



This November 2014 photo provided by the Wildlife Trust of India shows a leopard caught in a trap in a forest in Karnataka, India. Authorities in India are concerned a 2020 spike in poaching not only could kill more endangered tigers and leopards but also species these carnivores depend upon to survive. (AP)

Illegal hunting fueled by food shortages

COVID lockdowns increase poaching in Asia, Africa

NEW DELHI, June 22, (AP) — A camera trap photo of an injured tiger and a forensic examination of its carcass revealed why the creature died: a poacher's wire snare punctured its windpipe and sapped its strength as the wound festered for days.

Snares like this one set in southern India's dense forest have become increasingly common amid the coronavirus pandemic, as people left jobless turn to wildlife to make money and feed their families.

Authorities in India are concerned this spike in poaching not only could kill more endangered tigers and leopards but also species these carnivores depend upon to survive.

"It is risky to poach, but if pushed to the brink, some could think that these are risks worth taking," said Mayukh Chatterjee, a wildlife biologist with the non-profit Wildlife Trust of India.

Since the country announced its lockdown, at least four tigers and six leopards have been killed by poachers, Wildlife Protection Society of India said. But there also were numerous other poaching casualties — gazelles in grasslands, foot-long giant squirrels in forests, wild boars and birds such as peacocks and purple morhens.

In many parts of the developing world, coronavirus lockdowns have sparked concern about increased illegal hunting that's fueled by food shortages and a decline in law enforcement in some wildlife protection areas. At the same time, border closures and travel restrictions slowed illegal trade in certain high-value species.

One of the biggest disruptions involves the endangered pangolin. Often caught in parts of Africa and Asia, the anteater-like animals are smuggled mostly to China and Southeast Asia, where their meat is considered a delicacy and scales are used in traditional medicine.

In April, the Wildlife Justice Commission reported traders were stockpiling pangolin scales in several Southeast Asia countries awaiting an end to the pandemic.

Rhino horn is being stockpiled in Mozambique, the report said, and ivory traders in Southeast Asia are struggling to sell the stockpiles amassed since China's 2017 ban on trade in ivory products. The pandemic compounded their plight because many Chinese customers were unable to travel to ivory markets in Cambodia, Laos and other countries.

"They are desperate to get it off their hands. Nobody wants to be stuck with that product," said Sarah Stoner, director of intelligence for the commission.

The illegal trade in pangolins continued "unabated" within Africa but international trade has been disrupted by port closures, said Ray Jansen, chairman of the African Pangolin Working Group.

"We have witnessed some trade via air while major ship routes are still closed but we expect a flood of trade once shipping avenues reopen again," Jansen said.

Fears that organized poaching in Africa would spike largely have not materialized — partly because ranger patrols have continued in many national parks and reserves.

Emma Stokes, director of the

Central Africa Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society, said patrolling national parks in several African countries has been designated essential work.

But she has heard about increased hunting of animals outside parks. "We are expecting to see an increase in bushmeat hunting for food — duikers, antelopes and monkeys," she said.

Jansen also said bushmeat poaching was soaring, especially in parts of southern Africa. "Rural people are struggling to feed themselves and their families," he said.

There are also signs of increased poaching in parts of Asia.

A greater one-horned rhino was gunned down May 9 in India's Kaziranga National Park — the first case in over a year. Three people, suspected to be a part of an international poaching ring, were arrested on June 1 with automatic rifles and ammunition, said Uttam Saikia, a wildlife warden.

As in other parts of the world, poachers in Kaziranga pay poor families paltry sums of money to help them. With families losing work from the lockdown, "they will definitely take advantage of this," warned Saikia.

In neighboring Nepal, where the virus has ravaged important income from migrants and tourists, the first month of lockdown saw more forest-related crimes, including poaching and illegal logging, than the previous 11 months, according to a review by the government and World Wildlife Fund or WWF.

For many migrants returning to villages after losing jobs, forests were the "easiest source" of sustenance, said Shiv Raj Bhatta, director of programs at WWF Nepal.

In Southeast Asia, the Wildlife Conservation Society documented in April the poisoning in Cambodia of three critically endangered giant ibises for the wading bird's meat. More than 100 painted stork chicks were also poached in late March in Cambodia at the largest waterbird colony in Southeast Asia.

"Suddenly rural people have little to turn to but natural resources and we're already seeing a spike in poaching," said Colin Poole, the group's regional director for the Greater Mekong.

Heartened by closure of wildlife markets in China over concerns about a possible link between the trade and the coronavirus, several conservation groups are calling for governments to put measures in place to avoid future pandemics. Among them is a global ban on commercial sale of wild birds and mammals destined for the dinner table.

Others say an international treaty, known as CITES, which regulates the trade in endangered plants and animals, should be expanded to incorporate public health concerns. They point out that some commonly traded species, such as horseshoe bats, often carry viruses but are currently not subject to trade restrictions under CITES.

"That is a big gap in the framework," said John Scanlon, former Secretary-General of CITES now with African Parks. "We may find that there may be certain animals that should be listed and not be traded or traded under strict conditions and certain markets that ought to be closed."

Temperature soars

Arctic town hits 100F

MOSCOW, June 22, (AP) — A Siberian town with the world's widest temperature range has recorded a new high amid a heat wave that is contributing to severe forest fires.

The temperature in Verkhoyansk hit 38 degrees Celsius (100.4 F) on Saturday, according to Pogoda i Klimat, a website that compiles Russian meteorological data.

The town is located above the Arctic Circle in the Sakha Republic, about 4,660 kms (2,900 miles) northeast of Moscow.

The town of about 1,300 residents is recognized by the Guinness World Records for the most extreme temperature range, with a low of minus-68 degrees C (minus-90 F) and a previous high of 37.2 C (98.96 F.)



In this Feb 15, 2019 file photo, a pangolin looks for food on a private property in Johannesburg, South Africa. Often caught in parts of Africa and Asia, the anteater-like animals are smuggled mostly to China and Southeast Asia, where their meat is considered a delicacy and scales are used in traditional medicine. (AP)

What happens when students disappear?

Small college town worries over future

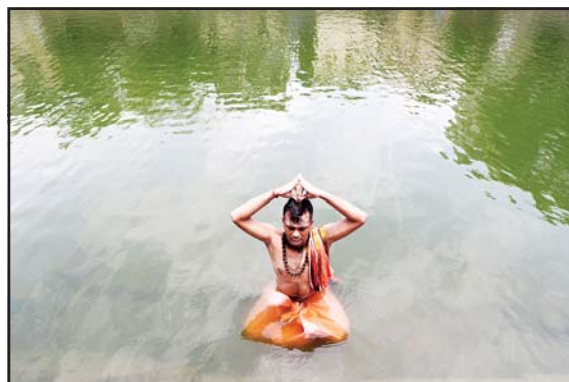
Hurricanes ... like Baseball

ORLANDO, Florida, June 22, (AP) — Even though the six-month Atlantic hurricane season lasts as long as a typical Major League Baseball season, a Florida congresswoman thinks it needs to be longer.

Democratic US Rep Stephanie Murphy on Wednesday sent a letter to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration requesting that the start of the official hurricane season be in mid-May. The current season goes from June through November, but Murphy said there has been at least one named storm before June 1 in each of the past six years.

In 2020, three tropical storms — Arthur, Bertha and Cristobal — formed in mid-May and the beginning of June, she said.

"This presents a practical problem, because government officials and residents in hurricane-prone states use this season to inform their funding choices, public awareness campaigns, and preparation decisions," Murphy said in the letter. "Accordingly, an official season that does not accurately predict major storm activity could result in readiness being compromised and people and property being harmed."



A Hindu devotee sits in a pond and performs rituals during solar eclipse at Banganga in Mumbai, India on June 21. (AP)

Eclipse wows stargazers

Stargazers in Africa, Asia and parts of the Middle East looked to the skies Sunday to witness a partial solar eclipse. It was known as a "ring of fire" because the moon covered most, but not all, of the sun. It occurred during the daytime hours Sunday in areas that saw the spectacle, lasting from 11:45 pm EDT Saturday and until 5:34 am EDT Sunday.

Millions from Dubai to Taiwan to Japan to India watched the solar spectacle.

In Dubai, people could see over 85 percent of the sun covered by the moon, with photographers taking stunning photos of the eclipse over the Burj Khalifa building. It was a sight that will not be possible in the country for another 14 years, according to Chief Executive Officer of Dubai Astronomy Group Hasan al-Hariri.

Al-Hariri said while the coronavirus pandemic had halted their plans for a gathering to see the rare phenomena, the group has turned to the internet to help people observe the partial eclipse, providing a live feed of the moon as it passes between the earth and the sun. (AP)

NOAA 'bent' in Dorian dispute

ALABAMA, June 22, (AP) — National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration leaders violated the agency's scientific integrity when they chastised a local weather office that had contradicted President Trump's inaccurate comments about Hurricane Dorian, an outside panel found.

NOAA's acting chief, Neil Jacobs, and its then-communications director, Julie Kay Roberts, twice breached the agency's rules designed to protect scientists and their work from political interference, the National Academy of Public Administration concluded. Jacobs and Roberts released a statement that "did not follow NOAA's normal process and appear to be the result of strong external pressure," the group wrote in the 144-page report released late Monday.

NOAA's science department had asked the public administration group to look into several complaints, including from its chief scientist and past administrator, after Hurricane Dorian threatened the East Coast in September.

As the storm approached the US, Trump tweeted that Alabama, along with the Carolinas and Georgia "will most likely be hit (much) harder than anticipated," even though the National Hurricane Center had pretty much said Dorian would not hit Alabama. He later defended his statements with a crude Sharpie-drawn addition to a forecast map.

Twenty minutes after Trump's tweet, meteorologists in the National Weather Service's Birmingham office tweeted "Alabama will NOT see any impacts" from the storm.

After a phone call to Jacobs from his boss, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, and other conversations with Commerce Department political appointees, NOAA put out the statement chastising the Birmingham weather office tweet. The statement said the Alabama office "spoke in absolute terms that were inconsistent with probabilities from the best forecast products available at the time."

Dorian made landfall in North Carolina and had no major impact on Alabama, which is about 600 miles away.

The outside report said the violations of scientific policy were, first, issuing the statement without talking to the Birmingham meteorologists and, second, issuing it after political pressure.

No one was disciplined, and Jacobs and Roberts disputed the findings. Roberts left NOAA for another high-ranking job in the Department of Commerce.

In a response letter, NOAA's acting chief scientist, Craig McLean, criticized the lack of discipline against the two.

"While there may be found causes of sympathy for the oppressed and meek subordinates of domineering autocratic ogres, I hardly can find sympathy in this scintilla of an argument for clemency," McLean wrote in a response letter.

WASHINGTON, June 22, (AP) — What happens to a college town when the students disappear? Ithaca, a small upstate New York city nearby gorges and vineyards, is finding out.

Most of the 24,000 students at Cornell University and 6,200 more from Ithaca College effectively vanished in March when the coronavirus pandemic struck, leaving behind struggling restaurants and shops. Locals still reeling from the outbreak and resulting exodus are wondering when — or if — things will get back to normal.

"It's going to be hard. I mean, normally we have about seven months that the colleges are here," said Gregar Brous, who runs the local Colleegetown Bagels shops, other restaurants and a catering operation. He has brought back just over 100 of the 330 employees he laid off, but the long-term fate of college-dependent businesses remain cloudy.

"One of the biggest challenges right now is so many unknowns," Brous said.

Ithaca College intends to bring students back this fall, but weeks later than normal on Oct 5. Cornell — the Ivy League school that dominates this city of 31,000 — is offering its summer courses online and expected to release its plans for the fall semester soon.

Even if Cornell opts for a return to in-class instruction as locals expect, they're concerned about returning students holing up on campus more, or an autumn surge in COVID-19 cases sparking another sudden exit. Ithaca Mayor Svante Myrick said possible international travel restrictions could affect Cornell, where almost a quarter of the students come from other countries.

"If people don't feel comfortable sending their children across the country or across the world back to our campuses, then we'll start to shed jobs," said Myrick.

Cornell students spend an estimated \$225 million annually, helping fuel a healthy retail economy highlighted by blocks of funky shops and restaurants on the Ithaca Commons, a pedestrian strip downhill from the sprawling Cornell campus.

"If you're a line cook or a server in Ithaca before the pandemic ... it was so easy to get a job. You couldn't avoid it, they were everywhere," said Matt Stupak, a laid-off line cook now working a part-time delivery job with partial unemployment.

David Foote was laid off from his job at Ithaca's Planned Parenthood the same day his wife found out her hours at a not-for-profit were being reduced. The couple had savings and deferred expenses. But even with his wife back to full-time hours recently, he's still looking for work and waiting on unemployment benefits. "At this point, things are starting to look a little stretched so I'm hoping that things start to shape up," he said, "but also recognizing there's still a lot of dangers in a lot of people being in the same place or not taking the proper precautions."

Ithaca is still doing well, relatively. The regional April unemployment rate zoomed up to 10 percent, but was the lowest for metropolitan areas in the state. With more than 10,000 workers, Cornell is the county's largest employer and has yet to announce job cuts. The university has even taken steps to help locally, such as contributing \$100,000 to a fund supporting businesses hurt by the pandemic.

Still, area hotels, restaurants and shops are recovering from a big hit. The number of leisure and hospitality jobs alone in surrounding Tompkins County was down by 2,000 from March to May, according to preliminary federal data.

Cities all over bled jobs this year, but the effects were more concentrated in some smaller college towns, where businesses depend heavily on students.

"Our entire economy left," said Gabrielle Gould, executive director of Amherst Business Improvement District.

The quaint Massachusetts college town had to deal with the sudden loss of some 35,000 students from UMass Amherst and four other colleges in the area. By May, Amherst had a 32.6 percent unemployment rate, tied for second highest in the state, according to an analysis provided by the Pioneer Institute.