How the world’s fires changed while humanity hit pause

Wildfires occur worldwide, and they can sometimes become serious threats to people’s lives. A series of massive bushfires from 2019 to 2020 swept across southeastern Australia and destroyed thousands of homes. Recently, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires spread widely across the city, resulting in massive damage to local communities.

Many things can cause wildfires, but humans are the only factor that can also make preventative efforts. Measuring people’s impact on fire is difficult because of the mix of human and natural influences.

A team led by Jianghao Wang, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, recently published a study in Cell Reports Sustainability comparing the COVID-19 era with other years. Data from the 2020 lockdowns suggest that lower human activity at this time had the net effect of lowering average fire activity.

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