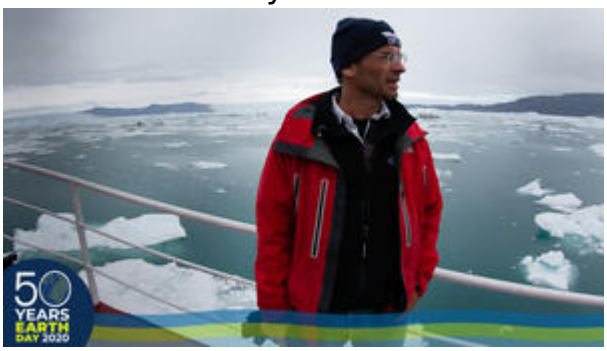
Coronavirus and climate change

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Donald Bren and Chancellor Professor Eric Rignot, a climate scientist and the chair of the Department of Earth System Science, during one of his field trips to Greenland.

Picture Credit:
UCI

As the pandemic rages, Department of Earth System Science Chair Eric Rignot defines what coronavirus means for climate change and those who study it.

Coronavirus is public enemy number one, and there are now only whispers in the media of the climate change crisis, which sits stirring in the background. Donald Bren and Chancellor Professor Eric Rignot, a climate scientist and the chair of the Department of Earth System Science, is isolating at his home with his family. There, he thinks about climate change in the pandemic's light.

"We are seeing the benefits of reduced emissions from cars and heavy industries. Air pollution in major cities is at an all-time low," says Rignot. "This illustrates the kind of environment we would be thriving in if we stopped burning fossil fuels tomorrow."

Rignot studies glaciers and how they're changing in our warming world. But the pandemic is upending that. Rignot does most of his work using satellite data, but he

also does fieldwork in places like Greenland, and he may not be able to continue his fieldwork this year. There will be a slowdown in the pace that the Earth sciences gets done, and the exact long-term effects of that slowdown are unclear. For some, it means they can't reach their field sites, but for others, Rignot explains, it means they have to re-think the way they conduct their day-to-day science while tending to the crisis.

Rignot likens humanity's rapid response to the pandemic to what needs to happen with climate change. "COVID-19 is a terrible problem, which we will solve, but climate change is a bigger crisis in the making," he says. "We should not wait for the climate crisis to take away tens of thousands of human lives to react. The scientific warning has been loud and clear, the technological solutions exist, but they await public and political approvals to be implemented on a massive scale."

The virus of climate change, Rignot explains, will see heat waves blaze, wildfires rage, droughts parch the land, and land claimed by rising seas. A vaccine for coronavirus will arrive, but the symptoms of climate change will be everlasting. "There is no vaccine for climate change," Rignot says. "To not deal with climate change now is suicidal."

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