

# The stormy, fiery year when climate disasters wouldn't stop

December 10 2020, by Seth Borenstein

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In this Aug. 20, 2020, file photo is a destroyed home by the CZU August Lightning Complex fire in the Pineridge neighborhood of the Santa Cruz Mountains community of Bonny Doon near Santa Cruz, Calif. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (Shmuel Thler/The Santa Cruz Sentinel via AP, File)

Nature struck relentlessly in 2020 with record-breaking and deadly weather- and climate-related disasters.

With the most named storms in the Atlantic, the largest-ever area of California burned by wildfires, killer floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic, 2020 was more than a disastrous year with the pandemic. It was megadrought and near-[record heat](#), California had at least derecho that savaged the Midwest somehow flew under the radar, despite damage nearing \$10 billion, and is barely remembered. Other billion-dollar [severe storms](#), often with tornadoes and hail, struck the U.S. in January, February, twice in March, three times in April and another three times in May.

All these U.S. [disasters](#) have "really added up to create a catastrophic year," said Adam Smith, a NOAA applied climatologist. "Climate change has its fingerprints on many of these different extremes and disasters."

"Nature is sending us a message. We better hear it," United Nations Environment Programme Director Inger Andersen told The Associated Press in an interview. "Wherever you go, whatever continent, we see Nature socking it at us. The warmest three-year period we've ever seen. The Arctic temperatures, the wildfires, etc. etc."



In this Aug. 16, 2020, file photo, a rare lightning storm crackles over Mitchell's Cove in early morning in Santa Cruz, Calif. The severe storm system rolled through the San Francisco and Monterey Bay areas in August, packing a combination of dry lightning and high winds that triggered wildfires throughout the region. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (Shmuel Thaler/The Santa Cruz Sentinel via AP, File)

Worldwide, more than 220 climate- and weather-related disasters hurt more than 70 million people and caused more than \$69 billion in damage. Over 7,500 people were killed, according to preliminary figures from the international angtze River and the Three Gorges Dam in China killed at least 279 people in the summer and caused economic losses of

more than \$15 billion, according to the World Meteorological Organization.

Hue, Vietnam had a record 103 inches (261 centimeters) of rain in October, according to the WMO.

Extremes, including heat waves and droughts, hit all over the world. Siberia reached a record 100 degrees (38 degrees Celsius) as much of the Arctic was 9 degrees (5 degrees Celsius) warmer than average and had an exceptionally bad wildfire season. Arctic sea ice shrank to the second lowest level on record and set a few monthly records for melt.



In this Aug. 21, 2020, file photo, firefighters watch flames from the LNU Lightning Complex fires approach a home in the Berryessa Estates neighborhood of unincorporated Napa County, Calif. The blaze, the fifth largest in California

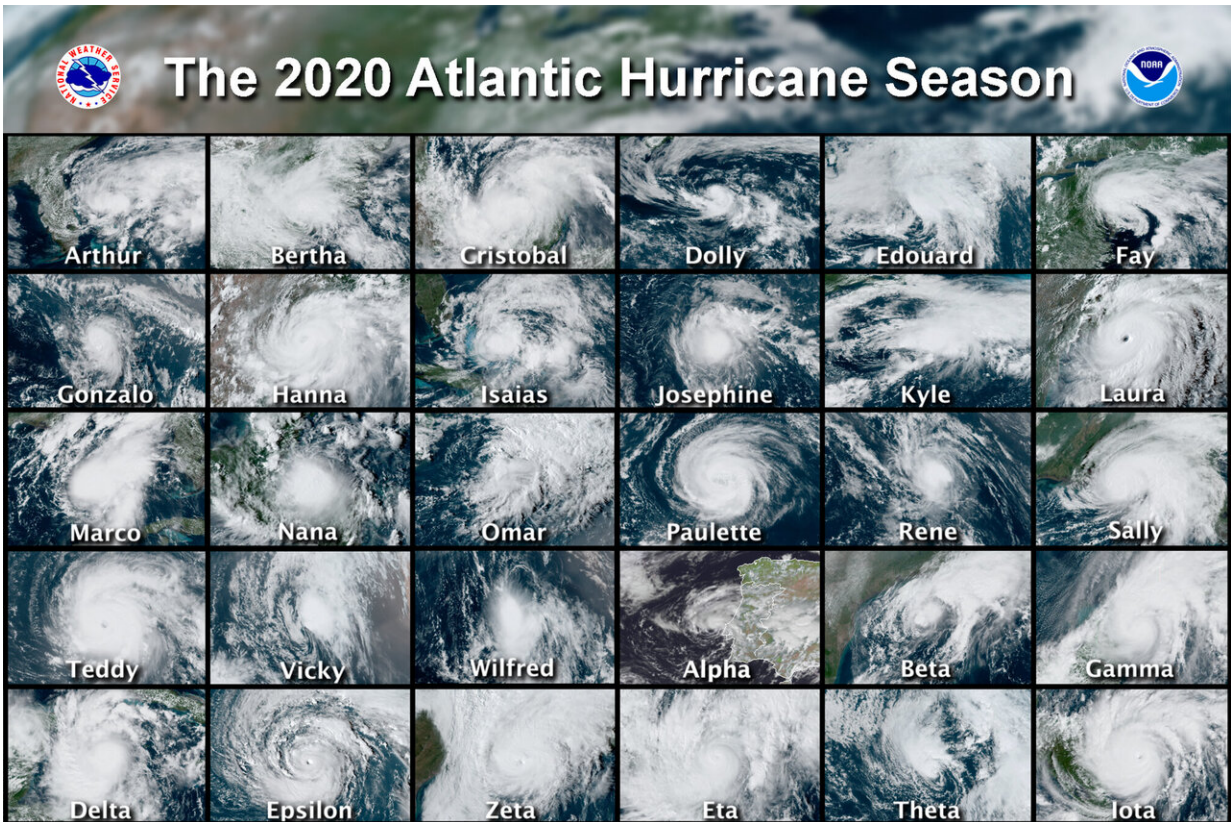
history, forced thousands to flee and destroyed more than 1,000 homes and other structures. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (AP Photo/Noah Berger, File)

Death Valley saw the warmest temperature recorded, 129.9 degrees (54.4 degrees Celsius), on Earth in at least 80 years.

The pace of disasters is noticeably increasing, said disaster experts and climate scientists. The international database in Belgium calculated that from 1980 to 1999, the world had 4,212 disasters affecting 3.25 billion people and costing \$1.63 trillion, adjusted for inflation. From 2000 to 2019 those figures jumped to 7,348 disasters, 4.03 billion people affected and \$2.97 trillion in damage.

"Disasters are very much becoming a chronic condition in this country," said Rikken, who has noticed the change since 2006 when he joined the Red Cross after Hurricane Katrina.

Climate change figures in the growth of disasters, especially wildfires worsened by drought and heat, said Pennsylvania State University climate scientist Michael Mann.



This combination of satellite images provided by the National Hurricane Center shows 30 hurricanes which occurred during the 2020 Atlantic hurricane season. Nature struck relentlessly in 2020 with record-breaking and deadly weather and climate related disasters. From the most named storms in the Atlantic with a record number of them intensifying rapidly to the largest area of the western U.S. states burned by wildfires, to killer floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic, 2020 was more than a disastrous year, it was a year of disasters. (National Hurricane Center via AP)



In this Nov. 6, 2020, file photo, a resident walking through a flooded street looks back at storm damage caused by Hurricane Eta in Planeta, Honduras. As Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (AP Photo/Delmer Martinez, File)



In this Aug. 27, 2020, file photo, vehicles drive through a flooded road after heavy monsoon rains, in Karachi, Pakistan. Heavy monsoon rains lashed many parts of Pakistan as well the southern port city of Karachi, leaving flooding streets, damaging homes and displacing scores of people. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (AP Photo/Fareed Khan, File)





In this Sept. 16, 2020, file photo, flood waters move on the street, in Pensacola, Fla. Hurricane Sally made landfall near Gulf Shores, Alabama, as a Category 2 storm, pushing a surge of ocean water onto the coast and dumping torrential rain. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)



In this Aug. 29, 2020, file photo, Bradley Beard walks with a shovel through his daughter's destroyed trailer home, after searching in vain for the water shutoff valve for the property in the aftermath of Hurricane Laura, in Hackberry, La. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)



In this July 17, 2020, file photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, water flows out from sluiceways at the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River near Yichang in central China's Hubei Province. Engorged with heavy rains, China's mighty Yangtze River crested again in July, as destructive seasonal floods have grown in force since June. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (Zheng Jiayu/Xinhua via AP, File)



In this Aug. 17, 2020, file photo, a person walks on a boardwalk at the salt flats at Badwater Basin, in Death Valley National Park, Calif. Death Valley recorded a scorching 130 degrees (54.4 degrees Celsius) the day before. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (AP Photo/John Locher, File)



In this Aug. 18, 2020, file aerial photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, flooding is seen in Bikou township of Longnan city in northwestern China's Gansu Province. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (Du Zheyu/Xinhua via AP, File)



In this Aug. 18, 2020, file photo, rescuers use an inflatable boat as they evacuate people from a flooded neighborhood in Neijiang in southwestern China's Sichuan Province. This year has seen record Atlantic hurricanes and western wildfires, devastating floods in Asia and Africa and a hot, melting Arctic. It's not just been a disastrous year, but a year of disasters. (Chinatopix via AP, File)

"I didn't expect to see a season with 30 named storms in my lifetime," Mann said, noting that hurricanes were fueled by a natural La Nina cooling of parts of the central Pacific combined with human-caused warming of water temperatures.

National Hurricane Center Deputy Director Ed Rappaport said: "It was an exhausting year."

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