Could a global pandemic help the environment?

With Covid-19 shutting down towns and cities across the world, environmentalists are asking what this means in terms of climate change and, after so much negativity, could there be a good news story for the environment?

Here in the UK we are in week three of our lockdown, but as we are all only too aware, the impacts of Covid-19 have been felt for a lot longer in other places across the globe. There are fewer cars on the road, planes in the air and trains on the track. People are staying at home now, but for how long? Can we reasonably expect any changes to the environment or in societal behaviour to be measurable?

For those of us that work in planning, we have always understood the correlation between movement of people and the impact this was having on the environment. But with the world shutting down, now will be the time to 'test' the science behind the theory and consider how a world with limited travel could really benefit the environment.

<u>What is the science so far telling us?</u>

It has been reported that, due to a halt in water traffic, the canals in Venice are cleaner and there are fish to be seen. Both China and Italy have recorded significant falls in nitrogen dioxide and New York City has seen a 50% reduction in carbon monoxide compared with 2019. Greenhouse gas emissions across the planet are falling dramatically.

The map below from NASA shows the difference in nitrogen dioxide levels over China between January and February 2020 attributed to restrictions on movement.
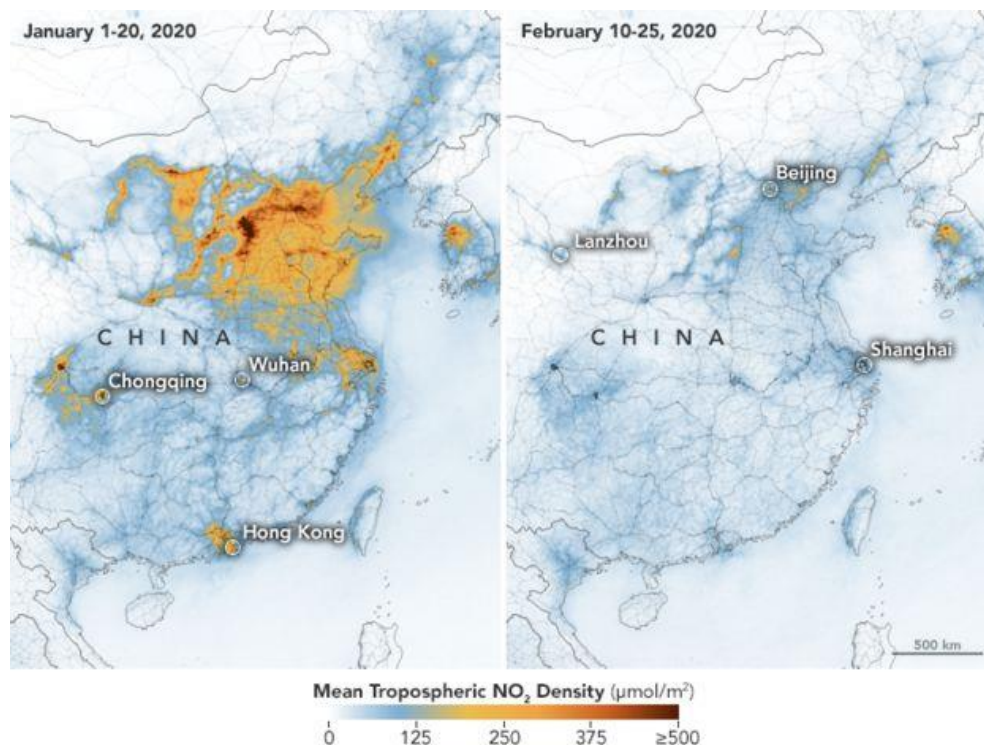

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<u>What does this mean for London?</u>

But what does this mean for London? Will we hear stories of the River Thames becoming cleaner because river transport has stopped? Will communities around airports and roads benefit from cleaner air? Will our cities become quieter and residents enjoy tranquil spaces? Will flora and fauna flourish with less human interaction? Or will it all go unnoticed because we are all indoors?

Will it change the way we plan cities in the future?

As town planners, environmental planners and transport planners, we are constantly trying to plan our towns and cities to be less reliant on the car and shift behaviours towards more sustainable transport modes. Whether that's encouraging car free developments, increasing rail networks or designing fully integrated mixed-use community places, there has never been a better time to examine the evidence.

After months of a global 'lockdown' will the evidence be strong enough to encourage people to change their behaviours, travel less, take a slower pace of life and consider their impact on the environment? Or, after months indoors, will everybody look to revert back to the 'good old days'? Can planners use this as an opportunity to change behaviours?

At the end of 2020 the RTPI London is going to run an event which focuses on Covid-19 and the environment, the short-term benefits and the medium-term implications. We will look back on 2020 and explore how a pandemic possibly saved the environment or, at the very least, made us think about how we want to live and work in this city.

Written by Katie Lidington