

Can we Achieve Climate Action and Reconciliation in a Post COVID World?

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IN A MATTER OF MONTHS, the exciting possibilities for continued growth in 2020 have quickly evaporated as the COVID-19 pandemic challenges the resiliency of nearly every institution on Earth. But interestingly, the very idea of “growth” has been put into focus by the pandemic as largely harmful, as a status quo not worth fighting for after all.

The pandemic has made us question, at least made me question, what life after COVID would, could, and should look like. What are the alternatives to that status quo?

After taking a step back, we find somewhat obvious overlaps between the ongoing climate crisis, and this pandemic. One more step back, and Indigenous perspectives on life and growth come into view as an interconnected system that presents a clear path forward, all together.

THE ORIGINS OF COVID-19 AND IMPORTANCE OF BIODIVERSITY

While the origins of COVID-19 are still under investigation, it is highly probable that the virus has a zoonotic origin (a transfer from animal to human through some interaction). This is known as a spillover event.¹ Indeed, the US Centre for Disease Control (CDC) reports that 6 in 10 infectious diseases are zoonotic,² an important insight into the prevention of future viral outbreaks.

As many scientific studies have found, human manipulation of the land is the primary driver in past diseases like HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and Zika virus.³ The more agricultural and grazing land that requires destruction of forests, as well as the increased urbanization encroaching into animal habitat, increases the risk of zoonotic transmission. Any short-term benefits of social and economic developments are outweighed by the disastrous long-term economic and health effects related to viral outbreaks.

Moreover, land use changes for resource extraction or agricultural activities eliminates carbon reservoirs, and increases pollutants into the atmosphere and nearby waterways, expanding the territorial range of malaria-carrying mosquitos. Fundamentally, these changes on a large scale strip ecosystems of biodiversity, increasing the success of viruses.

The case for biodiversity protection and conservation is no longer just about climate action, but about the future of human health.⁴

THE LONG OVERDUE ENERGY SECTOR TRANSFORMATION

There is much to say about the origins of COVID-19, but there are also the consequences, which can be linked to the climate crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the petroleum industry to a point we have never seen before: negative oil prices.

The Western Texas Intermediate (WTI) traded below \$0 for a few moments in late April, meaning that suppliers would pay for someone to take the surplus oil off their hands. Similarly, Western Canada Select (WCS) traded at -\$4.68 a barrel,⁵ forcing the oil economy of Alberta into one of its worst economic conditions it has ever seen.

In response, governments have provided relief to the industry, like the **orphan-wells clean-up program**. Packaged in the promise of job creation and economic stimulus, lies the ugly truth that the petroleum industry in Canada is too much of a liability. Through government royalty payment reductions, flow-through shares, pipeline buyouts, and clean-up initiatives, the industry continues to thrive despite conditions where it would ultimately fail in a free and open market.⁶

This pandemic has shown that the industry is simply too fragile to weather uncertainties.

We must build an energy system that is resilient to even the most adverse and unforeseen circumstances. The good news is that there are plenty of people, communities and groups in Canada proposing policies that can help catalyze clean energy growth through renewable energy sources (most of which have no fuel supply risk⁷).

With solar and wind production costs dropping below that of oil and gas,⁸ it also means that the business case for this transition is clear. Modern day **power purchase agreements (PPAs)** and **Feed-in-Tariffs (FITs)** that are multi-year contractual pricing agreements (a tool at the disposal of governments), are far more stable and less risk averse than the volatile petroleum market.

In a convenient parallel to the phrasing of some Numbered Treaties, renewables offer energy as long as the sun shines, the water flows, and the wind blows.

RECONCILIATION, EMPOWERMENT & SELF-DETERMINATION

It is not simply our relationship with the land and energy that needs to change, but our relationship with each other, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In fact, the protection of our environment and a resilient economy of the future are embedded in a pathway that leads towards building new and strong relationships.

It is understood that Indigenous peoples represent less than 5% of the world's population, but protect over 80% of its biodiversity.⁹ Therefore, to ensure that the sensitive ecological systems we know today thrive tomorrow, Indigenous peoples must be empowered to exercise their ability to protect and defend these territories, not just for Indigenous rights, or climate action, but to help prevent the next outbreak, as Indigenous peoples have been telling the world for thousands of years.¹⁰ Known to economists as protection of natural capital, delegating responsibility for Canada's biodiverse ecosystem to Indigenous peoples is not just an economic pathway, but one that will also exercise each nation's rightful claim to sovereignty.

Moreover, and beyond Indigenous control of Indigenous lands, engaging Indigenous peoples in shovel-ready green projects like housing upgrades can provide immediate employment opportunities that also reduces overall energy demand (not to mention can address the ongoing housing crises in many Indigenous nations across Canada).

Education funding for clean jobs for Indigenous people also ensures long term economic investment, especially now where there may be more personal opportunity to learn.

Finally, as more Indigenous nations, especially those reliant on diesel generators, engage in renewable energy projects, where nations have a major stake, there are opportunities not only to decarbonize the energy system of Canada, but provide long term economic returns.

PREVENTING THE NEXT COVID/COLLAPSE

The COVID-19 outbreak has no doubt been an experience that has hurt many families and brought healthcare systems to the brink of collapse. Like any crisis, it is a chance to evaluate what is most important and how to move forward as a stronger collective that protects the health and well-being of all.

If there was a way to achieve climate action while also reducing the risk of future outbreaks, would you do it?

If there was an opportunity to reconcile a strained relationship while also building a resilient energy system, would you consider it? The more sustainable and empowering government policies are, nations, people and communities worldwide are only to benefit.

ENDNOTES

¹“COVID-19 – What We Know So Far About... Zoonotic Origins.” <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/what-we-know-feb-26-2020.pdf?la=en>. Accessed 25 May. 2020.

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⁶“Unpacking Canada’s Fossil Fuel Subsidies – Frequently ... - IISD.” <https://www.iisd.org/faq/unpacking-canadas-fossil-fuel-subsidies/>. Accessed 25 May. 2020.

⁷“How Coronavirus Makes The Case For Renewable Energy.” 13 Mar. 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidrvetter/2020/03/13/how-coronavirus-makes-the-case-for-renewable-energy/>. Accessed 25 May. 2020.

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