

Human Ecology and COVID-19

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In mid-2019, as the closing plenary speaker finishes their talk, the international conference organizers take the stage to wrap up the event. The usual things: Thank you to those who flew for 24 hours to get here, to the venue for their facilities, to the catering team. As the audience excitedly awaits the closing ceremony, the organizers announce the 2020 conference: They reveal that it will not be a face-to-face meeting but will be held online, across four time zones, over a one-week period, with everyone self-catering, and with the option of pre-recording the sessions. The audience, perplexed, shift in their seats, and quickly begin debating the shortcomings of losing the essential component of human interaction in favor of a web-based gathering.

The scenario above may well have occurred at conferences in 2019—yet no one was really prepared for it to be normalized and become the first option for organizing any kind of event in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed day-to-day living for billions of people across the globe. Beyond the immediate health impacts, the pandemic has had profound ramifications in major sectors of society. Its effects have been highly differentiated across geographies, class, race, and gender. Within countries, a person's poverty or wealth, type of employment, and societal roles determined how much the pandemic affects them. Between countries, transport logistics, education, business, and advocacy have changed. Core economic sectors for some countries have collapsed, while some digital and informal economies have been amplified. How we talk about, see, and interact with each will take time to recover—and may prove to have transformed into something utterly different.

As human ecologists, we are tasked with analyzing why human and environmental systems change and react to specific disruptions. As a transdisciplinary field of enquiry, human ecology allows us to look at the structural dimension of a situation and question the different value systems that influence how we frame solutions to specific problems. The pandemic has had profound impacts, and has brought to light (again) the social injustices and inequalities of our world. Living in this altered world can teach us lessons in how to manage future risk and how to design public and private action to build buffers against future shocks. To do so meaningfully, we need to understand how we have responded to the impacts of the pandemic if we are to be prepared for the inevitable future shocks coming our way.

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This initial set of articles in *Human Ecology Review* has been prepared by the editorial board for this issue. There is already a plethora of publications and reports on the projected impacts of the pandemic. In my research field of food systems, two major journals compiled rapid opinion pieces while the pandemic was unfolding. At the end of 2020, we have already lived through the initial impacts and are starting to understand what things have changed and how they have changed. It is now time to critically examine these impacts and identify the underlying structures and values that have driven the response (or lack thereof). The five “COVID Commentaries” assembled for inclusion in this issue cover a wide range of topics, ranging over COVID-19’s effect on food procurement and waste in Portugal; food production in the Pacific; conservation tourism in Africa and the Galapagos Islands; pre-existing health stressors and lethality in Mexico; and confusion and miscommunication between medical authorities, policy-makers, and mass media in Europe. A common thread between the articles is the urgency to understand the systemic linkages between the health impacts of COVID-19 and the underlying structural factors that create higher vulnerability in peoples, economies, and environments.

We invite readers to contribute articles documenting the impacts of COVID-19 from a human ecology perspective, and which critically examine how societies and environments are recovering from, and adapting to, this major disruption. We are particularly interested in the differentiated impacts throughout the world, and want to understand how different geographies, cultures, politics, and histories have influenced the effects of COVID-19 in different sectors. We welcome submissions from scholars and researchers from all career stages, disciplines, sectors, and professions who are exploring the human ecological dimensions of COVID-19 in different contexts. As a research community, we hope to advance ideas and evidence to support our future responses to shocks. Critically examining how we respond to COVID-19 will help us advocate for more equitable and just interventions in response to the future environmental, economic, and social disruptions that are guaranteed to emerge in the coming decades.

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