

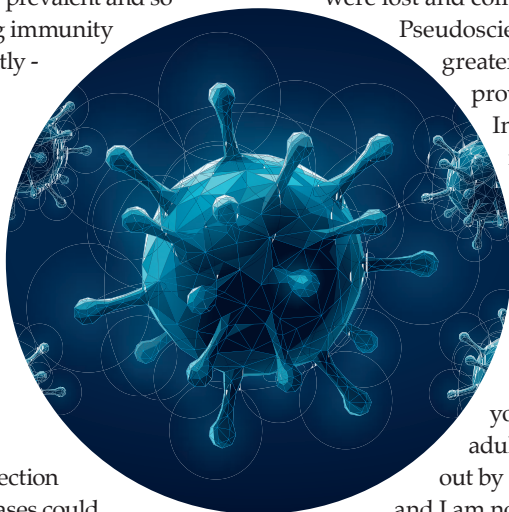
# Nature is not your friend



Photograph by Dr. Jeffrey Williams

As the Geological Society's Year of Life is dramatically brought to a standstill by a life form, **Ted Nield** reflects on changing attitudes to nature and the 'natural'

I was born in 1956. People of my generation, like the 'boomers' before them and all previous generations too, regarded nature as something principally to be feared - and it isn't hard to understand why. We were used to the idea that nature provided us with a bounty that included regular seasonal and non-seasonal infections to which we were going, inevitably, to be exposed, and which we were expected to have to contract naturally as part of the passage to adulthood. Indeed, many of these infectious agents were so prevalent and so contagious that acquiring immunity was positively – and rightly - encouraged. Measles, mumps, rubella and chicken pox appeared regularly and inevitably, and everyone knew that early exposure would not only confer immunity, but would likely have less serious long-term consequences for having taken place early in life. Our parents sometimes organised infection parties so that these diseases could be shared out.



## CLASSMATES

We remember also that some of our classmates never came back to school after this experience. I remember one who died, aged about seven, from measles. We also remember other schoolmates wearing leg-irons as a result of polio, and how the NHS of the time struggled to find the resources for the iron lungs that were needed in those cases where polio infection resulted in damage – usually, but not always temporary – to the autonomic reflex that controls breathing. Lord Nuffield turned over the resources of his motor car manufacturers to meet this the unprecedented demand, which is why owners of Morris Minors recognised some of the components as their children were inserted into these machines for a period of uncertain length.

To us, then, nature was something not only to

be treasured, but also feared. Not everything in nature was good for you. Quite a lot of nature was out to get you.

## INFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION

The reality of this situation has not changed; but thanks to new vaccines, in later years many lives that would otherwise have been lost or permanently blighted, were saved. And with that, memories of nature's many dangers were lost and complacency set in.

Pseudoscience, abetted by the greater availability of lies provided thanks to the Internet (a wonderful means of education, but an even better one for the dissemination of misinformation) sought to discredit the very thing that had been saving us. People tell me that the younger generation of adults is now feeling freaked out by the present pandemic, and I am not surprised. Nothing in their experience, or those of their parents, has prepared them for this. They have grown up with the idea that nature is universally benign. What's more, they are bombarded with information (and misinformation) about the pandemic as never before.

## A FORMIDABLE ENEMY

There will be – and should be – many reckonings once this emergency is past. But let us not forget this one. Nature is not your friend. Nature has to be resisted and fought as well as nurtured. Nature can also be the enemy, and a formidable one. And as things that were frozen thaw out, and the rainforests disgorge their displaced faunas and bring them into contact with humans for the first time, let us remember that caring for nature and fearing it are two sides of the same coin.

Ted Nield was formerly Editor of Geoscientist

## SOAPBOX CALLING!

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If you can write it entertainingly in **500 words**, the Editor would like to hear from you. Email your piece, and a self-portrait, to [sarah.day@geolsoc.org.uk](mailto:sarah.day@geolsoc.org.uk). Copy can only be accepted electronically. No diagrams, tables or other illustrations please.

Pictures should be of print quality – please take photographs on the largest setting on your camera, with a plain background.

Precedence will always be given to more topical contributions. Any one contributor may not appear more often than once per volume (once every 12 months).

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TED NIELD