

Experiencing nature in the new abnormal

Wade Graham escapes to an underwater kelp forest

The history of the pandemic is still being written, and whether or not it has changed how we experience nature remains an open question.

Economic shutdowns brought pain in myriad forms, but also hitherto under-experienced joys: clear skies, wide-open city streets and sidewalk walks, giant motorways as free from traffic as country lanes. Perhaps the most astonishing was the sensory rediscovery of the living world around us. Under lockdown, millions of us reported watching birds from our windows, and for many it was a new experience. My 82-year-old mother set up feeders on her narrow balcony and spent hours watching doves and finches, cataloguing their colours and squabbles with the diligence of an ornithologist, when she hadn't previously given either bird the time of day.

But it was the rediscovery of natural sounds, no longer drowned out by fossil-fuelled machines, that was most unexpected. For a moment – a too-short period of months – our ears told us more than our eyes about the world we share with non-humans. Not only could we hear more birdsong, the birds also could hear each other better, and it was palpable how much they appreciated that clarity, as birds in urban areas went on a spree of mating and nesting. City parks became like scenes out of a David Attenborough special, not by virtue of nature moving in, but because we moved outside and, prompted by our ears, lifted up our eyes. In my local park, small crowds gathered daily throughout spring to watch a pair of great horned owls raise their three huge, fluffy chicks not 25 feet above a well-travelled path; their striped feathers perfectly camouflaged them against the furrowed tree bark. They had always nested there, but few of us had noticed. We also marvelled at the comedy of ravens building their enormous, scraggly, stick nests in a pine, puffing and croaking to each other – an avian version of *Love Island*.

Those of us who'd spent our time outside before the pandemic sometimes felt

resentful at the extra company. I certainly did. A London friend who before Covid had had his running track to himself complained: "I'm out in my green belt haven for a few hours every day and it's notable how footfall went rocketing up in lockdown. Peeps gone discovered my rustic hideaway, damn them."

This new wonderment seems a miracle, and it comes none too soon. The majority of us now live in cities and spend the vast majority – some estimates put it at a horrifying 95-98% – of our time indoors. Children know far more of video game worlds than the natural world. Each successive generation can name fewer flowers, birds, trees, even places. As a culture whose navigators once invented longitude and

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"discovered" the globe, we are now even losing the capacity to read a map.

There has also been a reordering – for some, and to some extent – of our basic home economics. Many of us started growing food, sparked by the new-found, uneasy awareness of the fragility of our supply chains. Stuck in our dwellings, we learned entirely new productive activities: tending sourdough "mothers", growing greens and sprouting seeds, as I now do on my kitchen counter – even cadging a slimy, amoebic "scooby" from a kombucha-making friend. Anyone who could afford it fled the city for the countryside; those of us privileged or lucky enough to work from home found a new rhythm and a new Zoom aesthetic (beards, grey roots, presentable dressing only on top, with pyjamas below).

It is all weakly reminiscent of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and '70s, of the Victory gardens of the two world wars and the Depression.

Farther back, it recalls the "discovery" of the sublime scenery of the British Isles during the Napoleonic Wars, when the Lake District, Scottish lochs and Welsh moors – once scorned in favour of the marbles of Paris and Rome – became in vogue, in the same interregnum that gave us Wordsworth: all because for a couple of decades we couldn't travel to the continent. Now we've rediscovered beauty and profundity in our own backyards, and it's a fine thing. But once again it's been forced on us, with Covid-19 playing the role of Bonaparte. When the virus is finally tamed, will we go back to our old ways?

There are reasons to bet "yes". We saw the flip side to nature worship during the pandemic, with the most popular US national parks like Zion and Yosemite wallowing in crowds, traffic, lengthy tailbacks and attendant pollution, rubbish and vandalism. In the absence of protective park rangers, visitors rampaged off-road into sensitive habitats with their vehicles, painted graffiti on rocks and even cut down Joshua trees in California's eponymous national park. And it wasn't just bad behaviour – the rush into the Instagrammable outdoors was part of a general surge to consumerism as sales of every kind of sports and recreational gear spiked up to previously unscaled heights; waiting lists for new bicycles stretched to many months.

High sales sound good in theory, but there are no boundaries. The result is scenic visitor sites clogged with enormous, £100,000-plus Mercedes camper vans, tricked out with every appliance. As travel restrictions ease, overseas flights are filling fast again and the sky is streaked with vapour trails as the airline industry resumes its roughshod ride over us. And luxury adventure tourism is looking forward to one of its best seasons ever. One dive tour operator, offering trips to exotic reef locales in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, reports being booked out solid for the next two years.

I myself am guilty. During the pandemic I bought a new mountain bike and the surfboard I'd long lusted after. Before

Covid cancelled it, I'd booked a trip to fly thousands of miles to Tahiti to snorkel with humpback whales. Humpbacks frequent my local waters in summer, but stay far offshore where the water is cold, deep, dark and sharky – it is in any event illegal where I live to get closer than 100 yards to a whale. Only three countries in the world – Tonga, Dominican Republic and French Polynesia – permit it, using specially-licensed operators. The latter place is closest to me, so it seemed worth a once-in-a-lifetime trip to commune with something larger, in every way, than myself.

Is my desire to get (literally) close to nature a bad thing? From a carbon footprint point of view, yes – unless I get to Pape'ete in a sailing boat, following Greta Thunberg's example when crossing the Atlantic to confront Donald Trump and the oil companies. Economists unanimously prescribe a carbon tax, which would efficiently push us towards decarbonisation in every sector, but do little to curb travel, except by those with lower incomes. Those with resources will keep going. Billionaires now race to blast themselves into orbit, spewing ungodly amounts of fossil pollution without constraint and, far from censured, they are feted. Luxury hotel corporations are already making plans for space Hiltons for the global kleptocracy. No carbon tax will keep that, or something like it, from happening.

The problem of distant travel won't be solved through economic policy alone. Decarbonising transport is at base a technological problem: if we're going to continue to exist on this planet, we'll need to keep moving around it – carbon-free – by scaling up the existing renewable electricity and hydrogen systems, already proven in cars and trucks, to our ships, trains and planes. It is only a matter of time, as long as we can get there before the game is over.

Beyond the carbon issue, the near/far distinction isn't terribly important. Marco Polo, the thirteenth-century Venetian, travelled to the ends of the earth with his senses poised, listening, engaging, learning the languages of his hosts, recording, and bringing back immense riches – mostly of cultural understanding, not souvenirs, slaves, or looted statues. Jeff Bezos, the American billionaire master of Amazon on the other hand, just flew to the edge of space with the posture of a manspreader on the train, taking up too much space



Ben Graham with red urchin, Los Angeles County
Photo: Wade Graham

and looking bad doing it. His rocket shot reprised the nineteenth-century vision of world travel as imperialist triumphalism, with the swagger of conqueror-cum-exploiter. Bezos is just a rich dick riding a gas-powered dick (try googling an image of his rocket to verify that description). Reaching low space for just two minutes, it was a very expensive quickie. And he barely made 50 miles, when space actually begins at 60. He couldn't get it all the way up this time, but he'll just buy a bigger rocket. Or we'll buy it for him – as he made clear, we paid for it with our online pandemic ordering. I am as responsible as the next Amazon Prime customer.

Polo showed a better way of putting oneself in the world, both natural and cultural, as the two can't be separated. He wasn't a pilgrim or a supplicant. He wasn't a missionary selling any God. He was curious, not acquisitive; an observer, not a buyer; a participant, not a spectator. His way of leaving home and getting into the outside world was driven in part by self-interest – he and his family were after all merchants – but leavened by a spirit of inquiry and a cleverness, humour and humility that prompted Kublai Khan to make him the emissary for diplomatic missions all over Asia. The difference between a Bezos and a Polo is what Italians call "bella figura", which means not only beauty – though looking good matters – but an awareness of social grace, tact and good manners. On this basis, the Bezoses of the world shouldn't be banned for being immoral but scorned for being ugly.

During the long Covid winter, my seventeen-year-old son and I found an alternative way of getting close to nature

in the ocean, not by mingling with magnificent humpbacks, but by relocating a lot of spiny echinoderms. We knew that kelp forests hereabouts, like in many parts of the world, had been decimated by sea urchins, whose populations had exploded as their natural predators had been felled by infectious diseases, made worse by climate change. Following a scientific protocol found on the internet, we spent days freediving off a favourite beach, counting various organisms in blocks of seafloor measuring 25 square metres, then removing urchins in hopes the kelp might recover. Over several months, we saw a positive difference – more kelp waving in the green California water, attended by renewed populations of fish, crabs, nudibranchs and everything that makes its home among the giant algae.

Was it virtuous? Not really, though it was fun. It was cold, murky and rough, and we took a beating in the waves, but it was still an indulgence. There were no selfies, just awkward photos, that we shared. But we hope that in some small measure it was helpful. Most importantly, we felt connected and engaged with nature, playing by its rules and paying attention to what it was telling us. We felt, in our small way, like contributors not consumers (though we did eat an urchin or two – the gonads are called "uni" in Japanese, for sushi lovers). The difference between us and Bezos, I suppose, is one of degree: of minimising our material footprint while maximising our engagement. Making it a duet, or a party, with nature. Bezos' party was just about him, with photographers, entourage, and his own massive industrial corporation to fuel it all. Our sandy party involved algae, crabs, goosebumps, bruises, and a couple of grams of uni eaten raw on the beach.

The ultimate difference? It's not entirely reducible to the relative carbon footprints of rocket vs freediving. I believe it's also to do with how my son's pride going forward will be about defining *why* he goes outside, which will determine *how* he moves around. This matters as much as where and when he goes, how far, and how high.

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