

Earthweek: Diary of a Changing World

Written by By Steve Newman
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Week ending Friday, December 25, 2020

Walled Nature

The accelerated construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall over the past year has disrupted animal movements, caused mountains to be dynamited and toppled century-old saguaro cactus. “Interconnected landscapes that stretch across two countries are being converted into industrial wastelands,” Randy Serraglio of the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson told The Associated Press. Field cameras at southeastern Arizona’s San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge have recently captured 90% fewer movements of animals like mountain lions, bobcats and javelinas. “This wall is the largest impediment to wildlife movement we’ve ever seen in this part of the world,” said Myles Traphagen of the Wildlands Network.

Earthquakes

Much of northeastern Japan was jolted by a magnitude 6.5 temblor.

- Earth movements were also felt along the Iran-Turkey border, and in Sicily and far western Colorado.

Recalculated Heat

The world may have less time than expected to curb carbon emissions and avert a life-threatening climate catastrophe after it was discovered that manmade greenhouse gases may have already warmed the planet by 18% more than predicted. "Climate change hasn't suddenly got[ten] worse. It's just our estimate of how much warming has improved," says Tim Osborn of Britain's University of East Anglia. The findings come as 2020 appears to be vying with 2019 as the second-warmest year on record. The British Met Office predicts 2021 is still likely to at least be among the six warmest years on record, chilled a bit by the ongoing moderate La Niña ocean-cooling in the Pacific.

Antarctic Rumble

Scientists working in Antarctica say they have recorded more than 30,000 tremors just off the Antarctic Peninsula since August. The University of Chile's Seismological Center says the strongest registered a magnitude of 6 in an area where tectonic plates and microplates meet between the South Shetland Islands and the peninsula. This has caused the islands to separate from Antarctica about 6 inches per year, almost twice the average rate.

Bird Blackout

A New Zealand South Island village has switched off all of its streetlights in an attempt to stop young birds from crash-landing on roadways. Wildlife experts say the Westland petrel fledglings are possibly mistaking the streetlights of Punakaiki for the bioluminescent fish they typically eat. The town hosts about 6,000 breeding pairs of the rare birds each March, which is celebrated with a festival. But the introduction of blue-white LED lights last year has some local bird watchers believing that it's confusing the seabirds even more than usual, causing them to crash onto roads and sometimes be struck by cars.

Tropical Cyclones

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Late reports from Fiji say that Super Cyclone Yasa killed two people as it flattened entire villages on the South Pacific country's second-largest island of Vanua Levu on Dec. 18. Yasa was the third Category-5 cyclone to hit Fiji since 2016. Cyclone Winston killed 44 people that year and destroyed tens of thousands of homes.

- Minimal Tropical Storm Krovanh formed briefly near the Spratly Islands of the South China Sea.

Hawaiian Eruption

Plumes of ash and gases soared above Kilauea volcano on Hawaii's Big Island as fountains of lava illuminated the night sky around the summit caldera. Residents in the area were warned to stay indoors and avoid exposure to falling ash. A magnitude 4.4 tremor shook the south flank of the volcano about an hour after the eruption began. Kilauea last erupted in 2018, destroying more than 700 homes while spewing massive amounts of lava.

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