

COVID-19 and Environment: Citizens in Search of Proximity with Nature

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ABSTRACT

The measures taken by governments to limit the spread of Covid-19, particularly lockdowns, have restricted the opportunities for people to access nature. These restrictions have affected individuals and put at the heart of the debate the role of the link to nature for mental and physical well-being. Beyond this, the pandemic and lockdowns have led to changes in the perceptions of time and space : part of the population is questioning its relationship with its surroundings and its way of life. Memorandum 9 : overview of the studies and projects registered on the WPRN database.

The measures taken by governments to limit the spread of Covid-19, particularly lockdowns, have restricted the opportunities for people to access nature. These restrictions have affected individuals and put at the heart of the debate the role of the link to nature for mental and physical well-being. Beyond this, the pandemic and lockdowns have led to changes in the perceptions of time and space: part of the population is questioning its relationship with its surroundings and its way of life. According to researcher [Anne Caroline Prévot](#), lockdowns could thus bring us closer to nature. Are we heading towards major upheavals in terms of urban planning, food consumption, or leisure practices? Will the pandemic profoundly transform the relationship between individuals and their environment in a more ecological perspective?

Several research works in the WPRN database offer interesting avenues for reflection and useful recommendations for public authorities.

Lockdowns have led part of the population to become aware of the benefits of the relationship with nature. More and more urbanites are showing a willingness to leave the city, raising fears about the risk of negative environmental impacts.

The need for access and proximity to nature revealed by lockdowns

Free access to nature called into question by health measures

During the first lockdown in France and in several countries, the possibilities of access to nature were totally closed (urban parks, forests, beaches, mountains, etc.). These restrictions caused a feeling of lack among part of the population. This lack may have generated an awareness because an increase in the expression of the need to connect with nature can be observed. According to a [YouGov survey](#) conducted on June 17 and 18 on 1000 respondents representative of the population, 67% of French people feel that they have missed nature during the lockdown and 67% that they intend to enjoy this nature during the summer. Major protests and petitions took place during the first lockdown to ask for the reopening of natural spaces, which shows that the ban was difficult to implement. In the United States, a University of Pennsylvania [study](#) available on WPRN measured changes in outdoor activity practices at the height of the pandemic. The 1,000 respondents consulted in 3 phases were regular practitioners of outdoor activities. The study found a sharp decline in nature-related activities that primarily affected urban dwellers. Moreover, half of the respondents believe that the pandemic will change their leisure experiences in the long term. The change most frequently mentioned is a more frequent use of local natural areas.

Symmetrically, when access to nature was possible, it was strongly favored. In the Nordic countries, lockdown was less strict, and access to nature was encouraged. A [study](#) of the city of Oslo surveyed on WPRN measured the rate of use of natural areas using mobile and Google location data. It shows that the use of nature has increased considerably during lockdowns. It has increased almost fourfold compared to the average of the previous three years for the same period. People going out into nature every day accounted for almost one sixth of Oslo's population. The more remote and in the wilderness trails were, the more people used them. For the authors, this over-use is explained by the fact that nature provides a refuge from the stress created by the crisis. They also hypothesize that the practice of leisure

activities in the wilderness, allowing social distancing, played an important role in the fight against the spread of the virus. Similar results were found in Sweden, as summarized in this [study](#).

The proven beneficial role of contact with nature on mental and physical health

As the previously mentioned [American study](#) reminds us, important ecosystemic recreational services are provided by nature. And physical interaction with the natural world leads to reduced stress and improved well-being. In particular, contact with nature plays an important role in alleviating the psychological and physiological effects of crises. These benefits have been demonstrated by several medical and psychological studies and are summarized in detail in an American [study](#) and a WHO Europe [document](#).

Thus, the analyses all come to the same conclusion: public authorities must ensure better access to natural spaces for their citizens. In the short term, everything must be done to avoid a new ban on access to natural areas. The studies recommend, for example, to create pedestrian corridors instead of roads in the heart of cities. Urban parks could have extended time slots to allow for distancing. One-way lanes could be established on hiking and walking trails. Access to peri-urban natural spaces should be facilitated. In the long term, the creation of more green infrastructure in the heart of cities and the safeguarding of existing green infrastructure is recommended, particularly in the event of a new pandemic or major crisis.

The evolution of individual aspirations and its environmental impacts

New representations of the ideal lifestyle

Before the pandemic (in 2019) an IFOP [study](#) noted that 81% of French people consider country living to be the ideal way of life. This view is anchored in and echoes the dream of the single-family house with a garden. But until now few seemed ready to take the plunge. The pandemic may have been a trigger to make this wish a reality. During the first lockdown, one in five Parisians left the city, according to INSEE [data](#), mainly going to the countryside close to nature. This renewed enthusiasm has led to an increase in real estate searches outside the major cities. An OpinionWay [survey](#) in October reported that a quarter of Ile-de-France residents want to buy away from Paris and the [Se Loger website](#) notes that the number of people looking to buy a home with a garden increased by 25% in 2020 compared to the similar period in 2019. The main reasons put forward are the search for peace and nature.

More broadly, this desire seems to be part of a change in perceptions of the relationship to time and the environment following the pandemic. A search for proximity and a link with the local environment is noted. A [study](#) registered on the WPRN database conducted for the British government by YouGov illustrates this evolution. The study, with a rigorous methodology, is based on 4343 people representative of the British population. Only 9% of the British people want everything to return to the way it was before the pandemic. Concerning food, 42% of respondents consider that their relationship to food has changed and 38% believe that they cook more from raw products than before. 6% of British people also consumed local products for the first time during the lockdown.

We can thus note a search for proximity in the food supply and a willingness to pay more attention to the quality of one's food. The way of perceiving one's environment also appears to be more contemplative: 27% of the people surveyed said that they had noticed the presence of wildlife more

often (a figure that can also be explained by the increase in wildlife due to the drop in human activity following lockdown). On this theme, a [study](#) carried out by researchers affiliated with the CNRS and the Sorbonne, visible on WPRN, and whose results are not yet known, will be followed closely. The study seeks to analyze the relationships of humans with other animals during lockdowns to assess whether lockdowns lead to stronger care for other animals.

A temptation of urban exodus that is not without risk for the environment

The expressed desire for a stronger connection with nature suggests a significant awareness among citizens of the need to protect nature. This awareness is a source of hope in the context of the major environmental problems that are looming.

However, as mentioned above, the pandemic has also been able to give concrete expression to the desire for the ideal of country living. This way of life is becoming more and more accessible for part of the urban population with the development of teleworking. The impacts of an urban exodus, thus encouraged and facilitated, should be carefully assessed. A [study](#) by Israeli academics available on WPRN reminds us that urban sprawl leads to a lifestyle that increases greenhouse gas emissions, promotes global warming, and increases pressure on farmland, forests and biodiversity. In addition, the study analyses 271 Israeli cities using population density factors and public policy variables to assess whether population density is a factor in the spread of Covid-19. The study found no link between population density and the development of the epidemic. It shows that it is primarily the quality of the public health policies implemented and their respect by the citizens that determine the level of spread of the virus.

Nature as a vector of resilience

Ultimately, these different analyses demonstrate the important role of contact with nature for the well-being of citizens. The pandemic may have been a trigger for this awareness. As a Swedish [study](#) reminds us, access to nature is a major factor of resilience. Resilience, which can be defined as the capacity to absorb an exogenous shock, is a crucial notion for dealing with crises such as this pandemic. Studies converge to emphasize that access to nature in the immediate environment of citizens must be facilitated and improved. Making ecosystems more accessible to urban dwellers could limit the temptation for part of the population to leave the dense city to adopt a peri-urban lifestyle. Otherwise, urban sprawl risks generating major negative externalities for the environment. Resilience is also a crucial notion for coping with climate change in the coming decades. Several ongoing studies of the WPRN database propose to reflect on the lessons to be learned from the pandemic in order to respond to the climate challenge. A [study](#) from the University of Amsterdam seeks to understand why societies and individuals have been able to profoundly and rapidly change their behavior to fight the pandemic but are not able to do the same to fight climate change. A British [study](#) more generally seeks to find the ideal combination of public policies and changes in individual behaviour for a more sustainable society in the long term.

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