

Lockdowns offer a lesson in humans' impact on wildlife

By Jacqueline Barba, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.19.20

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Sea lions sunbathe in the street in Mar del Plata harbor, Argentina, during the lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Photo by Mara Sosti/AFP via Getty Images

Many people around the world are staying home. Schools and businesses are closed. People are not going out because of the COVID-19 virus. They are trying to stop the virus from spreading.

People may be staying indoors. But wild animals are exploring more than ever! They are wandering into new spaces. These spaces are usually packed with people.

Animals Explore New Places For Food

Katie Wood is a marine biologist. She studies sea life. Wood works at the Earth Day Network, a group that works to protect the environment by treating the world better. She is not surprised to see animals exploring more.

People take up a lot of space, Wood says. We hike, we crowd in cities, and we go to the beach. "We're everywhere," she says.

All of this activity keeps wildlife away. But now that so many people are staying home, animals are checking out those empty spaces.

How do they know it's safe? Normally, people make a lot of noise. We also make a lot of light. Our streetlights and car headlights brighten the nighttime. Our cars, ships and planes make loud sounds. This sends a message to animals: "Stay away!"

Animals take things a day at a time, Wood says. Their goal is to survive. When human noise goes away and lights are shut off, animals see it as an opportunity. It's a chance to explore new spaces. It may help them find new resources, such as food.

Observe From A Safe Distance

Ellie Chesterton is a behavioral ecologist. This kind of scientist studies how animals behave. Chesterton works at the University of Leeds in England.

She says people are valuing nature more. They are taking nature walks. They are listening to birdsong. They are looking at the wildlife all around them. This is a positive effect of the lockdown, Chesterton says.

There are also downsides, though. Chesterton worries that people will try to get too close to the animals they see. People love seeing wild animals. So they may try to attract them with food. This is dangerous for people and animals, too.

You can keep enjoying wildlife during the lockdown. Just do it safely. Never get close to a wild animal. "Enjoy them from a window," Chesterton says.

Sea Turtles Show Positive Impact Of Lockdown

Will the lockdown have a lasting effect on wildlife? It is too soon to tell. But some animals have already benefited.

One example is the leatherback sea turtle. Scientists released a report in April. It was about sea turtle nests in the country of Thailand. Usually, the beaches of Thailand are very crowded. Many people like to visit. This year, the beaches are closed. Scientists counted up the turtle nests. They found the largest number in 20 years! Without visitors, the turtles had more safe, private spaces to build their nests.

This is good news because leatherback sea turtles are endangered. They are at risk of going extinct. When an animal goes extinct, it dies out forever.

Lasting Changes Are Up To Us

Wood, the marine biologist, hopes we will see more improvements like this. It's up to us, she says. People have to take up less space. This will give animals the room they need to survive.

If you are interested in protecting wild spaces, Wood has an idea. Choose a section of your yard, or of a community space if possible. Then try to keep that space wild. Protect it, but leave it alone! Do not use any chemicals that kill bugs or weeds.

Steps like this sound small, Wood says. But they can make a big difference. They really can help the wildlife in your neighborhood.

Quiz

- 1 Which section of the article gives information about an endangered species that has benefited from recent changes?
- (A) "Animals Explore New Places For Food"
 - (B) "Observe From A Safe Distance"
 - (C) "Sea Turtles Show Positive Impact Of Lockdown"
 - (D) "Lasting Changes Are Up To Us"
- 2 What does the section "Lasting Changes Are Up To Us" show the reader?
- (A) an explanation of what happens when endangered animals go extinct
 - (B) an explanation of how people can protect wild spaces near them
 - (C) a description of what people normally do to scare animals away
 - (D) a description of how animals know that spaces have gotten empty
- 3 What does the author want the reader to think?
- (A) The lockdown is a good chance to see how much human actions affect wildlife.
 - (B) The freedom that wildlife enjoys during the lockdown will end when people come back.
 - (C) The places that people normally like to explore are being ruined by wildlife.
 - (D) The Earth Day Network needs to do more to protect wildlife in the environment.
- 4 Ellie Chesterton thinks people should observe and enjoy wildlife from a window.
Why does Chesterton think this?
- (A) It is the easiest way to hear birdsong.
 - (B) It is safer for both animals and people.
 - (C) It is the only way to follow lockdown rules.
 - (D) It is too hard to attract animals using food.