Honda 4-stroke 250cc twin outboards roared to life as we skimmed over the unusually placid Tasman Sea in route to Paraparaumu Beach. Chortling tourists added to the salubrious vibe that washed over me after a day hiking though a New Zealand nature sanctuary, Kapiti Island. I had visited in early March to replenish my perspective on being the master of ceremonies and opening speaker at the New Zealand Institute of Environmental Health’s annual conference in Wellington. I was blessed with a close-up experience with an endangered parrot, the New Zealand kaka, and captured a fleeting glimpse of an elusive spoonbill during my brief visit to the refuge.

Kapiti was identified by naturalists in 1870 as a potential site for a bird sanctuary and achieved that status in 1897. Regrettably, much of the habitat on the island had by that time been deforested and was overrun by feral animals. Despite its status, many native species did not survive. Flash forward 100 years. Goats were eradicated in 1928, followed by cats, deer, sheep, cattle, pigs, and dogs. Possums were removed between 1980 and 1986. Rats were the last to go and they were eradicated using the aerial application of rodenticide in 1996, leaving the island completely free of introduced mammals that had threatened bird life. Radical measures were required to achieve radical results.

I had yearned to escape the relentless work pace of the last few years for a few days of exploration, but alas, it was not to be. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cut short my ambitions as I amended my New Zealand travel plans to return to Denver, via San Francisco, on March 15. Our association leadership team convened an early conference call on March 13, during which time we elected to implement a 100% telework policy that would go into effect on March 16. Staff and member communication plans were developed, as were policies and procedures, to ensure essential functions would carry-on unabated. We would care for our employees and members from our respective homes.

As I hiked the steep inclines of northern Kapiti’s Okupe Valley, I reflected on the state of our profession. The major public health events of the last 20 years were rooted in environmental health: H1N1, H5N1, SARS, MERS, Ebola. Lyme disease, the 2017 hurricane season, the 2018 fire season, and now COVID-19. At the same time, most academic environmental health programs and environmental public health programs have not enjoyed revitalized interest and growth. As I scan the pandemic news and developments safely ensconced and locked down at home, I am somewhat distraught that there is scant reference to environmental health. Where are the experts on sanitizing and disinfection? How about our expertise in personal protective equipment? The health of jailed inmates? Can’t anyone see the root cause of these diseases is poor environmental health practices? Same as it ever was.

One of the major recurring issues I recognize during major disease events is that our profession provides backbone support to the public health enterprise. I am also committed to the notion of teachable moments and in that spirit, hatched an idea to survey our members. Jesse Bliss, our Program and Partnership Development director, and I worked long into the nights of March 23 and 24 to craft a rapid needs assessment of the profession. Our guiding principle was to be able to use the survey results to reframe how our profession is perceived within the public health enterprise and to ascertain how best to meet your needs. The survey was distributed to our membership on the morning of March 25 and by the end of the day we had 1,175 responses. A report of the rapid needs assessment findings can be found at www.neha.org/covid-19 and a summary can be found on page 40.

Figure 1 presents one of our findings. Environmental health professionals are profoundly involved in pandemic response and undoubtedly will be central figures in the recovery efforts. You know what’s next. How clean is clean? Can I safely open my Head Start operation? Is the clinic safe? I’ve had a sick family member, what procedures do I employ to disinfect? Can we and should we employ virtual inspections of retail food facilities? continued on page 44
We distributed the survey results to our colleagues within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, among others. We communicated to influencers we felt needed to know. While this moment is not the time to professionally declare, “Hey, look at us,” we believed it was important to lay an evidenced-based marker—the environmental health profession is foundational to the health of the nation during normal and abnormal times. As I craft this column, NEHA staff are engaged in a spirited exchange of capacity building ideas. How do we complement the existing barrage of COVID-19 webinars and e-mails that seem to be blanketing the ether? What I do know is that local governmental and private sector environmental health professionals are essential to life as we know it. Last Friday I was pleased to join a national webinar hosted by Ruth Ann Norton, executive director of the Green & Healthy Homes Initiative. One speaker from Grand Rapids, Michigan, called out the critical role of local environmental health professionals, including our own past-president, Adam London. We learned from Hurricane Katrina, Ebola, and most other urgent health issues that as society we are “on our own.” Local environmental health practitioners, local policy makers, local clinicians, local commercial enterprises, and local emergency responders will make the difference in how many of us fall victim to COVID-19. If we are honest with ourselves, this state of affairs has always been the case. Many of you whom I have had the privilege to meet and speak with will recognize my mantra: environmental health is profoundly local. What is more local than the disinfection of your house, school, day care, bus, subway, and other structures?

As I close, and in recognition that it could be a month or more before you read this column, please practice kindness. Please embrace the localness of your personal and professional life and recognize you are a role model. Please take care yourselves and your families. It took 100 years for the government of New Zealand to fully appreciate and restore the potential of Kapiti. Let us begin the journey of radically rethinking our profession and create a common vision of a restored environmental health enterprise.

Epilogue
Since I drafted the original column, our board of directors has directed me to cancel our Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition in New York City, July 13–16. I acknowledge that many of us were looking forward to the experience of Junior’s Cheesecake, Times Square, and reconnecting with our professional networks in the most important city in the world. Our staff is disappointed as planning, reviewing, and improving the conference is now a year-round endeavor. Our speakers, sponsors, exhibitors, award winners, scholarship recipients, and attendees, young and old, are undoubtedly disappointed, as am I. Our collective emotional investment in the annual meeting is not trivial. Throughout the summer, instead of attending the AEC, the environmental health profession, like Atlas of Greek mythology, will be asked to hoist many burdens upon our shoulders. We will be requested to green-light the reopening of schools and day care...
centers. We will be prodded for guidance on the flushing and cleaning of building plumbing systems. We will be involved in assessments of restaurants and grocery stores. We will weigh into decisions about the safety of swimming pools and beaches. We will mediate society’s return to normalcy. The stress promises to be intense and relentless. The issues will be emotional and compelling.

The time in history that puts us, environmental health professionals, at the intersection of COVID-19 is just ahead of us. I can visualize the bend in the road with the warning sign blinking. This time is the moment for which we were trained. Let’s bring a contemporary interpretation to the art of practice. Let our face be one of kindness and empathy. Let our science drive our community’s recovery and resiliency. Let this moment be where we safely shepherd the frightened public into the future. The road ahead promises to be arduous and the potholes to be abundant. All of us at NEHA commit to bring the full measure of our capabilities and resources to your support. Let’s create a profoundly memorable moment, one that undeniably demonstrates the value of our profession to the health and prosperity of the communities we serve. I can envision no better way to honor the 2020 AEC.

Did You Know?

NEHA has developed the NEHA Coronavirus Environmental Health Community Facebook page. The purpose of the page is to connect environmental and public health professionals and enable them to share and discuss their experiences, best practices, and success stories during the COVID-19 pandemic. We invite you to help build an interactive and informative community by liking the page and posting in the community. Please share and encourage others to participate. Check it out at www.facebook.com/NEHACoronavirusEHCommunity.