

# Leveraging the anthropause

In March 2020, the world went into lockdown in response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, outcomes have included quarantines and restrictions, which decimated the global economy; the exposure of frightening inequities; the deaths of over 4 million people, as of mid-July 2021; and the fragmentation of families and communities – all of which has forced us to rethink the structure of fundamental societal building blocks such as education and science.

These disruptions have also catapulted us into the “anthropause”, providing a glimpse of how the Earth system rapidly adjusts to dramatic reductions in human activity. Traffic largely disappeared and city streets were eerily quiet; air travel dropped by 60%; air pollution abated; and across the globe, wildlife appeared in urban centers where they had rarely, if ever, been observed before. The pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of our interconnected world and pointed to the dire need for a better understanding of the linkages between ecological processes and human well-being.

This anthropause is both a cultural and ecological inflection point. We now have a choice: to return to our pre-pandemic lives and livelihoods, or to leverage the anthropause to address ecological imbalances and injustices to change how, when, where, and with whom we create ecological knowledge. Either way, the future will be shaped by our response to the anthropause. Below, we identify three actions to bolster social and ecological resilience, inspired by this unique moment in time.

**Bring ecological knowledge to bear on complex problems: get involved in decision making.** Ecological knowledge is foundational for unraveling knotty, interconnected, socio-environmental problems including climate change, biodiversity loss, the freshwater crisis, and environmental injustices. Yet historically, ecology has been excluded from problem solving – to which it should be central. Indeed, up to 75% of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic in origin. Our ability to predict and abate future outbreaks of Ebola, SARS, Lyme disease, West Nile virus, and now COVID-19 will be highly dependent on our understanding of fundamental disease ecology, an often-neglected topic. We urge ecologists to be involved in decision making where they live and work – to bring ecological knowledge to the table. The ESA Public Affairs office offers training and strategies for taking action.

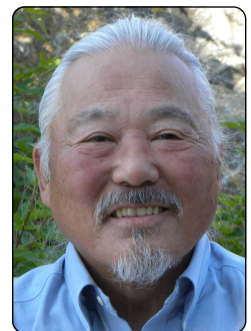
**Expand and refocus the lenses through which we view and practice ecology.** The success of post-anthropause problem solving will rely on our ability to develop and embrace new ways of knowing and doing, to utilize new lenses and contexts. For example, achieving urban adaptation and resilience will be possible only if actions are predicated on understanding the social history of urban disamenities, and placed within a new “ecology of segregation” (*Front Ecol Environ* 2020; <https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.2279>). These ideas compel us to consider new perspectives on justice, history, and knowledge as we co-create solutions. It is past time to expand the group with whom – and alter the way in which – we practice our profession. To be relevant and successful, we must refocus and embrace strategies that are inclusive and actively decolonize ecology (*Nat Ecol Evol* 2021; <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-021-01460-w>).

**Focus on feedbacks within and among social and ecological systems.** The anthropause demands that we understand the relationships and feedback loops required for problem solving amid environmental, social, and cultural change. We must foster robust interactions among a diverse group of scientists, knowledge holders, communities, and decision makers. Our usual mantra has been that we should better communicate ecological information *to* others, offering them the knowledge we think they need. This is a one-way message. Rather, open communication and meaningful *listening* are the foundation for the creative, knowledge-based solutions we need. This shift requires that ecologists see engagement with policy and management as a necessary, inclusive, creative endeavor and a responsibility, not as a burden. The goal is not only to be at the table, but for everyone who comes to the table to walk away with expanded ideas, solutions, and knowledge.

Vice President Kamala Harris skillfully articulated this moment in time in a recent address, in which she explained that the pandemic “has accelerated our world into a new era. It has forever impacted our world...it has forever influenced our perspective, and if we weren’t clear before, we know now: our world is interconnected. Our world is interdependent, and our world is fragile”. It is time for ecologists to leverage the anthropause: to step up like never before and actively diversify who is at the table; to create new knowledge using new lenses; to co-create solutions; to apply the results of ecological research; and to expand, build, and strengthen the voice, knowledge, and community of ecologists.



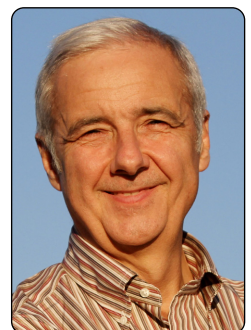
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