

Not even Antarctica could stop COVID: It's a crucial lesson

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COVID-19 wasn't supposed to get to Antarctica. If any place had a hope

of keeping the virus out, it would be a continent with no permanent residents and an annual visiting population of only 5,000. And every control measure was in place—testing, a strict quarantine of everyone visiting, as well as lots of deep sanitation, masks and social distancing.

And yet the virus got there in December 2020, less than a year into the pandemic. It arrived at the Chilean base first, spreading to at least 36 people. It later reached the Belgian base, and the Argentinian base, as well as French and British outposts. In 2022, there was a big outbreak at the US McMurdo station, one at New Zealand's Scott base and even a few cases at the South Pole.

Four years after the start of the pandemic, the frozen continent holds a lesson for the world in how much control we ever had over COVID. Back in March 2020, leaders worldwide talked about getting things under control, without thinking through what this entailed.

COVID in Antarctica "tells us a lot about human arrogance in terms of being above nature and being able to manage all that happens in nature," said Daniela Liggett, a [social scientist](#) at the University of Canterbury who studies Antarctic politics and environmental management. "We couldn't even lock away this one piece of the planet where nobody lives and protect it from the virus." She explored the situation and its implications in a [paper](#) in the journal *Science Advances*.

Humanity can control what we dump into the environment and emit into the atmosphere. We can exert some control over activities that might transfer animal viruses to humans. But after the fact, it's nearly impossible to Hoover up plastic pollution or cool our artificially warmed planet or control a virus that's already spread far and wide.

By the end of March 2020, COVID had reached every continent on the planet except for Antarctica, where the summer research season was

underway. Before that season was over, most research and tourism to the continent was paused. Scientists scheduled to continue experiments or collect field data were kept out. As months went by, Antarctica went into its dark, cold winter season, and its small skeleton crews remained isolated.

When the next summer research season began in late 2020, however, some researchers and support staff were allowed to return following a strict quarantine. To get to the New Zealand base, people had to be tested and then hole up alone in a hotel room for two weeks, Liggett said, while continuing to undergo daily testing. Once vaccines became available to the general public, the US programs and others required everyone to be up to date on their shots.

Despite all this, disease found a way to sneak in and spread.

That doesn't mean that Antarctica's policy was a failure. It showed the futility of going for total containment or elimination by cancelling activities and then using quarantines, testing and masks. But rejecting all those measures would have increased the number of cases and the odds that people would die. Before the vaccines became available, it wasn't all that rare for seemingly healthy people to get a severe case. Such cases would be more likely to turn deadly in a remote outpost far from a hospital.

The decision to resume Antarctic research activity struck a balance between the risks of disease and the benefits of conducting research that can't be done elsewhere. The few Antarctic regions not covered in ice are full of lakes where scientists have found improbable life forms, giving them clues to the way life might survive on other worlds.

Some scientists are monitoring the [effects of global warming](#) on the ice sheets, and others are monitoring the accumulation of microplastics and

PFAS (forever chemicals) on the Antarctic ice and in the surrounding seas. Others study ghostly particles or astrophysical phenomena.

Shutting down everything even for part of one season had consequences. Careers were derailed, said Liggett, because researchers couldn't get to the continent to finish field studies or experiments. For young investigators in competitive fields, that could make the difference between getting established and starting over.

Now, she said, researchers in Antarctica don't spend all that much time worrying about COVID. They've moved on—because that's what everyone is doing worldwide. And doing research in such extreme conditions has always required some appetite for balancing risk and reward.

Today, fact checkers, ignoring the complexity of the real world, try to argue that the virus is "under control" in the US despite a continued weekly death toll in the hundreds. But what counts as "under control" is inherently subjective and often politically malleable.

More information: Daniela Liggett et al, How the COVID-19 pandemic signaled the demise of Antarctic exceptionalism, *Science Advances* (2024). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.adk4424](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adk4424)

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