

Earthweek: Diary of a Changing World

Week ending Friday, June 18, 2021

By Steve Newman

On Thinning Ice

The sea ice surrounding the North Pole is probably thinning up to twice as fast as previously thought, according to research by University College London.

Writing in the journal *The Cryosphere*, scientists say earlier estimates on the depth of the ice cap were based on data collected by the Soviets between 1954 and 1991, which are now outdated.

They say their new modeling of temperature, snowfall and ice floe movements provides a better understanding of how fast the Arctic sea ice is actually disappearing.

“Sea ice thickness is a sensitive indicator of the health of the Arctic. And when the Arctic warms, the world warms,” said lead researcher Robbie Mallett.

Earthquakes

A strong under-sea tremor jolted Indonesia’s Seram Island.

• Earth movements were also felt in the far southern Philippines, Taiwan, southern Yemen, southern Israel and Jordan, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and around California’s Salton Sea.

Sargassum Belt

Beaches in Florida, the Caribbean and tropical Atlantic are being overwhelmed by masses of sargassum, a seaweed now growing explosively because of fertilizer runoff.

While the seaweed is key to the marine environment, excessive nitrogen and phosphorus in coastal waters from the fertilizers have caused the proliferation.

This poses a health risk as rotting sargassum creates toxic hydrogen sulfide gas that can be dangerous for people with asthma and other respiratory problems.

Florida Atlantic University professor Brian Lapointe says levels of fecal bacteria can also be high around the decaying blooms.

He adds that runoff from the Mississippi River and others from the Amazon to the Congo are responsible for the new great “Atlantic Sargassum Belt.”

Warming Bites

Global heating may soon mean that mosquitoes will become active all year round in places where they normally disappear during winter.

Researchers from the University of Florida compared how different types of mosquitoes respond to changes in temperatures. They found that the mosquitoes’ ability to tolerate swings in temperature changes through the seasons.

“That tells us that as climate change makes our autumns and winters warmer, mosquitoes in more temperate regions are well prepared to be active during those times,” said lead researcher Brett Scheffers.

Wind Power Resistance

The expansion of wind farms to generate power could reach a point of diminishing returns if too many are placed near each other, new research finds.

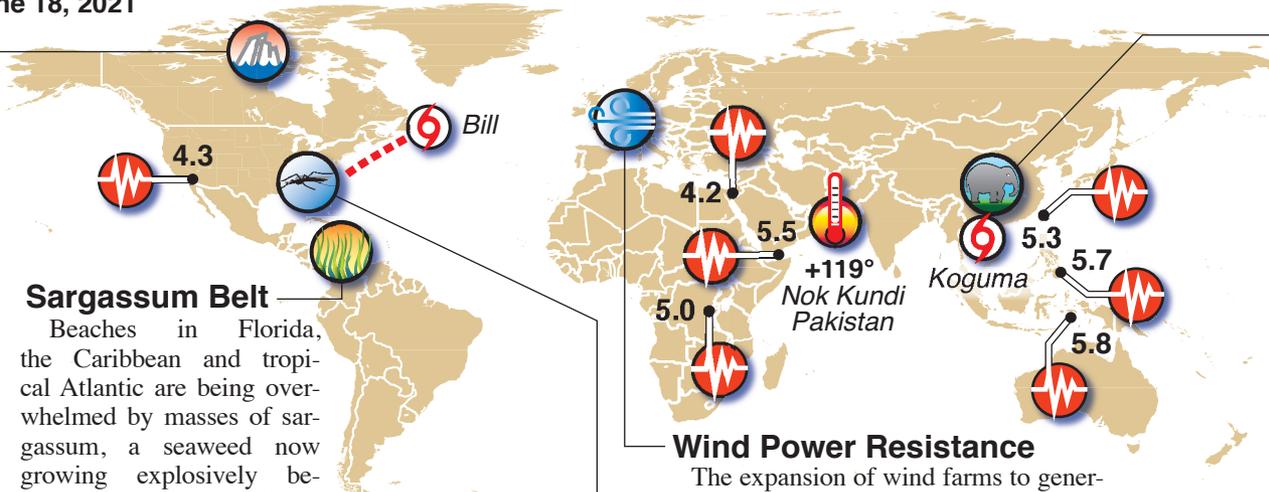
This is a real threat for coastal areas of Northern Europe, where limited space is seeing the turbines being built in clusters.

Writing in the journal *Scientific Reports*, researchers say wind speeds up to 60 miles downwind of the farms are significantly slowed down by them under some weather conditions.

This means output from neighboring wind farms could be reduced up to 25% if they are placed too close together.



China’s now world-famous traveling elephants take a brief rest. Photo: CCTV



Dawdling Dumbo

A herd of wayward elephants that has mysteriously trekked about 300 miles across southern China this spring took a break to rest and to wait for an errant youngster to catch up.

State broadcaster CCTV reports that despite repeated calls from the impatient adults, the 10-year-old doesn’t appear to be in any hurry to reunite with the main group.

Before the pachyderms’ respite, hundreds of trucks were dispatched to keep the 15 ambling migrants out of populated areas.

Officials say they are planning to use food bait and roadblocks to help guide the herd to a new suitable habitat once it is moving again.

Tropical Cyclones

Much of northern Vietnam’s Thanh Hoa province was drenched when minimal Tropical Storm Koguma made landfall from the Gulf of Tonkin.

• Tropical Storm Bill formed off the U.S. Eastern Seaboard, then later skirted Newfoundland.

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