



**A New Relationship with Animals, Nature, and Ourselves:
Brighter Green Statement on World Environment Day, June 5, 2020**

On this World Environment Day, three interrelated crises are roiling societies across the planet. The first, of course, is the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), which has so far infected more than six million people and killed at least 375,000, and has revealed the weaknesses of health-care services in many countries. The second is the economic shutdown and resultant job loss because of the pandemic; and the third is the recognition that these twin crises have affected certain workers and communities disproportionately: whether they are [caregivers](#), [slaughterhouse workers](#), [doctors and nurses](#), or [others](#) who maintain the everyday functioning of our societies.

Each of these crises has their own contexts; but these, too, are interrelated—and at the heart of them all are profoundly inequitable relationships. The many predominantly young protestors currently demonstrating in the U.S. and throughout the world, galvanized by the murder of George Floyd, an African-American man, by a white police officer, are well aware of how bleak a future awaits them—especially if the current system (inequitable, broken, and reliant on exclusion and enforced power) is maintained.

While the exact origins of COVID-19 remain uncertain, it is clear that it's the latest, and almost certainly not the last, [zoonotic outbreak](#), which make up to [70 percent](#) of all emerging infectious diseases. These zoonoses occur because of increasing human encroachment on the natural habitat of wildlife, as well as our breeding, confinement and consumption of animals, whether wild or domesticated.

Both the [bush meat](#) trade (widely thought to be the origins for [Ebola](#) and [Lassa fever](#) outbreaks in West and Central Africa) and the global [traffic in live, wild animals](#) have been enabled by [inroads into forested areas](#) for timber, minerals, or to produce [palm oil](#), [graze cattle](#), or [grow feed crops for livestock](#). Epidemiologists are warning that the [over-use of antibiotics](#) to reduce sickness among and promote growth in intensively reared farmed animals threatens to lead by 2030 to [hundreds of thousands](#) of excess deaths per year from previously preventable

conditions. Whether separately or together, these activities make another pandemic more likely, and leave all of us more vulnerable when one occurs.

Additional risks to human and non-human communities are occurring concurrently with the COVID-19 pandemic. The first six months of 2020 have seen the emergence of [African swine flu in Europe](#), [avian flu in North Carolina](#), and the continuation of African swine fever in East Asia, which led to the estimated culling or death of at least [1.1 million pigs](#) in 2019 in China alone. Some estimates suggest that this number could actually be in the tens or hundreds of millions.

COVID's disruption of the institutional supply chain for animal products and other foods has led in the U.S. to the forced "[depopulation](#)" of millions of piglets, chicks, and calves, and vast amounts of milk, meat, and vegetables being thrown away because it's neither convenient nor financially worthwhile to find alternate markets. Meanwhile, slaughterhouse workers in [Germany](#), [France](#), [the Netherlands](#), [the British Isles](#), and [the U.S.](#) are contracting COVID, as are their families and communities, and several dozen have died from the disease. The "normal" conditions of their workplaces are danger, risk, and crowding. And even though they've been defined as "essential workers," access to personal protective equipment (PPE) hasn't been broadly available to them, adding to the likelihood of infection.

Industrialized animal agriculture has shown itself both rigid, flawed, and profoundly vulnerable—not least because it demands that humans and animals [conform](#) to a mechanized, just-in-time, production-line model that neither serves the welfare of workers nor animals, nor (in a time of emergency) the needs of people for food. In spite of Big Ag's fabled promise to "feed the world," [small farmers](#) still make up the majority of food producers while using and controlling much less land. Yet they rarely receive equitable portions of government subsidies, concessional loans, or [bailout packages](#); many [continue to struggle](#) to find markets; and their margins are small. Many of the world's food producers are also on the frontlines of the climate emergency.

According to the United Nations, [820 million people](#) around the world suffer from hunger; by the end of this year, the U.N. estimates, those experiencing acute food insecurity because of the pandemic's effects will have increased from 135 to 265 million. Most of these people will be from the [global South](#); most will be black or brown.

How can it be that with so much abundant production (the world produced almost [350 million tonnes](#) of soybeans in 2018, the top [ten nation-state growers of corn](#) raise almost 900 million tonnes of it) people go hungry? One reason is that [45 percent of the crop calories](#),

including from soy and corn, go to feed animals or for biofuels. In the U.S., a full two-thirds of crops are grown for feed-stock.

All three crises have an even larger frame within which they must be seen: and that is the climate catastrophe. It is an irony that the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown revealed to many the possibility of a world with [cleaner skies](#), [more birdsong](#), [the return of wild animals](#), and a greater awareness of our local environments overall. However, the slight [downturn in CO₂ emissions](#) caused by the global recession has not been enough to stop this year seeing [record CO₂ levels](#), nor to disrupt rising global temperatures and intensifying weather events. Nor will it alter the long-term challenges of [crop](#) and farmed animal losses due to [heat stress](#) or variable rainfall patterns.

Nor will it halt the warming and acidification of the planet's oceans, and the threats to global security and humanitarian disasters as millions of climate refugees flee to cities or across their nations' borders.

Here, too, intensive animal agriculture serves to make a bad problem worse: by being a substantial contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, driving biodiversity loss and land use-change, wasting potable water—and despoiling surrounding environments for the people who live there, who are all too often lower-income or communities of color. It is these communities who are also disproportionately affected by climate change, in both the global South and the global North.

A New Vision: Reciprocity and Justice

A different vision for ourselves and the non-human world is, therefore, not only desirable but necessary. This new future prioritizes the needs of communities for a livable environment, provides easy and affordable access to fresh food and healthy living arrangements, and compensates all its citizens commensurate with their value in the crises we are undergoing now. That society will not only be more equitable and habitable, but it will be more likely to survive the social, political, and economic upheavals that await us over the next two to three decades.

What might be some of the first steps toward this new future? One would be to end the bailouts, subsidies, and incentives that enable the mass production of commodity feed-stock and animals. A second would be to reorient agriculture to small-scale, bioregional production of low-carbon intensive fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, legumes, and grains. That would include urban environments, where rooftop and community gardening, vertical farming, and local farms would diversify food sheds and encourage green space. A third would mandate decent opportunities for

co-ownership and livable wages for all workers in the food chain that foster dignity and literal and social investment. A fourth would prioritize women-led, minority, and indigenous initiatives as central to a reimagined farm-to-table economy that's accessible to all and restores a measure of equity and justice to those forced from their lands over several centuries. Such a step would nurture economic and social resilience, and increase access to affordable, healthy, sustainable, and just food.

A fifth step would be to restore public lands now given over to grazing cattle and sheep and feed crops via rewilding, conservation, and community management. Such a commitment would allow for reforestation, carbon sequestration, watershed protection, and increased biodiversity (and thereby greater biotic resilience as the planet warms). It would both reflect and deepen our recalibration of how we assign value to land and the natural world.

By shifting from extraction to restoration; monocultures to polycultures; commodification to bioregionalism; concentrated power to participatory democracy; hyper-individualized and divisive social structures to a social and political ecosystem that honors community, diversity, and the public good—we stand more chance of collective survival.

As millions of people across the world, and especially younger generations, commit to advancing racial and climate justice, adopt a plant-based diet and work for greater equity in food systems, engage in civil society, and demand more from those who hold economic and political power, it is possible to see a different future. It is one where we are citizens before we are consumers; where enhanced social and natural capital underpin any financial or political capital we may possess; where individuals are treated as subjects and not objects, holders of rights rather than instruments of utility; and we know ourselves as genuine equals rather than essential or inessential workers.

This world is ultimately one that also promises, and delivers, a new relationship with the natural world: not merely of genuine stewardship, and replenishment as opposed to extraction, but also of justice that ensures the survival of billions of species, including our own, and the planetary systems upon which all lives depend.

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