

Maximising well-being post COVID-19

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KEY INSIGHTS

Much has changed in New Zealand since the New Zealand Government imposed a nation-wide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on 26 March 2020. Research³ undertaken by social researchers from Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research and the Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment provides insights into how people navigated their COVID-19 response and what that means for their, and New Zealand's, continued well-being.

The Environment and Well-being

The environment plays a significant role in people's well-being. A common theme from our interviews was the importance of connecting with the environment or nature during and after lockdown. For our participants, nature covered a spectrum from urban backyards and parks to the coastal/marine environment and the New Zealand back country. All these spaces played an important role in contributing to people's well-being:

...it was really important for me to be outside for my well-being, and I continue to do that, maybe a bit more during COVID than at other times. It was the opportunity and it really does nourish me (MWB40).

There's an increased awareness about mental health, tools for coping, and especially the importance of nature for mental health and physical health (MWB71).

I care about the environment and I know I find a lot of happiness when I'm outdoors rather than inside (MWB91).

While being able to connect with nature provided many positive well-being experiences, concerns about environmental degradation had the opposite effect. Participants were worried that environmental issues are being overlooked, or have been given a low priority, due to COVID-19:

COVID is, for me,...has been quite traumatic in the sense that I am...very much an environmentalist and it makes me want to be more active politically, environmentally to save our planet....But I'm also – I do suffer from the depression of what the science is showing us....what I find so distressing is the fact that so many people are burying their heads and ignoring what is coming down the road in a sense for their own greed and for their own satisfaction (MWB10).

³ A background and methodology report is available from StrongeD@landcareresearch.co.nz

I'm worried...how New Zealand's COVID response will impact on the likelihood of the government actually making changes that are going to be helpful for climate change...It's very easy for people to respond to the immediate threat...of COVID and harder to see the equally imminent...more long-term threat of climate change and that's actually a really big worry for me (MWB13).

[COVID's] such a fast problem that science was listened to, but we've got so many slow problems that science is more easily ignored on,...I'm doing conservation biology which is a slow problem and...there's no traction on that kind of thing (MWB47).

I've been really worried about climate change and [the] environment all around the world, [and] that COVID-19 has been a massive distraction from dealing with that (MWB52).

I guess what I'm most worried about is the bigger picture of things. You hear those pictures of the waves where there's COVID-19 and then another bigger wave, and it's like, to me, that climate change and the bigger wave is coming and the lack of concern about that is most worrying to me (MWB76).

As outlined in the key insight on rethinking the economy, participants wanted to see environmental issues addressed through a move to a green, circular or well-being economy. Other actions people wanted to see taken included a stronger focus on sustainability and investment in green technologies, pollution and recycling, jobs for nature, and environmental policy and regulation:

[The] best [outcome] of all will be the accommodation of that grass root appreciation [of the environment] and systemic change coming from government to get a greener economy – that would be the best outcome (MWB13).

I'd be happier if that money got spent towards actually doing some stuff around the environment and around the long-term sustainability of New Zealand. ...COVID is challenging, but as I say, sometimes challenges are opportunities. If we were to maximise those opportunities, I'll see it as investments into green initiatives, like proper investment (MWB45).

I think we're already on the journey of reducing plastics waste and that side of things. I think that's a big issue, all the rubbish that we're generating and the lack of recycling. And you only need to look in the sea, it's just terrible (MWB4).

...look at [a] wealth tax...we are the generation whose benefited from using all the carbon in the environment and polluting left, right and centre. And yet nobody seems to care about actually repaying some of the environmental debt (MWB10).

I definitely can see that people feel more connected to nature and feel like they need to do something. So, after lockdown I went to volunteer with some conservation groups and they say there are more people volunteering, more people inquiring [who] want to volunteer and they want to do more tree planting and stuff, so that's very good (MWB27).

People hoped that more urgency would be given to environmental problems:

I do hope that it has woken up the world to what we are facing in terms of human population, degrading nature, climate change, loss of biodiversity, and everything else because I think we've had a short sharp lesson in what the planet has instore for us. And I think this is just the beginning and if we don't react very quickly to improving our environmental social practices there will be no economy worth saving (MWB10).