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The Big picture: Coronavirus Impact on Environment

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Global carbon emissions from the fossil fuel industry could fall by a record 2.5bn tonnes this year, a reduction of 5%, as the coronavirus pandemic, triggers the biggest drop in demand for fossil fuels on record. The unprecedented restrictions on travel, work, and industry due to the coronavirus has ensured several days with good quality air in otherwise choked cities. Pollution and greenhouse gas emissions have fallen across continents.

Impact on the Environment

- The impact of the unprecedented lockdown, made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic, has been largely positive on the environment.

- According to the Centre-run **System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research (SAFAR)**, the measures against COVID-19 have led to a drop in PM2.5 (fine particulate pollutant) by 30% in Delhi.
- The Nitrogen-dioxide level has come down drastically with a nearly 40% reduction.
- Water quality in the rivers has improved massively including that of Ganga and Yamuna both of which were in very bad conditions.
 - There are two reasons for this, first, the demand for water has gone down as industries are not using the water, and
 - Second, since the industries are not operating they're not releasing toxic effluents in the river bodies.
- Nature and wildlife has replenished itself. According to the Bombay Natural History Society, there has been a 25% increase in flamingo migration since 2019.

Bombay Natural History Society

- Established in 1883.
- Based in Mumbai.
- BNHS is a pioneer non-government organisation working on conservation based on scientific research throughout the country.

Issues and Challenges

One major issue to consider is whether these are just fleeting changes, or could it lead to a longer-lasting fall in emissions.

- **Behavioral Changes:** Work From Home is one such positive change that can be expected to last even beyond the lockdown. **Lesser number of private vehicles will ensure fewer traffic-jams and less pollution.**
- **Industries and factories:** Due to the lockdown the industrial waste generation has completely stopped and this has played a major role in the improvement of both air and water quality across the globe. However, it is probable that the emissions might even surpass the earlier levels, post-lockdown.
 - Some countries might let their environmental laws down to make up for the economic loss suffered during the lockdown.
- **Poverty and Climate Change:** Sustainable development goals might take a hit in the post corona world as a huge amount of poverty is going to come back. The fight against climate change will also suffer as countries across the globe are expected to take knee-jerk measures to undo the economic loss.

Way Forward

The reduced pollution levels and replenished wildlife is a silver-lining amidst COVID-19 crisis. It is an eyeopener for mankind but this has come at a major humanitarian cost, taking a toll on both human life and economy. A long-term vision with a targeted stimulus towards sustainable goals is the need of the hour.

- **Internalise environmental concerns:** The repeated outbreak of pandemics like SARS, MERS, Ebola is a result of climate change, **desertification**, loss of biodiversity, and illegal trading of wildlife. In order to successfully avert such a crisis in the future, we have to respect nature and biodiversity.

Climate change is a slow pandemic itself that in years to come will cost human lives so we can learn a lesson from this particular pandemic and devise a future which is sustainable in equal parts for humans and environment and wildlife
- **Sustainable development:** The economies have become very weak and therefore supporting the fight against climate change is going to be very difficult. However, now is the time to realise the importance of sustainable development. Data shows that the fatality rate due to coronavirus is higher in the regions with poorer air quality.
 - It's time to redefine growth and development and make preserving the environment an integral part of it.
 - Private companies should incorporate and internalise such method of production so as to reduce carbon emissions.
 - Governments should also make developmental policies keeping in mind the environmental challenges.
- **Coordinated response:** The present crisis was the result of a lack of coordinated and timely global response and public health preparedness. We need to act globally and collectively and have a common understanding on monitoring and understanding pandemics.
- **Move towards cleaner energy:** The coronavirus crisis also presents India with an opportunity to invest in clean energy and ensure a cleaner future. Installing solar panels and other renewable energy technology that reduces demand from traditional energy sources that harm our lungs, such as coal-fired power plants should be made a priority.
- The debate between environment and development is a perennial one. But it's time to realise that it is not an either-or choice, the two have to go hand in hand.
 - The environment should not be seen as antithetical to development if we ensure it to be sustainable,
 - We need to mainstream the respect for natural resources and a concern for its conservation and a strategy for decarbonisation.
 - Developing and strategising methods of energy transfer reducing dependency on fossils and moving towards renewables will go a long way.