

Earthweek: Diary of a Changing World

Week ending Friday, March 13, 2020

By Steve Newman

Ice-Free Future

The Arctic may become “ice free” in as few as 15 years due to accelerating global heating, according to a team of U.S. scientists.

While areas of the thickest ice that surround islands near the North Pole are likely to survive until later this century, the region will be considered ice-free when the summer coverage is less than 386,000 square miles.

Writing in the journal *Climate*, the researchers say statistical models point to the first ice-free summer arriving during the 2030s, with 2034 the most likely year.

“The extent of Arctic ice is important to Arctic peoples, whose lands are being affected by increased coastal erosion,” NOAA said in a statement. “Conversely, the disappearance of ice creates economic opportunities, including the opening of oil fields and new shipping routes.”

Tropical Cyclone

Tropical Storm 21 formed over the far eastern Indian Ocean, then dissipated before reaching the tip of northwestern Australia.

Climate Dithering

The U.N. head warns that the world is “way off track” in combating the deepening climate crisis and is rapidly running out of time.

Secretary-General António Guterres gave warnings at the release of the U.N.’s grim assessment of the global climate in 2019.

It says last year was marked by record-breaking atmospheric heat and marine heat waves that affected at least 84% of the world’s oceans. There was also unprecedented severe weather.

“Climate change is the defining challenge of our time. We are currently way off track to meeting either the 1.5 degree C or 2 degree targets that the Paris agreement calls for,” said Guterres.

Scientists urged world leaders not to let the current coronavirus crisis distract from the long-term fight against climate change.

Earthquakes

Indonesia’s West Java province was rocked by a sharp temblor that injured at least three people and damaged more than 200 houses. The Kalapanunggal district was the most affected region, where 48 houses were destroyed or severely damaged.

• Earth movements were also felt in central Tibet, northwestern Italy, Portugal’s Madeira Islands, southwestern Iceland, Montreal, eastern New York and parts of New England, Costa Rica, the Baja California-U.S. border region and the Sierra Nevada mountains and foothills of Northern California.

Towering Loss

The world’s last female white giraffe and one of its calves have been killed by armed poachers in Kenya, leaving only one of the slain female’s white offspring still alive.

The mother was first spotted in eastern Kenya’s Ishaqbini Hirola Community Conservancy in 2017.

Their alabaster coats were caused by leucism, which is different from albinism, as dark pigments continue to grow in the animals’ soft tissues, giving them dark eyes.



This photo of the rare white giraffe female and one of its calves was taken in May 2017. Credit: Ishaqbini Hirola Community Conservancy

Wild Food Ban

Chinese officials are debating a proposed bill that would outlaw all trade and consumption of wild animals—practices blamed for the current coronavirus crisis as well as earlier outbreaks.

There was no word from the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress on when the proposed bans could take effect.

But the move is likely to face strong opposition from a population that has become accustomed to eating exotic animals and using them for traditional therapies not verified by science.

A similar ban was imposed after an animal-to-human pathogen led to the deadly SARS outbreak in 2002-03. But international observers say the wildlife trade was soon booming again.

Javan Lava

Indonesia’s Mount Semeru volcano showed renewed signs of life in East Java with flows of lava that streamed as far as 3,000 feet down its slopes.

