TRENDED SCIENCE: COVID-19 lockdowns didn’t impact climate change, says new study

Even though greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions fell to unprecedented levels, the effect on climate was insignificant.
The coronavirus pandemic won’t save the planet from its climate crisis. However, COVID-19 is a golden opportunity to consider green recovery plans alongside economic ones to help turn around global warming.

A study published in the journal ‘Nature Climate Change’ found that the plummeting GHG emissions will do nothing to slow climate change unless we move away from fossil fuels. CO2 emissions fell by 17% daily around the world during the height of COVID-19. Using global mobility data on travel and work patterns from Google and Apple, researchers calculated how 10 different GHGs and air pollutants changed between February and June 2020 in 123 countries.

**Government response could be turning point**

“Although temporary changes can help, you need to reduce CO2 permanently to make a dent in global warming,” lead author Prof. Piers Forster from the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom told the ‘BBC’. “CO2 is long lived in the atmosphere, so you effectively need to reduce emissions to zero for a long-time before you begin to cancel out the effects from decades of past emissions.”

Co-author Harriet Forster considers these difficult times a perfect occasion for decision-makers to change course: “Our paper shows that the actual effect of lockdown on the climate is small. The important thing to recognise is that we’ve been given a massive opportunity to boost the economy by investing in green industries - and this can make a huge difference to our future climate.”

Several steps need to be taken now, claimed co-author Prof. Corinne Le Quéré from the United Kingdom’s University of East Anglia. “In cities, it is to support cycling and walking (including electric bikes) because this has multiple benefits for climate, for reducing air pollution, and for health. Encouraging remote working until social distancing measures are lifted releases the pressure on public transport, which can continue to be used. As soon as possible all cars will need to be electric.” She continued: “The economic stimulus post-Covid could greatly help support that change in the car manufacturing industry towards the production of electric cars alone.”

**What does temperature have to do with it?**

According to the research, global temperatures will only be 0.01 °C lower than expected by 2030 even if lockdown measures continue globally until the end of 2021. However, a solid green stimulus could keep Earth from going over 1.5 °C of warming by 2050. The paper explained: “The direct effect of the pandemic-driven response will be negligible ... In contrast, with an economic recovery tilted towards green stimulus and reductions in fossil fuel investments, it is possible to avoid future
warming of 0.3 °C by 2050."

“It is now make or break for the 1.5C target,” Prof. Forster told ‘The Guardian’. “This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to really change the direction of society. We do not have to go back to where we were, because times of crisis are also the time to change.”

Prof. Forster is hopeful. “Disasters are often historically the time of biggest change,” he added in the same BBC news article. “For once government, industry and public voices are all pretty aligned that green jobs and green investments are the way to build back better. We just need to do it.”

**Keywords**

COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, lockdown, GHG emissions, CO2, climate

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