climate crisis” (Horowitz 2020). For those of us who live in the most polluted and crowded cities in the world, the change in the skies has been remarkable and quick. In my two decades in Seoul, the skies have never been clearer. It was sudden, unlike the process of pollution that the world slowly got used to. Pollution, like obesity, doesn't happen overnight but occurs rather over a long process that we just don't really notice in the way that we are noticing the skies after two months of global lockdowns. Now, with the bottom of the oil barrel in sight and bottom-of-the-barrel world leaders and their populist dupes infecting the world, the skies have become clear. Now the day has come for the alternative energies that we have been perfecting. This is a critical time in

history. World leaders will either attempt to return things to the way that they were (which seems the trajectory of the Trump administration) or will use the chances offered by COVID-19. In late April 2020, “German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that tackling climate change must be woven into the solution to the coronavirus pandemic” (Horowitz). It won’t be painless, to be sure, but we know we can do it. We are doing it. Now, the question is, can we keep it up?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The virus is called “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2,” and it is also known as SARS-CoV-2. The disease that this virus causes is called “the coronavirus disease 2019,” COVID-19 for short.

<sup>2</sup> See Ripple et al. 2017 and Ripple et al. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> In an article posted online April 30, 2020, entitled “IMF calls on world to make green recovery from COVID-19,” Aysu Biçer reports that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief Kristalina Georgieva recognizes that “fiscal measures implemented by governments against the novel coronavirus need to be harmonized to combat climate change and ensure an environmentally sustainable recovery from the pandemic.”

<sup>4</sup> According to the World Health Organization, 25% of all deaths on the planet are environment-related: diseases linked to air and water pollution, food and water shortages due to climate change, wars, and others. See Prüss-Üstün et al. (2016).

<sup>5</sup> The OED (1971) dates the term back to around 1440 and defines it as being “like a dog,” “having the bad qualities of a dog,” “having the persistency or tenacity characteristic of certain breeds of dogs; obstinate; stubborn,” and/or “having . . . a malicious spirit” (581). The term is speciesist.

<sup>6</sup> James Wilks, one of the film’s producers (himself a former UFC fighter), explains that there is a stigma attached to being vegan and that he, like many other people, sees the vegan as (in his words) a “skinny, long-haired hippie—tree hugging, [and a person who] lives in a commune” (see Psihoyos).

<sup>7</sup> Putting veggie patties in the meat aisle, which is loaded with misogyny, seems to taint the food. Ethical vegans don’t go down meat aisles.

<sup>8</sup> Executive producers of *The Game Changers* include James Cameron, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jackie Chan, Pamela Anderson, and 20 others.

<sup>9</sup> Vegan sexuality has been the topic of study before, notably in Annie Potts and Jovian Parry’s (2010) “Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity through Meat-Free Sex.” In this article, Potts and Parry note that there are “powerful links between meat-eating, masculinity, and virility in western societies” (53) but that “the ‘real’ manliness (and sexuality) of vegetarian and vegan men typically comes under scrutiny by men who eat meat” (58). It seems that in *The Game Changers*, there is a shift in who is analyzing what, and it is vegan men (or supporters of vegan men) who scrutinize vegan male sexuality—but in the most crudely unnuanced of terms. For Spitz, it all boils down to erections, it seems. Not very delicate reasoning or discussion here.

<sup>10</sup> This paragraph and the preceding one appear in different form in my “Merchandizing Veganism” in the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Vegan Studies*.



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