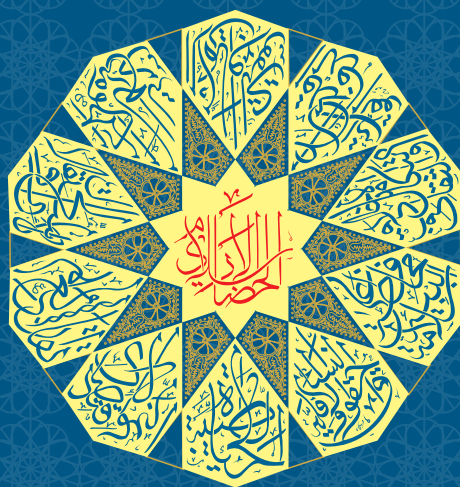


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VIEWPOINTS

The Pandemic and Post-Lockdown Impact on Nature

*Shahino Mah Abdullah**

Coronavirus (Covid-19) is an airborne infectious disease caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Based on rigorous research, scientists unanimously agree that the virus has zoonotic origins. Since it originated from animals, it must have initially been transmitted amongst them in the wild. However, the virus made a significant jump from animal to human, followed by human-to-human transmission, last year in Wuhan. The infection started among a group of people with unusual diets composed of exotic wildlife, including endangered species (bats, pangolins, snakes) that are believed to be carriers. Those who are infected commonly show mild symptoms, including fever, cough, fatigue, shortness of breath, and loss of smell and taste. Some people also develop Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) with a high chance of fatality when they have certain underlying health conditions.

The disease hit Malaysia in January 2020, arriving with tourists to the country. Although this first wave was easy to control, Malaysia was hit by a second involving strains from other countries, mainly due to Malaysian citizens and permanent residents returning from Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia. During this time, March 2020, infection and mortality rates increased. This led to the government enforcing preventive measures to fight the spread of the disease. The measures included a phase-by-phase Movement Control Order (MCO) and a lockdown that required citizens to shelter at home, practise physical distancing, wear suitable masks, practice self-hygiene by regular hand washing and sanitising, and monitor body temperature. The Department of Health Malaysia was worried that a third wave would take place when some people were found violating the order. Indeed, the spread of the virus has continued throughout the country.

Aside from threatening public health, the Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected the economic and transportation sectors due to stringent containment measures to flatten the infection curve. This has, however, led to the reduction of water and air pollutants, benefiting the environment. Because transportation and industrial activities have been dramatically reduced, levels of greenhouse

gas (GHG) emissions, such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), nitrous oxide (NO₂), and methane (CH₄), have seen significant reductions, being now at their lowest levels since World War II. In just a few weeks of lockdown, the air quality in many main cities showed significant improvement, and many natural environmental zones were seen to be slowly recovering. For some, it seems that the climate crisis is hitting a pause.

Certainly, some animals are observed to be easing back into their natural lives. Pandas, for instance, now have more space to breed naturally than they did a decade ago, with the absence of visitors to pry into their daily activities. A group of turtles were seen making a return to certain places to lay their eggs. The number of survived hatchlings also increased since many locals, tourists, and even wildlife smugglers were away from the beaches. There were also scenes of wild animals enjoying their freedom during the lockdown. Due to the drop in water traffic and the absence of anglers, dolphins can now be seen swimming and jumping in the calm waters of the Bosphorus Strait. The environment, including wildlife, is enjoying a recovery period.

However, this phase might not last long. While there are reductions in air and water pollutants, plastic pollution is reportedly increasing due to the littering of disposable masks and gloves in streets, escalators, and drainage systems, especially in cities. It seems that an awareness of the need to wear masks is not accompanied by an awareness of the need to dispose of those masks in a proper way. Used masks worn by health front-liners are always treated as medical waste, since they might contain harmful pathogens. Although the masks worn by the public have a lower risk of carrying pathogens than those of front-liners, experts have advised that all masks be folded and sealed in a plastic bag if a trash bin is not around.

Used masks are also found in rivers, on beaches, and in the ocean. Marine animals, such as seabirds and turtles, are at risk of severe injury or death from latex gloves and masks mistaken for food. Moreover, since most disposable protective gear is made from polypropylene, it will disintegrate quickly into microplastics in water, making it almost impossible to remove. These tiny microplastics will be an indirect diet of marine life and will eventually enter the human body through seafood consumption. Microplastics disrupt iron absorption and stress the liver, being harmful to the human digestion system in the long term.

Overall, according to recent studies, the lockdown will have a negligible effect on the climate crisis. Based on an International Energy Agency report, projected 2020 global CO₂ emissions stand at around 47 billion tons, almost eight per cent less than the amount of CO₂ emitted in 2019. However, to achieve this reduction in CO₂ emissions, more than a million people have died, while tens of millions are out of work. This situation shows how difficult and costly it is

to reduce emissions, despite major changes in human behaviour. At the same time, a rebound effect is expected to occur as early as several months after lockdown orders are lifted. This prediction was made based on the previous Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008-2009, where the global CO₂ emissions quickly rebounded over 2010 following large investments by many countries to promote rapid economic recovery. The post-lockdown period will witness many factories pushing to make up for lost time. The need for an economic boost will be accompanied by an increase in approved permits to construct new coal-fired power plants that last for years and increase GHG emissions.

Reducing GHGs over a short period of time due to a pandemic or lockdown is not a sustainable way to clean and recover the environment. What are seen as ‘good effects’ for the environment, such as animals enjoying their freedom, increases in animal survival rates, decreasing GHG emissions, and reductions in global temperature, are obtained indirectly, unintentional, and temporarily. There is almost no positive aspect or silver lining to the coronavirus pandemic, even for the environment, because it does not actually free nature; the threats posed by human activity will continue.

Therefore, while we are fighting the pandemic with various preventive measures for the good of all people, we should also put environmental care into consideration during the recovery period. The environment, including wildlife, needs our attention and care. In Islam, humans have guardianship (*khilafah*) over the Earth. As mentioned in the Qur’an, “And it is He who has made you successors upon the earth and has raised some of you above others in degrees [of rank] that He may try you through what He has given you. Indeed, your Lord is swift in penalty; but indeed, He is Forgiving and Merciful” (Qur’an 6:165). This means that humans are not merely capable of exercising power over other creatures, but are reminded to act in a just manner towards them. Prophet Muhammad added that, “A good deed done to an animal is as meritorious as a good deed done to a human being, while an act of cruelty to an animal is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being” (*Mishkat al-Masabih*; Book 6; Chapter 7, 8:178).

In Islam, the lives of all creatures are as important as those of humans because the former also live in communities and receive similar returns in the Hereafter for their deeds: “And there is no creature on [or within] the earth or bird that flies with its wings except [that they are] communities like you. We have not neglected in the Register a thing. Then unto their Lord they will be gathered” (Qur’an 6:38). They also pray like we do, in their own way: “Do you not see that Allah is exalted by whoever within the heavens and on the earth, and by the birds with wings spread? Each of them has known his means of prayer and exalting” (Qur’an 24:41). Islam recognises animals as creatures with the right to be protected based on an instance where the Prophet Muhammad prohibited

people from dragging, mutilating, or branding animals by saying, “God curse the one who branded it” (narrated by Jabir bin Abdullah. *Muslim*, Vol.3, Hadith No. 2116).

In fact, Islam makes care of nature (the environment and animals) an obligation: “And do no mischief on the earth after it has been set in order, that will be best for you, if ye have Faith” (Qur’an 7:85). Humans must preserve the environment and maintain the natural balance: “And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance (of Justice), in order that ye may not transgress (due) balance” (Qur’an 55: 7-8). However, instead of taking care of the environment, some humans do the opposite: “Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]” (Qur’an 30: 41).

Humans have corrupted the Earth and, thus, are reminded to understand God’s greatest creation (ecological sustainability), “Do you not see that Allah sends down rain from the sky and makes it flow as springs [and rivers] in the earth; then He produces thereby crops of varying colours; then they dry and you see them turned yellow; then He makes them [scattered] debris. Indeed in that is a reminder for those of understanding” (Qur’an 39:21). We must not take the environment for granted. In this context, it is apt that we heed a reminder in the Qur’an: “And do good as Allah has been good to you. And do not seek to cause corruption in the earth. Allah does not love the corrupters” (Qur’an 28:77).

In the post-pandemic period, we must remember to take good care of the environment as part of the economic recovery process. Most conventional economic activities are achieved at the expense of the environment. Such economic practices have been shown to be unsustainable and should not be continued, or at least reduced as much as possible after lockdown. A green economic recovery strategy is necessary to conserve the environment while rebuilding the economy after the pandemic.

Notes

- * *Shahino Mah Abdullah* is a Research Fellow at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia.