

On the occasion of International Mother Earth Day – 22 April 2020

The COVID-19 crisis: how it could help us tackle environmental challenges

by Adrien Geiger, Chief Sustainability Officer at L'OCCITANE Group and Global Head of the L'OCCITANE en Provence brand

The global crisis that we are currently experiencing brings colossal challenges on all fronts. First and foremost, those challenges are about humankind itself. Lives are being lost; heroic work is being done every day by those on the front line; we are separated from and denied physical contact with our loved ones, and especially our older relatives. However, there are political and economic challenges too. This is a crisis unlike any our generation has ever seen before.

In increasing numbers and with gathering impetus, voices are calling for us all to think about how tomorrow's world should look and turn this global tragedy into a chance to 'reboot', with a new, more virtuous focus and without falling back into our pre-crisis habits. We echo those voices. The challenge here is to reinvent ourselves without relying on our usual ways of working, focused as they are on instant results. What we all need is a wide-ranging reassessment of how we live our lives, and this is an opportunity for us to take a much-needed step back. Let us take the time to seize that opportunity wherever possible.

Today, to add my modest contribution to this new collective effort, I would like to share the personal observations that compel me to see this crisis as a **chance to learn how to make our planet healthier – by combating climate change and regenerating biodiversity** – as well as a reminder of the pressing need for businesses to be **responsible and more engaged with society than ever**.

This crisis gives us a clear view of the limits, the outermost borders, of our system: where our weaknesses and shortcomings lie, **but also the strength that we can muster in times of necessity, particularly when the stakes are high**.

Businesses have distinguished themselves by stepping in quickly and efficiently to meet the needs of government authorities – powerful gestures, unprecedented collaboration, overlooking profit margins to sell at cost. This was only possible thanks to the outstanding commitment of the human beings behind those businesses. I take off my hat to the leaders who are currently pouring resources into this effort through their start-ups, their family firms, their companies, their corporate groups, and to all the members of their teams: employees and staff who are bravely stepping forward to manufacture, deliver and lend a hand. This show of solidarity is testament to the power of the **innovation coalitions** that have sprung up, pooling the strengths and efforts of the public and private spheres along with civil society.

In my capacity within the L'OCCITANE Group, I was very grateful to observe how quickly **collaboration within local ecosystems** was set up. I take this opportunity to extend my warmest thanks to our partners, who have helped us to produce large quantities of hand sanitiser. Special thanks go to [Distilleries et Domaines de Provence](#), [HelmD3](#) and its supplier [Geodis](#), who respectively provided tens of thousands of litres of alcohol, made warehouse space available and provided delivery services at our production facility in Manosque. We also relied on [Schutz](#)'s timely assistance; they managed to deliver empty anti-static containers within 24 hours when they realised that we were shipping to hospitals! ([More details about our work to counter the COVID-19 crisis are available here.](#))

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We have also seen the emergence of many **open-source solutions**, which make it possible to accelerate and scale up operations to satisfy high demand quickly; here, we are witnessing the **advent of collective intelligence**. On 11 March, an ‘open source ventilator’ project was launched on Facebook in which hundreds of experts from around the world came together to design efficient, inexpensive and widely accessible emergency ventilators using 3D printing. A number of hackathons have also been set up, stretching across those very borders that have otherwise had to be closed ([the European Commission's effort was launched on 3 April](#)).

A number of citizen-led initiatives have also come about ([Just One Giant Lab](#) being just one example), while start-up accelerators ([in Estonia](#), for example) have brought new ways to support projects that could have a major impact on the crisis – or on the post-crisis world.

This constant innovation – this revolution, even, as Schumpeter might have it – is something that we at L'OCCITANE are proud to foster through projects like [The Plastic Odyssey](#), which is trialling plastic recycling solutions.

Innovation is flourishing in every field, throwing up new solutions to the healthcare crisis and new ways of working, collaborating and staying in touch. As many of us have already seen, social distancing seems ironically to have strengthened human relationships, mainly through the use of digital tools, which we could now unashamedly hail as our ‘saviours’ in these difficult times. We who so frequently saw digital as a risk factor for losing sight of the more important things in life are now using it to draw closer to them than ever. Could it also help us regenerate our ecosystems and our biodiversity, and if so, how? Could it be that the real problem is the lack of boundaries in our lives and our constant dependence on our mobile phones rather than digital itself? I, for one, think it could.

I feel sure that if we channel the potential of digital towards increasing our capacity and productivity, it can really help us to reconnect and find the right solutions for our planet and our societies. Here again, the crisis is a test for us, and though we had no choice in the experiment, let us take the opportunity to reassess our relationship with digital tools. I plan to do so carefully, taking stock of how I am using those tools during the crisis, and will try to learn positive lessons from it.

That said, as pivotal to human relationships as physical contact is, we must also confess that the current lockdown has led us to take a step back and reflect on whether before the crisis we were travelling more than was really appropriate. The instant reduction in air pollution that we have witnessed, due in no small part to the reduction in transport use, must serve as food for thought.

To an extent, many of us are going ‘back to basics’ in our daily lives right now. This often manifests itself in the form of rediscovering our **connection with nature**. For instance, we have come to realise how certain things – things that we in ‘developed’ countries regularly take for granted – are crucial to our lives: access to clean water at a time when our focus is on washing our hands, for example. Or, on a completely different level, the vegetation around us in our urban and rural environments, which forges a vital link between us and the natural world.

There is also a **great desire to reconnect with the earth and express a sense of solidarity**: I am thinking of the calls to help with harvesting, which have received an extraordinary response from a great many members of the public.

Something we knew before the crisis **has only become clearer now: we need to move towards greater resilience in all human activity**, including in the way our economies work.

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This crisis is both a test and an opportunity to learn. **It is leading us down the path of resilience more quickly than we ever thought possible, and it is reminding us of how crucial it is to reconnect with nature and rely more than ever on 'nature-based solutions'. Not only must we respect biodiversity but we must also commit to regenerating it. L'OCCITANE was born of that very idea, and since then it has made it its mission. Today, the L'OCCITANE Group is taking its work one step further by joining the #OP2B coalition ([One Planet Business For Biodiversity](#)),** which aims to develop regenerative agriculture and protect natural ecosystems.

We are living through a difficult chapter in history. I stand convinced that this is a chance to learn, and we must seize it. Let us tackle the emergency together; **let us take time to spot the good that is coming out of it**, and let us think – urgently but not hastily – about the changes that we would do well to maintain once the crisis is over. This is something we will do with our partners and with anyone else who wishes to join that effort, of whom I know there are many.

About the L'OCCITANE Group

The L'OCCITANE Group is an international group that manufactures and retails beauty and well-being products that are rich in natural and organic ingredients. A global leader in the premium beauty market, the Group has more than 3,400 retail outlets, including 1,572 owned stores, and is present in 90 countries. Through its six brands – L'OCCITANE en Provence, Melvita, Erborian, L'OCCITANE au Brésil, LimeLife and ELEMIS – the Group offers new and extraordinary beauty experiences, using high-quality products that respect nature, the environment and the people in it.



L'OCCITANE
EN PROVENCE

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ELEMIS