



2020 Year in Review

Ice Losses

Sea ice surrounding the North Pole was at a record low extent for October due to unusually warm Arctic Ocean temperatures. Danish researchers say the ice was slow to re-form following the summer's melt, and coverage was at the lowest of the past 40 years of satellite data.

Earthquakes

Despite all of the misery suffered around the world from COVID-19 and various natural disasters, the magnitude of deaths and damage from earthquakes was at the lowest level in memory during 2020.

- The most deadly temblor killed 118 people around the Turkish city of Izmir on Oct. 30, where many buildings collapsed.
- At least 41 people died when a massive quake struck southeastern Elâzığ province on Jan. 24.

- Ten people perished on Feb. 23 when a sharp temblor struck the Iran-Turkey border region.
- Ten people were found dead in the rubble of a magnitude 7.4 quake in Mexico's Oaxaca state on June 23.

Avian Tragedy

Scientists believe that the untold thousands of migratory birds that fell from the sky dead or dying across parts of the southwestern U.S. in September were probably victims of smoke from the West's catastrophic firestorms. The songbirds could have either choked in the massive pall of toxic smoke and gas or used up their fat reserves trying to fly around it.

Greenhouse Earth

Scientists predict that Earth's atmosphere will soon contain the same high level of carbon dioxide that existed at the peak of the Pliocene Epoch warmth 3 million years ago. That's when temperatures were 5 to 7 degrees Fahrenheit warmer and sea levels were 65 feet higher.

Magnetic Mystery

Scientists are struggling to understand a new weakening of Earth's magnetic field in a region that stretches from South America to Africa and is causing technical problems in some of the satellites orbiting the planet. The anomaly is allowing the inner Van Allen radiation belt to dip to an altitude of about 120 miles, sometimes exposing satellites to several minutes of higher-than-normal radiation. Astronauts have reported disturbances in their eyesight, known as cosmic ray visual phenomena, when passing through it.

Light Pollution

Humanity's pervasive use of artificial light is causing widespread impacts on the world's animals and plants, and researchers say it should be limited where possible. Scientists at Britain's University of Exeter say their studies reveal light pollution causes changes to animal behavior and physiology, especially hormone levels and patterns of waking, sleeping and activity.

Global Quieting

The plunge in human activities due to the pandemic brought the longest and most pronounced quiet period of seismic noise in history.

The relative quiet has allowed scientists to detect previously hidden earthquake signals.

Massive Hole

The ozone hole in the stratosphere above Antarctica reached its annual peak on Oct. 1, which scientists say was the largest and deepest in 15 years. This was in contrast to an unusually small and short-lived ozone hole in 2019, caused by unusual weather conditions.

Tropical Cyclones

The 2020 Atlantic hurricane season ended with a record-breaking 30 named storms and the second-highest number of hurricanes ever observed. One feature of this year's cyclones is that many of the same areas were hit by them again and again. This was especially true in the central U.S. Gulf Coast, the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan and the Korean Peninsula.

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