

Black Death: Was the plague actually good for the environment?

From [1347 to 1351](#), a nightmare disease ravaged Europe, afflicting victims with putrid black boils, fevers, vomiting, and in short order, death. Daily life ground to a halt as the Black Death spread along medieval trade routes, claiming an estimated [20 million lives](#) with ruthless efficiency. Now, a team of researchers is asserting that the plague had an unexpected impact: clearing the air of a toxic pollutant for the first time in over a thousand years.

Lead pollution is typically considered a hallmark of industrial society, but a [growing body of research](#) suggests human activity has been fouling the air with harmful heavy metals for millennia. Results of a new ice core analysis, [published last week](#) in the journal GeoHealth, support the idea that in Western Europe at least, mining and smelting activity has tainted the air with lead for at least 2,000 years. In fact, the only sliver of time during which the scientists' instruments sniffed lead-free air was from 1349 to 1353, when folks were presumably too busy dying in droves to work the mines.

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Reconstructing the past is a messy business, and the debate over how much our ancestors sullied the air—and the extent to which catastrophic events like the Black Death cleared it—is likely to rage on for years. But if one thing's clear, it's that we need to stop thinking of the pre-industrial past as a pollution-free era. Humans have always impacted their environment, and we're just starting to come to terms with the consequences.

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion, and analysis. Read full, original post: [The Black Death May Have Had a Surprising Effect on the Environment](#)