

The essential, the useless and the harmful (part 3)

By [Éloi Laurent](#)

Is humanity a pest?

For the other beings of Nature who find it increasingly difficult to coexist with humans on the planet, the answer is unambiguous: without a doubt.

Life on earth, 3.5

billion years old, can be estimated in different ways. One way is to [assess the respective biomass of its components](#). It can then be seen that the total biomass on Earth weighs around 550 Gt C (giga tonnes of carbon), of which 450 Gt C (or 80%) are plants, 70 Gt C (or 15%) are bacteria and only 0.3% are animals.

Within this last category, humans represent only 0.06 Gt C. And yet, the 7.6

billion people accounting for only 0.01% of life on the globe are on their own responsible for the disappearance of more than 80% of all wild mammals and half of all plants.

This colossal crisis

in biodiversity caused by humanity, with [premises dating back to the extermination of megafauna in the prehistoric age](#)

(Pleistocene), started with the entry into the regime of industrial growth in the 1950s, with the onset of the "[great acceleration](#)".

This is now well documented: while nearly 2.5 million species (1.9 million animals and 400,000 plants) have been identified and named, convergent studies suggest that their rate of extinction is currently 100 to 1000 times faster than the rhythms known on Earth during the last 500 million years. This could mean that, due to human expansion, biodiversity is on the brink of a sixth mass extinction. Whether we observe these dynamics [in section](#) or [longitudinally](#), at the level of [certain key species in certain regions](#) or by turning to more or less convincing hypotheses on the [total potential biodiversity sheltered by the Biosphere](#) (which could amount to 8 million species), the conclusion is obvious: while humans are thriving, the other species are withering away, with the exception of those that are directly useful to people.

But this destruction of biodiversity is of course also an existential problem for humans themselves. According to a causal chain formalized two decades ago during an [evaluation of ecosystems for the millennium](#), biodiversity underpins the proper functioning of ecosystems, which provide humans with “ecosystem services” that support their well-being (recent literature evokes in a broader and less instrumental way “the [contributions of Nature](#)”). This logic naturally also holds in reverse: when humans destroy biodiversity, as they are massively doing today through their [agricultural systems](#),

they degrade ecosystem services and, at the end of the chain, undermine their own living conditions. The case of mangroves is one of the most telling: these maritime ecosystems promote animal reproduction, store carbon and constitute powerful natural barriers against tidal waves. By destroying them, human communities are becoming poorer and weaker.

The start of the 2020 decade, the first three months of which were marked by huge fires in Australia and the Covid-19 pandemic, is clearly showing that destroying Nature is beyond our means. The most intuitive definition of the unsustainability of current economic systems can therefore be summed up in just a few words: human well-being destroys human well-being.

How do we get out of this vicious spiral as quickly as possible? One common sense solution, known since Malthus and constantly updated since then, is to suppress humanity, in whole or in part. Some commentators are taking note of how much the Biosphere, freed from the burden of humans, is doing better since they have been mostly confined. If we turn off the source of human greenhouse gas emissions, it is of course likely that they will fall sharply. Likewise, if the sources of local pollution in urban spaces, for example in Paris, are turned off, [the air there will be restored to a remarkable quality](#). It is also likely that we will see an improvement

in the lot of animal and plant species during this period, much as in areas like the [Chernobyl region that humans were forced to abandon](#). But what good is clean air when we are deprived of the right to breathe it for more than a few moments a day?

In reality, even if confinement has led to a constrained and temporary sobriety, its long-term impact is working fully against the ecological transition. All the mechanisms of social cooperation that are essential to transition policies are now at a standstill, except for market transactions. To take simply the example of climate policy, the very strategic COP 26 gathering has already been postponed to 2021, the [next IPCC Assessment Report has been slowed down](#), the full, comprehensive outcome of the efforts of the Citizen climate convention has been compromised, and so on. And a [heat wave under lockdown](#) cannot be excluded!

The point is that it is not a matter of neutralizing or even freezing social systems to “save” natural systems, but of working over the long-term on their [social-ecological articulation](#), which is still a blind spot in contemporary economic analysis.

The fact remains that the current social emergency is forcing governments around the world to work here and now to protect their populations, particularly the most vulnerable, from the colossal shock that is simultaneously hitting economic systems around the world. The notion of essential well-being can rightly

serve as a compass guiding these efforts, which could focus on sectors vital to the whole population in the months and years to come, subject to the imperative of not further accelerating the ecological crisis. Essential well-being and non-harmful well-being could converge to meet the present urgency and the needs of the future. How, precisely?

Let us briefly return to the different dimensions of essential well-being outlined in the first post in this series. Public health and the care sector are clearly at the centre of essential well-being, understood as human well-being which works for its perpetuation rather than for its loss. The medical journal *The Lancet* has [highlighted in recent years](#) the increasingly tangible links between health and climate, health and various pollutants, health and biodiversity, and health and ecosystems. Care for ecosystems and care for humanity are two sides of the same coin. But the issue of environmental health must be fully integrated, including here in France, with the new priority on health. Investing in public services beyond the health system is also a guarantee that essential well-being is shared most equitably.

This temporal coherence is complicated by the necessary reinvestment in essential infrastructure. Food

supply systems in France and beyond, from agricultural production to retail distribution, are today far too polluting and destructive to both human health and ecosystems. Food systems already engaged in the ecological transition should be given priority in order to promote their generalization. Likewise, the energy required for infrastructure, particularly urban infrastructure (water, electricity, waste, mobility, etc.) is still largely fossil-fuelled, even though in just five years a global metropolis like Copenhagen has given itself the means to obtain supplies from 100% renewable energy. We must therefore accelerate the move for energy and carbon sobriety – we have [all the means needed](#). Finally, the issue of the growing ecological footprint of digital networks can no longer be avoided, when essential infrastructures, such as heating networks and waste collection, work very well in a “low-tech” mode.

The notion of essential well-being can therefore be useful for the “end of the crisis”, provided that we remain faithful to the motto of those to whom we owe so much: first, do no harm.