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How social distancing has renewed our love for nature, and what it means for a sustainable future.

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Abstract

Social distancing measures put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19 resulted in more people accessing nature in their local areas as they relied on greenspaces to improve mental and physical health, for enjoyment, and exercise. This essay explores the impact social distancing has had on our use of local greenspaces and tourism destinations in an attempt to understand how a renewed interest in nature may help us work towards a more sustainable future.

[Keywords]: Sustainable nature use, Greenspace use, Sustainable development, Sustainable tourism, Sustainable development goals.

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INTRODUCTION

On the 23rd March 2020, lockdown measures came into force in the UK to combat the spread of COVID-19. These social distancing measures meant the public could only leave their homes if they were key workers, to get essential supplies, to care for others, or to exercise outdoors (Johnson, 2020). The latter is the only recreational reason the public had to leave their homes, and resulted in more people learning about the parks, paths, woodlands, fields and wildlife close to their homes. This essay will explore how social distancing measures may have reignited interest in nature and how that might help create a more sustainable future.

Appreciating nature closer to home.

With no other recreational activities available outside their homes, people turned to nature for mental and physical wellbeing, for entertainment, and education. Research has long detailed the benefits of exposure to nature (Bratman, Hamilton, and Daily, 2012; Shanahan *et al.*, 2015), and use of nature for recreation and tourism is often suggested as a way to meet some of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (Fig 1).

Tourism and recreation can provide several benefits, including generating income, encouraging the protection of the environment, and allowing people space to enjoy nature. If managed sustainably, the sector can contribute to reducing poverty (goal 1), good health (goal 3), education (goal 4), decent work and economic growth (goal 8), sustainable communities (goal 11), and protecting life below water and life on land (goals 14 and 15, respectively). While people may have heard via the media about how nature provides health benefits, and can help to conserve nature, now is perhaps the first time that many are realising how important their connection with nature is.



Figure 1 The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, n.d).

As leisure and recreation-based businesses remain closed and it is unclear when it will be safe to go on holiday again, people are exploring and discovering greenspaces close to home. On social media, people are sharing photos of their walks, they are 'travelling' the world via webcams at beauty spots, and taking part in bird watches. After noticing increasing social media references to nature in relation to social-distancing, my supervisor - Professor David Lusseau - and I, began a project to understand and analyse the sentiment of tweets which use words relating to nature and COVID-19. Preliminary results from over 40 million tweets suggests that tweets about nature and COVID-19 were slightly more positive than those that just mentioned COVID-19. Topic analysis revealed two themes which were consistently spoken about more positively over the sample period (Fig 2). We dubbed these themes 'enjoying nature from home' and 'outdoor exercise'. Enjoying nature from home

At home, some people are reporting seeing "more" wildlife in recent weeks than they usually would. Biologists have been quick to point out that we currently have more time to notice wildlife than previously, but it is plausible that wildlife may be exploring areas they would have previously avoided due to human disturbance. Reduced human mobility has provided opportunities to study what nature does when humans step back a little, which may be important for understanding how we can make nature-use more sustainable in the future. Off the coast of Vancouver, Canada, researchers have recorded significant drops in underwater noise levels as a result of reduced shipping activity (McVeigh, 2020). The presence of boats, and the sound they generate, has been found to disrupt feeding and communication in some marine species (Lusseau *et al.*, 2009; Pirota *et al.*, 2015). The benefits of limited human movement are unlikely to be restricted to marine life. Wildlife living in busy tourist destinations, or near humans, may find themselves involved in less human-wildlife conflict incidents, or may experience less stress in the absence of people and their vehicles (Perona, Urios and Lopez-Lopez, 2019; Suraci *et al.*, 2019; Tyagi *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, fewer vehicles could result in a reduction of wildlife injuries and deaths on roads.

It is not all good news for wildlife. The tourism industry has been one of the sectors hardest hit by COVID-19 as a result of cancellations. Unlike other industries, such as hospitality, it cannot offer contact-free deliveries or post products out. The International Air Transport Association reported that air travel was down by almost 80% at the beginning of April in comparison with January 2020 (IATA, 2020). The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) predicts that international tourist arrivals will drop by 20 - 30% this year, resulting in a loss of \$300 - 450 billion USD (UNWTO, 2020). Those losses will continue to grow the longer it remains unsafe to travel, and the longer it takes for the public to feel comfortable travelling internationally. The UNWTO expects small island developing states, and areas relying on tourism, to be hardest hit. There are concerns that areas impacted by the loss of tourism, communities without resilient supply chains, or those without financial support schemes may experience increases in natural resource exploitation (Gardner, 2020; Maron, 2020). In these locations, there may be a rise in poaching cases, environmental degradation,

and over-exploitation of natural resources as people are forced to take drastic measures to provide for their family.

Working towards sustainable use of nature.

In the midst of lockdown, people are already looking forward and thinking about what the 'new normal' will be. Many are talking about the importance of access to well-funded healthcare, and some are wondering if they can reduce commutes and improve their work-life balance by increasing homeworking. But where does nature fit into our vision for the future?

After several weeks of social distancing, some are experiencing renewed or strengthened appreciation for how much they can benefit from a small dose of nature each day. Some people are discovering woodlands, parks, and paths that they did not know existed previously. People are also learning about the species that inhabit these areas, and their gardens; in the US, downloads of bird identification apps increased during March and April 2020 (Flaccus, 2020). Unfortunately, not everyone has equal access to greenspaces. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that 12% of households in Great Britain do not have access to a garden; in London that figure rises to 21% of households (ONS, 2020). The ONS also found that garden access varied with ethnicity, with those of Black ethnicity four times less likely to have a garden than White people. Lack of access to a garden is not the only issue; the Green Space Index found that 2.6 million people in the UK do not live within a 10-minute walk of greenspace (Fields in Trust, n.d). Another study found that 12% of children in the UK had not visited the natural environment during the 12 months before taking the survey; additionally, children from higher-income households were more likely to visit the natural environment more often than those from lower-income households (Hunt *et al.*, 2016). Given how important access to greenspaces is for health during 'normal times', let alone during a pandemic, it is vital to deal with the issues preventing equal access to nature so that everyone can benefit from nature.

On a global scale, the way we use nature could help us progress with the SDGs if we can identify how to make nature-based recreation and tourism more sustainable. In recent years, there has been a lot of talk about the importance of sustainability while also celebrating increasing international arrivals and growing numbers of tourists at already busy locations. Researchers have been critical about the fact that there has never been more interest in sustainable tourism, but tourism has never been as unsustainable as it is now (Hall, 2019; Lusseau and Mancini, 2019). The lack of homogeneity in nature makes it hard to transfer sustainable management plans from one location and successfully implement it elsewhere. Even if that was possible, current management plans are not working. As of 6th May 2020, 6,925 species are on the IUCN's red list as threatened due to recreation and tourism - this is an increase of 995 species since Lusseau and Mancini's 2019 paper. What is missing is a cohesive global effort in providing guidance and advice that would allow land managers to develop sustainable recreation and tourism plans and monitor the results. This also requires commitments from governments to provide the necessary funding to support staff, education programs, and research, to ensure that tourism and recreation are heading towards sustainability, instead of continuing to become more unsustainable.

Conclusion

Social distancing measures have resulted in people learning about and enjoying nature in their local area for a variety of reasons. Some may be using nature more often than usual while others are accessing these areas or taking an interest in nature for the first time. There have also been wider discussions about our impact on the environment as people notice what happens when human routines change from the status quo. It is also clear that there is more to be done to ensure that everyone can benefit from nature. The more people who care about nature, the more people there are calling on politicians to protect nature and ensure it is used in a sustainable way. To quote Sir David Attenborough, *"No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced."*

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