

Environmental Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered our everyday lifestyles to focus on safety first and foremost. The pandemic also seems to have had many silver linings for the environment, as we discussed in the [Featured Article](#). As we begin to emerge from our social distancing, we will undoubtedly need to follow many safety practices into the future. We can apply this same philosophy to many of the practices that have been benefitting the environment. Check out the list below for a few ideas to continue the encouraging environmental results we've seen in the past few months! A special thanks is given to the Green Team Leads Council and Sustainable Lab Practices Working Group for brainstorming these ideas. If you are interested in joining either of these groups, please send an email to green@mail.nih.gov.

- **Increased Teleworking:** It is likely we will need to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic slowly and with caution. This may allow for increased teleworking into the future, at least to an extent greater than before the COVID-19 pandemic. If your job allows it, teleworking provides safety through physical distancing while also creating great environmental benefits by reducing your commuting. For example, by keeping off the roads, the NIH Bethesda campus teleworkers reduced Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions for commuting and travel by approximately 24 percent (1,252 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MTCO_{2e})) in March of 2020 compared to the previous year. This reduction in GHG emissions is equivalent to the carbon sequestered by 1,635 acres of U.S. forests in one year.
- **Reusing Materials:** The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired creativity for reusing materials that can be carried over into the future. The most notable instance is the multitude of ways people have created their own reusable face masks, like with old clothing or scraps of cloth from other projects. This ingenuity is a great lesson for how we can utilize items that may otherwise be thrown away. It seems likely we will continue to need face masks for the foreseeable future, so you could even consider making extra masks and donating them to others!
- **Food Waste:** Food shortages were a very real concern at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, many of us became much more aware of our tendencies to waste food and learned to use our food more efficiently. Making meals in a way that minimizes waste or adopting meal alternatives like meatless dishes have many environmental benefits that we can strive to maintain. If you are interested in exploring this topic further, then please consider visiting the Maryland Department of the Environment [website on Food Scrap Management](#).
- **Technology Utilization:** Our recent isolation has forced many of us to learn much more about the capabilities of technology. In our modern age, technology gives us the capability to perform many tasks remotely or to work more efficiently. Maybe we don't need to be physically present to perform that task? Maybe there is a better way to perform our daily routines? Greenhouse gases are likely to benefit from a reduced need for physical presence, however there are many additional environmental areas that could be positively affected through better technology utilization.

- Nature Appreciation: Being confined to our houses has helped create a renewed appreciation of nature for many of us. Simple joys like a quick walk for fresh air or hearing bird chirping can make us feel less isolated and improve our mood. It is important to remember that nature is always around us and that we should do our part to protect it.