

SUSTAINABILITY PARADOXES

Although the pandemic has given the Earth a chance to heal, the travel industry is at a cross-roads when it comes to prioritising money-making over environmental conservation
By Marisa Cannon





The headline of a recent news story in *The Independent* read: "Coronavirus could trigger biggest fall in global carbon dioxide since Second World War, scientists say." One of the few benefits of the pandemic has been the environmental bounceback we have witnessed, with daily emissions in the EU

down 58 per cent since the outbreak and global levels of nitrogen dioxide at record lows. About eight in ten flights globally have been grounded and previously tourist-clogged beaches and jam-packed streets have been left eerily empty, giving wildlife greater freedom to roam where it pleases.

The silver lining is, of course, temporary, and

as soon as the global economy jerks back to life, the respite that the planet has enjoyed will be undone. As governments tussle to revive ailing industries, environmental initiatives may well take a back seat.

At the Airlines4Europe summit in March, CEO of Air France-KLM Benjamin Smith asked governments to delay upcoming policies

that would limit air travel and reduce emissions, while spokesperson for Airlines4Europe Jennifer Janzen said: "We definitely don't need new taxes right now. It doesn't make any sense whatsoever to burden airlines and passengers with higher prices."

But experts and campaigners have called for "stringent conditions" aligned with the Paris Agreement on any airline bailout, as well as support to help workers affected re-skill. In a letter to UK chancellor Rishi Sunak, a group of 26 civil society groups wrote: "Public money must be used to address social and environmental priorities, as well as economic needs."

Meanwhile, Transport and Environment aviation manager Andrew Murphy has called for "a green transition by linking aid to taxes and greener fuels which will

reverse the sector's rapid emissions growth."

The reality is that colossal revenue losses may well leave airlines with little option but to discard offset plans. "Any sound business will prioritise their existing liabilities and payroll over voluntary investments in future sustainable aviation fuel volume," says Adam Klauber, a technical advisor at the Rocky Mountain Institute.

One boon for airlines is the plummeting oil price, but this could also deter them from investing in more sustainable, long-term solutions, such as expensive biofuels (Lufthansa wants to make fuel from sunlight and air) or cleaner, fuel-efficient aircraft.

The question now up for debate is whether travel brands will scramble to return to normalcy once the pandemic lifts, or be galvanised by this

"breather" to maintain and go further in their environmental and social commitments. The unpolluted blue skies and birdsong are likely to have struck a chord with many, and it could be a promising moment for companies advocating a more considered approach to travel.

Proponents of slow travel may well see greater interest in their philosophy, where travellers take longer trips to more unusual destinations, reached by alternative transport such as trains. Globetrender hopes that travellers and industry leaders will take responsibility for carbon offsetting as a bare minimum, as well as doubling down on reducing plastic waste, which sadly has rocketed because of demand for bottles of hand sanitiser, surgical masks and takeaway food containers.