



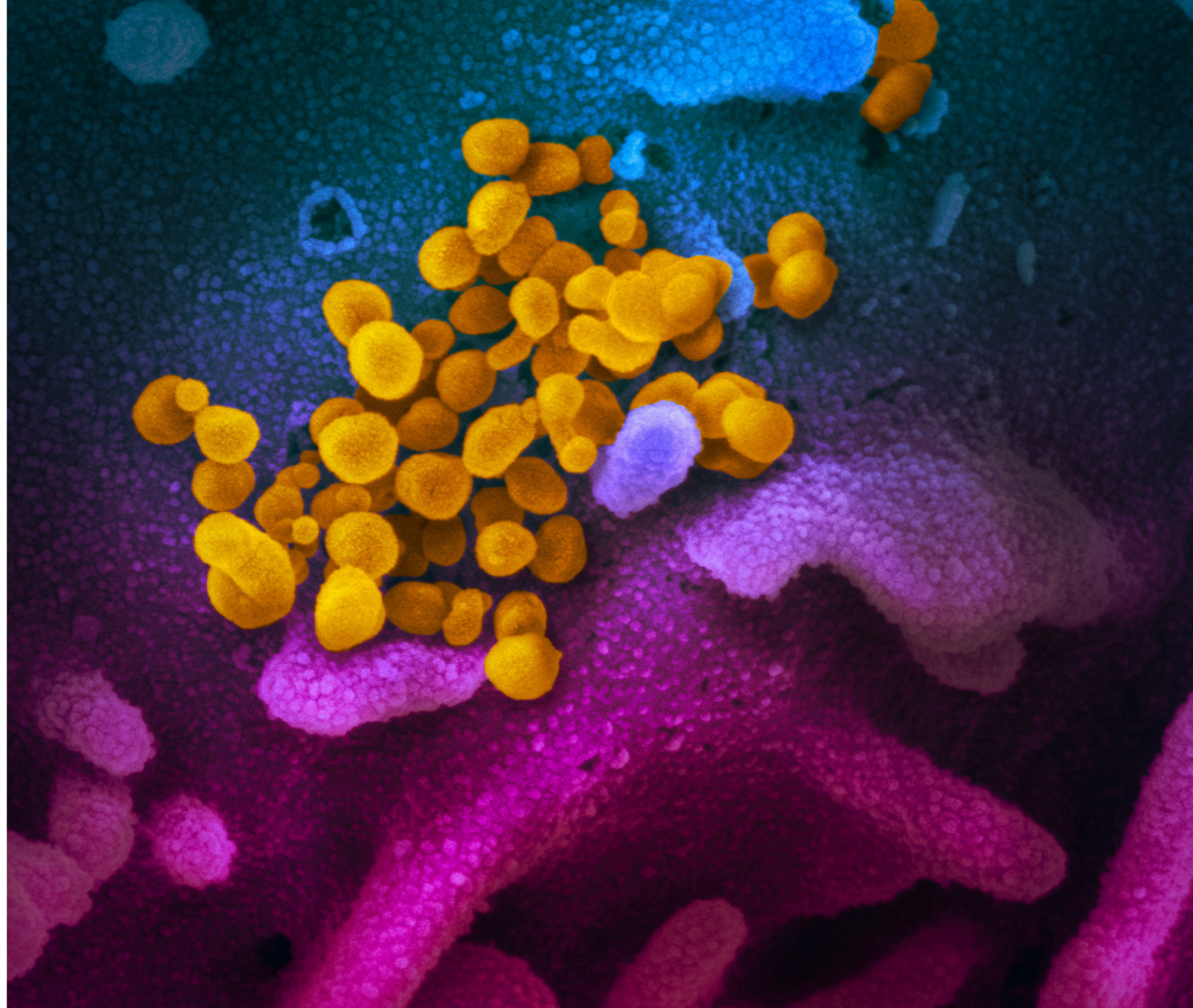
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Coronavirus News

Coronavirus Pandemic: A Symptom of Our Mass Extinction

UCSB Professor Says Ecological and Human Health Are Inseparable



Ultraviolet light is one of the antagonists that works against the virus SARS-CoV-2 responsible for COVID-19.

By Peter Alagona

Wed Apr 15, 2020 | 10:30pm



Deer, monkeys, coyotes, wild boars, mountain goats, pumas, and, of course, lots and lots of rats. In recent weeks, photographs of wild animals wandering through deserted cities have circulated widely in the press and on social media.

Yet they are profoundly misleading.

Some, like the now-famous photograph of dolphins frolicking in a crystal-clear Venice canal, were fakes. But even the unaltered photographs distract from a larger truth.

The Santa Barbara Independent is providing all coronavirus stories for free so that all readers have access to critical information during this time.

The coronavirus pandemic is not an example of nature's resilience. It is a direct consequence of the mass extinction that is sweeping over our planet, decimating life on Earth and making it a more dangerous place for humans.

Recent studies have painted a grim picture of the state of the natural world.

In October 2018, the World Wildlife Fund reported that over the past 50 years, wild animal populations have declined by a global average of 60 percent. In April 2019, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature announced that one million species are threatened with extinction.

Facing this deluge of grim news, one could be forgiven for forgetting about the plastic pollution crisis now facing global ecosystems, or that last summer, Greenland lost an estimated 329 billion tons of ice.

2019 may have been the worst year for life on Earth since the last mass extinction, 66 million years ago.

Habitat loss, climate change, pollution, and overharvesting are laying waste to ecosystems around the world.

Habitat loss dredges up pathogens, like the Borrelia bacterium that causes Lyme disease, while eliminating predators that control pathogen hosts and bringing people into closer contact with disease-bearing creatures.

Ecological destruction also led to our current pandemic.

Viruses probably have been around as long as life itself, and epidemics have affected people since we've been gathering in large groups.

The novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 got its start at a wet market in China, where animals bred in farms or harvested in the wild are packed into cruel and unsanitary conditions for sale as exotic delicacies.

Viruses rarely jump from one species to another, but placing animals in these cramped, stressful conditions greatly increases the chances of interspecies transmission.

The best way to prevent these pathogens from reaching humans is to keep them in the ecosystems where they evolved. In healthy, diverse ecosystems that contain different kinds of animal hosts and vectors interacting in complex ways, pathogens tend to have a tougher time spreading.

The illicit wildlife trade, in particular, poses enormous risks. The world's fourth most lucrative trafficking industry — after the smuggling of drugs, weapons, and people — with annual revenue of as much as \$23 billion, the illicit wildlife trade threatens hundreds of species.

Governments, universities, foundations, and conservation groups are working to curb the trade in exotic species, implement early warning systems for new pathogens, coordinate emergency responses, and develop new vaccines and therapies.

Predictably, the Trump Administration is undermining efforts to keep us healthy by slashing environmental programs and regulations. But liberals have not done much better.

The time has come for a bold new approach: a Marshall Plan for Nature to rebuild our world's shattered ecological infrastructure.

To do this, we will need to spend trillions of dollars, recruit millions of workers, and hold every government of every nation — most of all, our own — accountable for healing ecosystems devastated by decades of reckless indifference.

For the hundreds of millions of people who have seen their lives upended by this pandemic, there will be a deep desire to return to normal. But as we cope with our grief, survey the wreckage, and begin to rebuild our lives, we must remember that a healthy economy does not destroy the ecosystems that sustain it.

We now have a choice: Will we choose a symbiotic world where humankind dedicates itself to nurturing the ecosystems on which all species depend? Or will we choose a parasitic world, in which we demolish our host planet while it wreaks havoc on us?

This is not a war because there is no enemy. We created this crisis. Only we can spare future generations from more of the same.

Peter S. Alagona is an associate professor of Environmental Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

At the Santa Barbara Independent, our staff is working around the clock to cover every aspect of this crisis — sorting through rumor, our reporters and editors the toughest questions of our public health officials and spreading the word about how we can all help one another.

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