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by Tatiana Konrad and Savannah Schaufler



About the Authors

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The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Environmental Humanities Perspective

Tatiana Konrad and Savannah Schaufler

The COVID-19 pandemic is a complex health, environmental, social, and cultural issue. Described, for example, as a “warning shot from . . . nature” by Dr. Aaron Bernstein and a “portal, a gateway between one world and the next” by Indian author, writer, and activist Arundhati Roy, the pandemic has emerged as both a rupture and a revelation (Carrington 2021; Roy 2020, 132). The Bifrost network’s open letter states that the pandemic carries the “message of our interbeing—across bodies, species, continents,” foregrounding the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human worlds (Bifrost Online 2020, 1). The pandemic has also uncovered various forms of injustice while exacerbating ecological, social, and political crises. It has brought questions of ethics, systemic and structural inequalities, and environmental degradation to the fore.

This special issue of *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities*, “The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Environmental Humanities Perspective,” is grounded in the recognition that the coronavirus pandemic has changed perspectives on climate, health, and the global environment. The special issue explores the pandemic’s environmental, cultural, and sociopolitical dimensions using perspectives from the environmental humanities. Central to these discussions is the question of ethics—how humanity might reimagine its place within the broader ecosphere to create a just future?

As the pandemic has shown, ethical ideals often falter in practice when confronted with real-existing forms of structural injustice. Environmental racism, health disparities, and social exclusion have amplified the pandemic’s unjust impact. This special issue moves across scales and geographies, focusing on experiences and perspectives of BIPOC communities and nations in the Global South. It addresses the compounded vulnerabilities that result from various forms of environmental exploitation, deforestation, and climate change, and the consequences that the pandemic has had so far for marginalized populations globally. When approached in such a way, the

pandemic, indeed, emerges as a “portal” for reexamining humanity’s entanglements and (extractive) activities, raising questions about care, environmental harm, and the responsibility to protect shared ecological systems (Roy 2020, 132).

Cultural texts such as music, photography, and reality television play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of environmental challenges and responses. This special issue emphasizes the importance of representation in understanding and addressing environmental concerns, viewing art and media as a site of activism and reflection.

The special issue also explores how the pandemic has impacted the more-than-human world. Tracing the COVID-19 pandemic’s recurrences across species and environments, this special issue invites a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Anthropocene’s interconnected crises.

This special issue frames the COVID-19 pandemic as a complex phenomenon encompassing a multitude of experiences, encounters, and entanglements. The articles explore both local and global reverberations of the pandemic, spanning micro and macro scales. By situating the COVID-19 pandemic within the frameworks of the environmental humanities, this special issue presents a lens through which to understand the intertwined environmental and social realities of the pandemic. Through interdisciplinary and environmentally oriented research, the perspectives provided here capture the multiplicity of the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing its environmental, cultural, and sociopolitical dimensions, while simultaneously highlighting the value of thinking within and across disciplines to navigate interconnected past, present, and future landscapes.

Organization of the Special Issue

Building on the ethical dimensions of the pandemic, Julie Hawkins’ article, “From Anthropause toward a More Ethical Whole-Earth Vision,” provides a philosophical exploration of how the pandemic highlights the need for a shift in human relationships with the Earth. Hawkins draws parallels between the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the broader ecological crises, emphasizing how the temporary slowdown in human activity—referred to as the “Anthropause”—has revealed the potential for behavioral change that could lead to a more sustainable and ethically aligned interaction with the planet (Rutz et al. 2020).

Following Hawkins’ call for a more ethical approach to environmental and planetary health, Nadine Jackson’s article, “Unmasking Environmental Injustice: Intersectional Perspectives on COVID-19 ‘Social Distancing’ and the Exclusion of Marginalized

Communities,” investigates how public health responses to the pandemic in the United States intersect with environmental justice issues, particularly in BIPOC communities. Jackson discusses the unequal impacts of social distancing policies and how they function as mechanisms of environmental injustice. Jackson shows that because of environmental racism as well as systemic health and economic inequalities, BIPOC communities were disproportionately affected by the virus at the height of the pandemic.

Abellia Anggi Wardani, Tengku Shahpur, and Thurain Soe’s article, “Environmental Degradation, COVID-19, and Respiratory Health for Rohingya Refugees in Cox’s Bazaar,” is a case study of how environmental degradation and the pandemic have created a major health crisis for Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar. The authors analyze how environmental factors, such as poor sanitation, air pollution, and overcrowding, contribute to respiratory diseases in the camps, and explore the ways in which the pandemic has intensified the problem.

In “Understanding the Surge of Deforestation during the COVID-19 Lockdown: Local Perception of Illegal Timber Trade in Karen (Kayin) State, Myanmar,” Riyad Febrian Anwar provides a concrete example of how the pandemic, despite its rather positive impact on climate change mitigation globally, has led to a surge in deforestation in certain regions. While global lockdowns resulted in a temporary decline in greenhouse gas emissions, Myanmar, a country rich in tropical forests, witnessed an increase in illegal timber trade during this period. This case study serves as a contrast to the narrative of environmental recovery, illustrating how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was far from uniform across different regions and nation-states.

Deborah Temisan Lawal’s article, “Sounding the Impact of COVID-19 on Environmental Health in Lagos, Nigeria,” explores music as a medium for raising awareness about environmental health impacts of the pandemic in Lagos, Nigeria. Drawing on perspectives from ecomusicology and musical environmentalism, Lawal examines popular music as a site for articulating environmental consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author demonstrates that popular music has played a critical role in explaining the spread of the virus and providing guidance on preventive measures, thus serving as an essential tool for informing the public about the pandemic.

Paromita Patranobish’s article, “Articulating Visual Infrastructures of COVID-19 in the Global South through Pandemic Photography,” draws on perspectives from visual arts to analyze how photography has shaped the visual representation of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Asia, particularly India and Indonesia. Patranobish explores how photographic practices have interacted with racialized, economically regulated infrastructures during the pandemic. The author emphasizes the role of arts and media

in understanding environmental and social dimensions of the pandemic in the Global South, and how photography can reframe both visible and invisible layers of the health crisis.

In “Reality TV Meets Environmental Realities: Plastic Pollution in *7 vs. Wild*,” Savannah Schaufler examines how reality television can bring attention to environmental issues. Focusing on the German YouTube series *7 vs. Wild*, the author explores how the show intertwines survival challenges with environmental concerns. Drawing on perspectives from the environmental humanities, media studies, and postcolonial studies, Schaufler examines the show’s implicit engagement with environmental degradation linked to Isla de San José’s history of US military chemical weapons testing. The author considers how *7 vs. Wild* portrays survival and environmental challenges and argues that it encourages viewers to adopt a sense of environmental responsibility.

Finally, in “COVID-19 at the Zoo: Racial Capitalism, Immunity, and the Zoo,” Ishaan Selby locates the zoo as a site deeply entangled with racial capitalism and biopolitical control. Selby investigates how the immunization of zoo animals against COVID-19 reflects broader systems of control, highlighting the zoo’s role as a space where both animal bodies and human perceptions are managed. Selby’s analysis connects the regulation of animal health during the pandemic to larger questions of biopolitics, immunity, and racialized systems, offering a critical perspective on the zoo as a microcosm of social and environmental inequalities.

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