



Coronavirus and the karmic interconnectedness of humans, animals

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The COVID-19 coronavirus has killed thousands of people around the world, including [14 in the U.S.](#), and its origin in animals and global spread should remind us how inextricably linked we are with other life on Earth. We share the same planet and breathe the same air, and we also exchange

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microbes including germs. Now, with our burgeoning human population and global economy, we face new threats from a wider distribution of diseases like this new strain of coronavirus.

For some background, the World Health Organization (WHO) [explains](#): “Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV)... Coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted between animals and people.” COVID-19 was [thought to have come from a live animal market where animals are often sold as food in Wuhan, China](#) in December 2019, and so far it has been confirmed in [nearly 80 countries](#) and declared a “public health emergency of international concern” by the World Health Organization.

No one yet knows how many people will be infected or die from COVID-19, but it has characteristics [similar to the bird flu, known as the “Spanish Flu,” which killed millions during World War One.](#)

SARS, MERS, and COVID-19 are [contagious diseases that jump from animals to humans](#), and more needs to be done to curtail these, including banning live animal markets. But, other potentially fatal zoonoses also warrant attention.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [warns](#): “...3 out of every 4 new or emerging infectious diseases in people come from animals.” These include viruses, bacteria, fungi and parasites, and they infect millions of U.S. citizens every year.

In the U.S., almost ten billion animals are exploited and slaughtered every year. Most live short miserable lives in overcrowded factory farms, which are a breeding ground for disease, including emerging pathogens and virulent strains of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

In addition to foodborne illness and environmental pollution, animal agriculture can also [incite global pandemics like H1N1](#), which was initially called “swine flu” because it was linked to [a similar disease in pigs](#), but its connection to animal agriculture has since been largely obscured.

The H1N1 pandemic [killed hundreds of thousands of people around the globe, including over ten thousand in the U.S.](#), according to CDC: “From

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April 12, 2009, to April 10, 2010, CDC estimated there were 60.8 million cases (range: 43.3-89.3 million), 274,304 hospitalizations (range: 195,086-402,719), and 12,469 deaths (range: 8868-18,306) in the United States due to the (H1N1)pdm09 virus... Additionally, CDC estimated that 151,700-575,400 people worldwide died from (H1N1)pdm09 virus infection during the first year the virus circulated.”

While animal-borne illnesses continue to threaten human health, agribusiness has a vested interest in preventing consumers from thinking about it — under the oversight of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Since the 1980s, Farm Sanctuary has investigated farms, stockyards and slaughterhouses and worked to prevent irresponsible agricultural practices, such as the transport and slaughter of downed animals, animals too sick even to stand. T

he USDA defended the practice for decades, dismissing our concerns about diseased animals entering the food supply. Finally, after confirming mad cow disease in the U.S., the agency agreed that downed cows should not be slaughtered for human consumption. Unfortunately, however, other diseased and debilitated animals are still entering the U.S. food supply, including half a million downed pigs every year.

We continue challenging this inhumane and risky practice, and we are also challenging a new USDA policy to remove limits on slaughterhouse line speeds, and give the industry more authority to police itself. The USDA and other government officials need to protect the public, instead of serving the short-sighted financial interests of agribusiness.

Government programs should encourage diverse organic farms that build soil and create ecological sustainability and resilience, instead of chemically dependent mono-crops and factory farm confinement, which denude and despoil the earth.

We should invest in plant-based agriculture and grow crops to feed people instead of farm animals, which would feed more people with less land and fewer resources, allowing rainforests and other vital ecosystems to be preserved, along with biodiversity and the earth’s natural capacity for regulating greenhouse gasses and other environmental threats. We all benefit when our common home, the earth, is healthier.

Transitioning agriculture and government policies will take time, but each of us can make daily choices to help the planet and ourselves. Eating nutritious, plant-based foods can help [fortify our immune systems](#), thereby enhancing our ability to withstand various threats, including from contagious viruses like COVID-19.

Our disrespectful treatment of other animals and the earth has consequences, and when they are harmed, ultimately, so are we. All life on Earth is connected, and it's in our interest to act accordingly.

Gene Baur is the president and co-founder of [Farm Sanctuary](#), a national farm animal rescue and advocacy organization.

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