

Earthweek: Diary of a Changing World

Week ending Friday, June 12, 2020

By Steve Newman

Greenhouse Rises

The level of atmospheric carbon dioxide reached a new record high last month even as lockdowns and economic slowdowns during the coronavirus pandemic caused a sharp decline in greenhouse gas emissions.

Researchers at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography say they measured a monthly average high of 417 parts per million (ppm) during May at Hawaii's Mauna Loa Observatory, up from 414.8 ppm a year earlier.

While global emissions dropped by 17% in April, Scripps scientists say much larger drops of 20% to 30% would be needed for an entire year to slow the growth of CO2 concentrations in the atmosphere.

Record Cyclone

Tropical Storm Cristobal battered the Gulf Coast as it made landfall near New Orleans. Remnants of the storm brought heavy rain and squalls to a long stretch of the Mississippi Valley, northward to Ontario. That made it the westernmost-tracking tropical cyclone on record in North America.

Andean Eruption

A sudden burst of activity at Ecuador's active Sangay volcano spewed a column of ash high above the Andes that later rained down on several towns.

Sangay is near a remote region of the Amazon basin and is one of the country's most active volcanos.

It has remained active since its first recorded eruption was noted by Spanish explorers in 1628.

Earthquakes

Late reports from Indonesia's North Maluku province say a strong June 4 temblor damaged hundreds of homes.

• Earth movements were also felt in Papua New Guinea's New Britain Island, Fiji, eastern Taiwan, southeastern Kazakhstan, India's Jammu and Kashmir territory and southeastern Turkey.

COVID Sniffers

French researchers say Belgian Malinois shepherd dogs can sniff out humans exposed to the COVID-19 coronavirus from the distinct odor in armpits resulting from the infection.

Using dogs trained to work in search and rescue missions, detecting explosives or sniffing out colon cancer, scientists from the National Veterinary School of Alfort say that four of the dogs had a 100% success rate in detecting the virus among 360 human subjects.

Another four of the canines had an accuracy rate of between 83% and 94%.

More dogs are now being trained as COVID sniffers.

Pink Power

Bright pink flamingos have been found to be more forceful than their paler rivals when it comes to fighting for food, bucking the human conception that the color pink represents more gentle characteristics.

Researchers from Britain's University of Exeter and colleagues say that a flush of color derived from the algae Africa's lesser flamingos filter from the water is a sign that they are ready to breed. This seems to cause the pinkest birds, both male and female, to push others around.

"A healthy flamingo that is an efficient feeder — demonstrated by its colorful feathers — will have more time and energy to be aggressive and dominant when feeding," said researcher Paul Rose.



Africa's pinkest lesser flamingos seem to act more aggressively. Photo: File

Warmest May

Last month was the warmest May on record worldwide, with temperatures soaring to 18 degrees F above normal in Siberia.

The European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service calculated that the average global temperature was 1.13 degrees F above the 1981-2010 average.

The service says the unusual warmth that began during January persisted.

This ongoing warmth is of particular concern in Siberia and Alaska, where unprecedented firestorms blackened large swaths of permafrost landscape during last summer's extreme warmth.

Antarctic Buffer

New Zealand announced that it will help keep Antarctica coronavirus-free by temporarily cutting many of its scientific projects there.

Only essential operations and planned maintenance will be allowed during the Antarctic summer season.

The government says the number of projects on the frozen continent will be slashed from 36 to 13 between October and March.

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