News
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A man in Portland, Ore., lies on a sidewalk during a heatwave Aug. 11, 2021. (CNS photo/Mat

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by Brian Roewe

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Editor's Note: *EarthBeat Weekly is your weekly newsletter about faith and climate change. Below is the Jan. 14 edition. To receive EarthBeat Weekly in your inbox, sign up here.*

It was by coincidence that I finally got around to watching "Don't Look Up," the apocalyptic Netflix blockbuster that has everyone talking, the night before NASA and NOAA released their latest annual data on the accelerating rise of global temperatures.

Each prestigious scientific agency issued reports Jan. 13 stating their findings that 2021 was the sixth warmest year on record, and the last eight years have been the hottest since record-keeping began in 1880. Data from European scientists determined 2021 as the fifth warmest year.

NOAA added that 2021 "marked the 45th consecutive year (since 1977) with global temperatures rising above the 20th-century average." NASA reported that the planet was roughly 1.1 degrees Celsius (1.9 degrees Fahrenheit) "warmer than the late 19th century average, the start of the industrial revolution."

Or as Washington Post climate reporter Sarah Kaplan put it: "The year 2021 was the seventh in a row in which global temperatures were more than 1 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial average. It's unlikely anyone alive will see the world's temperature drop below that 1-degree benchmark again."

For perspective, the world's nations have agreed to try to limit global warming to 1.5 C.

"The long-term trend is very, very clear. And it's because of us. And it's not going to go away until we stop increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere," Gavin Schmidt, director of NASA's climate modeling center, told the Associated Press .

The reports on global warming came the same day that Australia matched the highest temperature on record in the Southern Hemisphere.

(NASA’s Scientific Visualization Studio/Kathryn Mersmann)

When I watched the national evening news Thursday night, it was almost as if these reports were never released. I was pleasantly surprised to see Lester Holt with a brief story on "NBC Nightly News," but not so on "CBS Evening News" or "ABC World Report." (I avoid cable news, so can't speak to what aired there.)

Yes, there was certainly a lot of important news to cover yesterday:

- the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on President Joe Biden's vaccine mandates;
- the Oath Keepers founder charged with seditious conspiracy for his role in the Jan. 6 insurrection;
- the fate of voting rights legislation;
- and of course, the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

Each of those stories received time on the three major news networks, and I certainly don't disagree with those editorial decisions. But each network also ran sizable segments (relatively speaking for a 22-minute broadcast) on Prince Andrew losing his royal titles amid his ongoing sexual assault scandal.

As I watched, I couldn't help but think back to the scene in "Don't Look Up" (no spoiler, I promise) where the media continually flocked reporters, resources and precious time and space to the various scandals involving a fictitious Supreme Court nominee, all at the expense of covering an Everest-sized comet barreling toward Earth that scientists universally confirmed would annihilate all life.

There's certainly a lot to unpack from "Don't Look Up," a parody film that billed itself as a not-so-subtle allegory of how the world, and especially government leaders and the media, has responded to repeated alarms raised by scientists about climate change — a threat to the planet that is no longer a forecast for the future, but one already present and worsening unless major advances are made to curtail the burning of fossil fuels, the primary driver of global warming.

The lack of coverage of the NASA/NOAA reports made me also wonder: Have we grown numb to the record-breaking heat our planet experiences on a now annual basis?

I don't have an answer to that. And as an environmental reporter, I know well the debates about how to report on climate change — more on solutions, for instance — in ways that will better engage and empower readers, listeners and viewers, rather than leave them curled up in a ball in the corner.

I don't have all those answers, either. But I do believe that amplifying coverage of climate change, period, is an important part of it, instead of cordoning it to Earth Day segments and international climate summits. While the media landscape has transformed dramatically the past two decades, core principles of when and where a news publication places a story, and how much space it gives it, still stand.

Back on the TV Thursday night, there were some positive signs. CBS Evening News ran a lengthy segment on rural Alabama communities that lacked septic systems, and connected it to funding earmarked in the infrastructure act to address such issues. It was an important environmental justice story that followed up on an investigation by "60 Minutes" in December.

But the coverage of the latest planetary warming report shows there's ample room for journalism to improve on climate change. In "Don't Look Up," as politicians and networks focused on scandals and short-term priorities, the comet continued toward Earth. And the NASA/NOAA reports show that in our real world, even as major news develops — be it critical legislative debates, tabloid scandals and even a pandemic — the planet continues to grow hotter and hotter.

It's up to us to decide if we'll look up to notice it, and then how we'll act.

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What's new on EarthBeat this week:

- A photo exhibit in Rome featuring captivating images of Amazonia shows both the majesty and the fragility of the globally critical region, Cardinal Michael Czerny told NCR Vatican correspondent Christopher White.

- Do you still have unwanted presents from the holiday season you're planning to return? If so, you might consider the true environmental cost that comes with the return process, writes Céire Kealty in an eye-opening commentary.

- A coalition of religious representatives and laypeople condemned the murder of an Indigenous leader in Honduras who was active in environmental, education and human rights initiatives, reports David Agren for Catholic News Service.

- More than 70 earthworks in Southern Ohio, constructed by the Indigenous Adena and Hopewell cultures, have become a religious flashpoint as their descendants say other spiritual groups have used them in ways that damage the sites and disrespect their beliefs. Diana Kruzman has the story for Religion News Service.

- Starting Tuesday, EarthBeat will have a new head when Stephanie Clary officially begins as NCR environment editor. Meet her here.

What's happening in other climate news:

- As an addendum to this week's main feature: U.S. emissions increased 6.2% in 2021, per Rebecca Leber at Vox; and the year also saw the second-most billion-dollar weather-related disasters — totaling upwards of $145 billion — with many made worse by climate change, writes Rachel Ramirez for CNN. And 2021 also broke more heat and cold records than any other year, according to an analysis by The New York Times.

- Last week, we highlighted one of two exits of top environmental justice officials from the White House's Council on Environmental Quality. Politico's Zack Colman has a new report on how the departures are worrying environmental justice activists on whether the president can deliver on his bold equity promises.

- At Inside Climate News, Nicholas Kusnetz reports on a recent presentation by the American Petroleum Institute, which celebrated lobbying victories it's had in the first year of the Biden administration.

- While efforts to repurpose excess food grab headlines, a new report from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says greater focus is needed on preventing food waste before it happens, writes Lisa Held for Civil Eats.

- New Mexico has begun its transition to clean energy, and community and labor organizers are working to ensure that the economic change is equitable, reports Carl Segerstrom for High Country News.

Upcoming events:

The Catholic Climate Covenant will debut its new "Ecospirituality Nights" virtual series on Jan. 31 with a presentation by Christina Leaño, associate director of Laudato Si' Movement. The live event will run from 7:30-8:30, Eastern, and will feature English-Spanish interpretation.

You can find more information about this and other events on the EarthBeat Events page, and you can add your own group's events here.

Final beat:

Near the end of 2021, Stefan Hostetter invited me to speak with Green Majority Radio, on CIUT 89.5 out of Toronto, about EarthBeat's "Estate Plan for the Earth" special reporting project. It was a good conversation about all things land preservation, conservation easements, *Laudato Si'* and even the pope's potential visit to Canada.

The interview was broadcast last Friday (Jan. 7), and you can give it a listen here. As an added incentive, the episode also features a discussion on "Don't Look Up."

As always, please forward this email, or pass along the link to EarthBeat Weekly on our website, to a friend who might appreciate EarthBeat.

And of course, thanks to you for reading.

This story appears in the **EarthBeat Weekly** feature series. View the full series.