

News Round-up

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Coastal damage

No point in boasting of a long coastline if it is getting incrementally degraded year after year. That's what **Indonesia** is discovering.

Though it has the world's second longest coastline, coastal areas are being rapidly degraded.

Environmental activists in Indonesia are calling on the government and the

public to halt the degradation of marine resources in order to prevent the kinds of disasters that have already caused suffering for millions of people.

Riza Damanik, campaign manager for marine and coastal areas at Walhi, the Indonesian Forum for the Environment, said the rapid damage to coastal areas has left 750 villages along some 81,000 sq km of the country's coastline subject to chronic erosion.

"These villagers are also hit by increasingly frequent floods. In 2003 alone, some 12,000 villages were inundated, which is a sharp increase from 1999, when 7,000 villages were affected by floods," he said.

A study by Walhi showed that 90 percent of the disaster-hit villages were located in areas where coral reefs and mangrove forests were damaged.

The 2005 State of the Environment report says that of the country's 51,000 sq km of coral areas, only 5.8 per cent are well-preserved, a decrease from 2004 when 6.8 per cent were in good condition.

Meanwhile, about 57 per cent of the country's 9.2 mn ha of mangrove forests are in critical condition. Experts say mangrove trees could halt erosion and mitigate the negative impacts of large sea waves on coastal areas, where some 16 mn Indonesians live.

Ocean change

Every creature has its place and role in the oceans— even the smallest microbe, according to a new study that may lead to more accurate

models of ocean change.

Scientists have long endorsed the concept of a unique biological niche for most animals and plants—a shark, for example, has a different role than a dolphin. Bacteria instead have been relegated to an also-ran world of "functional redundancy" in which few species are considered unique, said Jed Fuhrman, holder of the McCulloch-Crosby Chair in Marine Biology in the USC College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

In The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences' Early Edition, Fuhrman and colleagues from USC and Columbia University show that most kinds of bacteria are not interchangeable and that each thrives

under predictable conditions and at predictable times. Conversely, the kinds and numbers of bacteria in a sample

can show where and when it was taken.

The researchers took monthly bacteria samples for more than four years in the Pacific Ocean near the USC Wrigley Institute's marine laboratory on Catalina Island. They used statistical methods to correlate the bacteria counts with the Wrigley Institute's monthly measurements of water temperature, salinity, nutrient content, plant matter and other variables.

The findings have immediate relevance for scientists attempting to understand how the oceans are changing, Fuhrman said. If bacteria behave predictably, they can be used to improve models for ocean change. By including bacteria, which make up the vast majority of species on land and sea, "we have some hope of predicting how changes are going to happen," Fuhrman said.

Home again

Australia has perhaps the world's record for jailing "illegal" fishers, mostly from Indonesia.

The Australian government has since January deported more than 1,600 fishermen from Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara province after they were charged with

trespassing into Australian waters.

The fishermen were returned home on chartered planes funded by the Australian government, a provincial official was quoted by the

Antara news agency as saying.

“The fishermen were treated humanely and they even got new clothes during detention,” said Fransiskus Salem, head of the office for social affairs in East Nusa Tenggara. “It is based on their own words. I even had to tell them not to illegally re-enter Australian waters to get caught and receive those facilities again,” he said. Another 100 Indonesian fishermen are currently facing legal proceedings in Australia, he said.

Australian Ambassador to Indonesia Bill Farmer said earlier most of the captured fishing boats had entered Australian territories within the distance of 12 miles. In several cases, those boats landed on Australia’s main island. According to the new immigration law, trespassing is punishable by

three-year imprisonment in Australia.

Oil spill

Oil spills in Nigeria have greatly polluted the creeks of the Niger Delta. The 1991 Environmental Guidelines and Standards for the Petroleum Industry in Nigeria (revised in 2002) outlines in Part VIII B Sections 4 and 8 what should be done for any mystery oil spill, including in terms of compensation. The guidelines state that a spiller shall be liable for damages. If more than one person is responsible, liability should be joint.

However, activists say that victims of pollution have been poorly compensated and several cases have dragged on for many years. The courts are located only in State capitals, putting them out of the easy reach of most rural inhabitants. The litigation process is fraught with many technicalities, requiring the services of legal practitioners that most people cannot afford.

The other problem in the Niger Delta is due

to river sand mining, which destroys the aquatic habitat and disrupts the ecosystems of the river channels.

Fishing communities suffer as a result on top of the destruction caused by the oil industry. Fishing has become less productive and profitable in many areas of the Delta, with reduced catches and lower incomes, compared to income from oil-related activities. Many swamps, rivers and creeks where fish spawn have been destroyed or polluted. The efforts of local fishermen to maintain or improve upon their income levels result in overfishing, say environmentalists.

Typhoon victims

Typhoon Saomai killed at least 134 Chinese and left over 163 missing, according to the official Chinese State media. Reports have emerged of fishing villages crushed by the strongest storm to make landfall in China for half a century. An unknown number of fishermen were at sea when Saomai arrived in southeast China’s Fujian province, leaving anxious families with no news of their loved ones.

One local resident described how he walked along the coastline in the north of the province, near the fishing town of Shacheng, trying to identify the body of

his wife’s uncle. He said he came across several bodies that had drifted ashore but not the one he was looking for.

“The bodies had become so bloated in the hot weather that they were impossible to recognize,” he told AFP by telephone, asking not to be named. “We could only tell people apart from the clothes they were wearing.” The Southern Metropolitan Daily reported from Shacheng that many fishing vessels had disappeared, with families desperate to know what happened to their sons, husbands and brothers. Saomai caused Shacheng to lose a staggering 1,000 fishing boats, while half its 8,000 families were made homeless when the storm flattened their houses.

Fuding also saw horrific damage, reporting 41 killed, 107 missing and 1,350 people injured as hundreds of houses collapsed, according to Xinhua. The city’s Ziguo Temple, a priceless relic of Buddhist architecture more than 1,000 years old, was also severely damaged, Xinhua said.