

Earthweek: Diary of a Changing World

Week ending Friday, July 24, 2020

By Steve Newman

Polar Peril

Climate change is likely to wipe out polar bears across the Arctic unless efforts to curb global heating are not accelerated soon, wildlife biologists warn.

Writing in the journal *Nature Climate Change*, researchers say dwindling sea ice is removing the surface bears use to hunt seals.

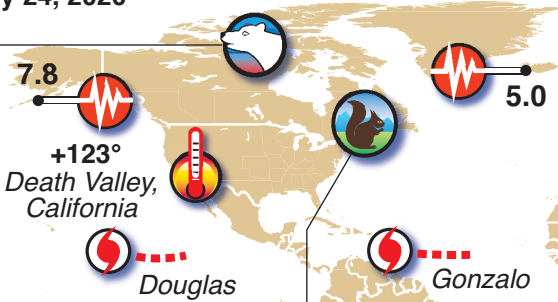
“Polar bears are already sitting at the top of the world. If the ice goes, they have no place to go,” Peter Molnar of the University of Toronto told BBC News.

Experts warn that cubs will be the first to go because their mothers won’t have enough body fat to produce milk to feed them through the ice-free summer season.

Earthquakes

Coastal residents across southern Alaska scrambled for higher ground after a magnitude 7.8 offshore temblor triggered a brief tsunami alert.

• Tremors were also felt in southwestern Iceland, the northern Netherlands, the Italy-Slovenia border area, western India and eastern Papua New Guinea.



Chipmunk Antics

A bumper crop of acorns last fall in New England has led to a population explosion of chipmunks, which are pestering homeowners and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

With plenty of food to fuel their high jinks after emerging this spring, the rodents have been digging up people’s gardens and tunneling beneath lawns. But some say they can also be entertaining.

“They’re cute. They’re fun to watch in the forest as they duck in and out of the holes and play peekaboo,” small mammal biologist Shevenell Webb, with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, told The Associated Press.

The plentiful acorns also fueled a population boom of squirrels, rabbits and various types of mice in the region.

Italian Eruption

A volcano on the southern Italian island of Stromboli erupted with lava bombs that spewed violently from its crater.

The loud eruption occurred for about five minutes in the middle of the night, but did not threaten any island residents other than causing them to lose some sleep.

A sudden eruption on Stromboli last July killed one hiker and forced some of the island’s residents to rush into the Mediterranean Sea in fear of their lives.

Dist. by: Andrews McMeel Syndication
©MMXX Earth Environment Service

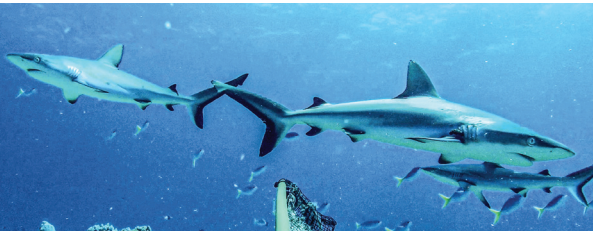
Shark ‘Extinction’

New research reveals that sharks are disappearing at an alarming rate in a trend that is upsetting the ecological balance across many marine ecosystems.

Writing in the journal *Nature*, scientists say that habitat destruction and overfishing have caused shark numbers to crash in many of the world’s coral reefs.

Underwater cameras used in the study revealed that one in five of the 371 reefs studied during a four-year period had shark numbers so low that the species there could be considered “functionally extinct.”

This is causing further stress on reefs that are also under threat from global heating and the ocean acidification brought on by a changing climate.



Reef sharks, which play a critical role in keeping the balance of species of marine habitats in check, are vanishing. Photo: Global FinPrint study.

Heat Hazard

Global heating has already created such intense heat in some areas of the world that workers are being exposed to conditions that could threaten their lives, especially among those now battling the pandemic.

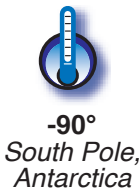
From the medics caring for patients outdoors in the necessary but sweltering layers of personal protective equipment to farm workers and those laboring in steel mills, nearly every year brings conditions closer to the point they and others cannot cope, experts warn.

“If this happens day-in, day-out, people become dehydrated, there are cardiovascular issues, kidney stones, heat exhaustion,” said researcher Vidhya Venugopal of the Global Heat Health Information Network.

Tropical Cyclones

Tropical Storm Gonzalo formed over the central Atlantic Ocean and was expected to pass over the Windward Islands and into the Caribbean after becoming the season’s first Atlantic hurricane.

• Hurricane Douglas gained strength between Mexico and Hawaii.



-90°
South Pole, Antarctica