

Deadly price of a hotter Earth

From the arctic to Africa, the hellish carnage of a changing planet is undeniable



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I hiked once in Death Valley. It was in July, many years ago. My wife and I went up into a canyon, a half-mile or so. We did it for the experience; we'd never encountered that kind of heat before.

It topped out at 120 degrees, and it was a physical force. We felt like we were walking against it, trying to push our way through it. We didn't really sweat. We just had trouble breathing.

We got back to the trailhead perversely savoring what we thought was a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

That perspective of uniqueness was shattered by the last few weeks.

Death Valley — where temps are measured at aptly named Furnace Creek, 190 feet below sea level — just broke the U.S. record for hottest month ever, with an average temperature for July of 108.1 degrees. It hit at least 120 degrees on 21 days, reached 127 four days in a row, and on 10 days never fell below 100.

It wasn't blazingly hot only in the California desert. Dozens of places in the United States, from Maine to Nevada, broke records. Dozens of people died from heat-related causes in Quebec.

Temperatures topped 90 degrees in the Arctic Circle. Wildfires ravaged northern Scandinavia and Siberia; the smoke, and its attendant air pollution, traveled more than 5,000 miles and colored sunsets red in Canada and America.

Heat records were set in Armenia, France and Britain, where roads and roofs buckled. Algeria (124.3 degrees) probably broke the all-time high for Africa. Oman recorded the hottest low daily temperature in history when the mercury never dropped below 109.

In Japan, 23,000 people were hospitalized in one week in July from triple-digit temperatures; since May, more than 80 people

have died of heatstroke. One victim was a 6-year-old boy on a school outing to hunt insects.

Korea — both South and North — also shattered records in July, with at least 29 people in the South dying from heatstroke. More than 3 million livestock in South Korea died, and North Korea's secretive government said that stemming further damage to rice, corn and other crops is "extremely important and urgent."

As July passed into August, a report from MIT scientists found that intensifying heat waves in China's breadbasket — fertile farmland known as the North China Plain — likely will "limit habitability" later this century in the region of 400 million people. A report last year from the same team came to a similar conclusion about heat in South Asia — which includes India and Pakistan and about 20 percent of the world's population.

July's heat also fueled ferocious wildfires, from the arctic to Greece, where more than 80 people perished, to the American West, where it feels like the entire state of California has been in flames for several years.

The state is caught in a vicious cycle, with heat playing a major role. Relief from droughts comes with winter snows. Snowmelt and spring rains promote the growth of grass and brush. Then earlier and hotter summer temps dry out the vegetation, turning it into rocket fuel for turbocharged fires (which also has happened in the Midwest and Southeast). In the hugely destructive Carr fire in Northern California, scientists say, extreme heat and dry brush helped create on July 26 a devastating fire tornado as much as 500 yards wide and 38,000 feet tall, with winds exceeding 143 mph.

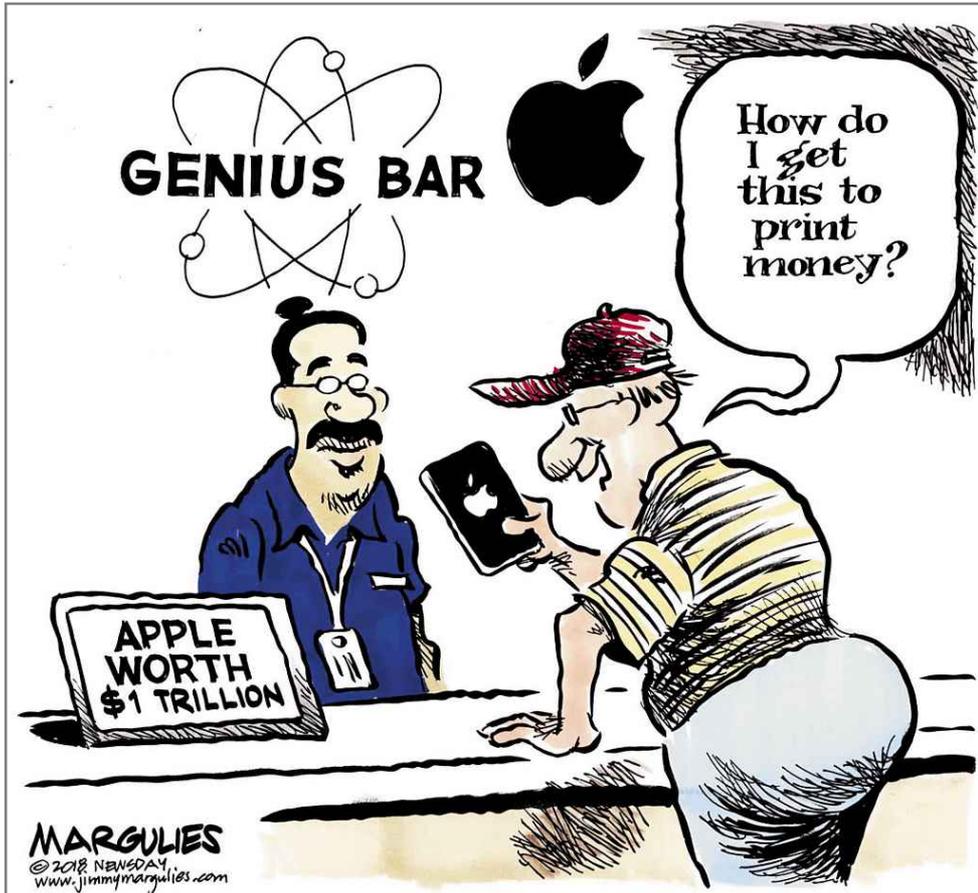
The heat also brings more ticks and mosquitoes move north, carrying more diseases. Lobsters and fish that used to be here are fleeing farther north as the heat warms their waters, hurting local fisheries.

That's what's happening. What you do with the information is up to you. You can respond to it and work to help make a change.

Or you can ignore it, and hope that it doesn't continue.

The heat is on. Your call.

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday's editorial board.



NEWSDAY/JIMMY MARGULIES

■ Matt Davies is off. See his cartoons at newsday.com/matt

BOTTOM LINES

A deeply humane friend recently suggested that medics stop saving people on their third opioid overdose. The subject was naloxone, a medication that can yank users from the jaws of death. It can be given via Narcan nasal spray or injection. My friend surprised me. I thought that if a life could be so easily and cheaply salvaged (a Narcan kit costs about \$40), why not do it?

— FROMA HARROP, CREATORS SYNDICATE

The anti-straw movement exploded in 2015 with a disturbing video made by a Texas A&M scientist of a marine biologist extracting a crusty plastic straw from the nostril of a live sea turtle . . . I'm all for avoiding plastic straws. They're one of thousands of products we overuse or just don't need. But can we really save the planet by banning one product at a time like this?

— TRAMMELL S. CROW, THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS

President Donald Trump's solicitous posture toward Russian President Vladimir Putin, in Helsinki and elsewhere, is helping to keep alive interest in his income tax returns: Does he have some hidden financial connection to the Kremlin? Unlike his waffling on policy positions and factual matters, he has consistently refused to release his returns, contrary to the practice of every president since Jimmy Carter. Still, this is a poorly understood area of the law.

— GEORGE K. YIN, THE WASHINGTON POST

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