

# SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

## EVENTS

### Whalers fined

An Australian court fined a Japanese company Aus\$1 million (US\$724,000) on 18 November and found the firm to be in contempt of court for killing minke whales in an area declared a sanctuary by Australia. According to the animal-protection organization Humane Society International (HSI), which, along with the Environmental Defender's Office, brought the case against the firm Kyodo Senpaku Kaisha, this is one of the largest fines issued under Australian conservation law. The company caught whales in four different years, despite a 2008 injunction against the practice, says the HSI.

### Climate repeals

The US Senate voted on 17 November to repeal a pair of regulations by the Environmental Protection Agency that would limit carbon emissions from new and existing power plants. Votes on both rules were led by Republicans and passed by a margin of 52–46; the House of Representatives is considering similar resolutions. Coming just two weeks before the United Nations climate summit in Paris, the resolutions are largely symbolic. US President Barack Obama promised to veto both repeals, and supporters do not have the two-thirds majority needed to override a veto.

### Statoil Arctic exit

Norwegian energy company Statoil announced on 17 November that it would cease exploration for gas and oil in Alaska's Chukchi Sea. The decision comes just over a month after Royal Dutch Shell suspended its own exploration off the Alaskan coast, citing regulatory uncertainty and a



JASON REED/REUTERS

## Tasmanian devils returned to the wild

Tasmania has 39 more wild devils, after the latest batch of healthy individuals was released from the Devils Ark Sanctuary (pictured is manager Dean Reid) onto the Forestier Peninsula on 18 November. The area was cleared of Tasmanian devils (*Sarcophilus harrisii*) after an infectious

cancer that is devastating populations of the endangered animals was detected there in 2004. A 'devil-proof fence' has now been installed to prevent the new, healthy population from mixing with animals afflicted with the deadly and infectious devil facial tumour disease.

disappointing survey of the area's fossil-fuel prospects. The Statoil decision sees the company exit early from 16 leases that were set to expire in 2020.

### L'Aquila verdict

Italy's highest court of appeal on 20 November upheld a decision to acquit 6 seismologists accused of manslaughter in regard to the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake, which killed more than 300 people. Prosecutors claimed that the scientists misled townspeople about the risk, leading them to stay in their homes instead of seeking safety. The scientists were originally given six-year prison sentences, but an appeals court in L'Aquila acquitted them last November, and reduced

to two years the sentence of Bernardo De Bernardinis, former deputy director of the Italian Civil Protection Department, who was also convicted. De Bernardinis's reduced sentence was upheld; he still faces a separate charge of manslaughter.

### Ebola setback

In a setback to efforts to end the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, the World Health Organization announced three new cases of the disease in Liberia on 20 November. One of those individuals, a 15-year-old boy, died on 23 November. The country had been declared Ebola-free on 3 September. Sierra Leone was declared Ebola-free on 7 November, and the last case in Guinea was reported on 29 October,

leading to hopes that the epidemic, which began in December 2013, might finally be nearing an end.

### Pandemic report

A panel of physicians, scientists and policy experts has called for major reforms to the World Health Organization and other international health-response systems following the Ebola epidemic that has killed more than 11,000 people. The panel, convened by Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, released its report on 22 November (S. Moon *et al.* *Lancet* <http://doi.org/9gf>; 2015). It also recommends measures to improve prevention, detection

and response to outbreaks, and to speed research on diseases that cause them. See [go.nature.com/jxxvs6](http://go.nature.com/jxxvs6) for more.

## Rare rhino dies

Northern white rhinoceroses (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) are one step closer to extinction, after a 41-year-old female named Nola had to be put down after surgery at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park in California on 22 November. The last three remaining individuals — two females that cannot reproduce naturally and a male with a low sperm count — live at Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya. Conservationists hope that the species can be saved through assisted reproduction techniques, using southern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) as surrogates.

### POLICY

## CRISPR cress

The Swedish Board of Agriculture on 17 November told two Swedish universities that they do not need special approval for field trials of some cress (*Arabidopsis*, pictured) varieties mutated by the CRISPR-Cas9 gene-editing technique. In June, the European Commission had asked European Union member states to hold back on such rulings until it makes its own proposals on how to



regulate organisms modified by new genetic techniques. But the Swedish authority said decisions needed to be made now, so that trials can be prepared for the next growing season.

## Chimps retired

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) is ceasing its chimpanzee-research programme altogether, two years after retiring most of its chimps. In a 16 November e-mail to the agency's administrators, NIH director Francis Collins announced that the 50 NIH-owned animals that remain available for research will be sent to sanctuaries. The agency will also develop a plan to phase out NIH support for the remaining chimps that are supported, but not owned, by the NIH. See page 422 for more.

## Coal curbs

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development agreed

on 18 November to restrict public financing for coal-fired power plants. Two years in the making, the agreement removes support for large, low-efficiency coal-fired plants while maintaining support for medium-sized, high-efficiency plants in countries facing energy shortages, and for small, less-efficient plants in the poorest countries. The restrictions will not apply to any coal-fired plants that are equipped to capture and store carbon emissions.

### FUNDING

## UK research review

A tensely awaited report into the future of the major UK research-funding agencies, released on 19 November, suggests the creation of a powerful umbrella organization called Research UK to manage the agencies. The review was led by Nobel-prizewinning geneticist Paul Nurse. Many scientists feared that it would

## COMING UP

### 30 NOVEMBER

The leaders of the world's nations gather to broker a climate deal at the United Nations' Paris Climate Change Conference.

[nature.com/parisclimate](http://nature.com/parisclimate)

### 1-3 DECEMBER

Washington DC hosts the International Summit on Human Gene Editing.

[go.nature.com/huzip3](http://go.nature.com/huzip3)

### 2 DECEMBER

The European Space Agency's LISA Pathfinder satellite, which will hunt for gravitational waves, launches from Kourou, French Guiana.

[go.nature.com/rxrzuc](http://go.nature.com/rxrzuc)

recommend a total merger of the research councils, which collectively distribute some £3 billion (US\$4.6 billion) of government research funding each year. Nurse recommends that Research UK be led by an experienced researcher, who would in effect be boss of the heads of the seven discipline-based councils. See [go.nature.com/2rwzeu](http://go.nature.com/2rwzeu) for more.

### BUSINESS

## Mega-merger

Two major pharmaceutical firms are to merge in a US\$160-billion deal, they announced on 23 November. Pfizer of New York will combine with Allergan, based in Dublin, in a merger that is expected to be completed by the end of 2016. The resulting firm will be named Pfizer but will be headquartered in Dublin — providing a significant tax break for the US firm — and will have more than 100 medicines in mid-to-late-stage development.

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## TREND WATCH

The availability of antiretroviral drugs for HIV has increased women's lifespans more than men's in KwaZulu Natal in South Africa, concludes a study of more than 98,000 people (J. Bor *et al.* *PLoS Med.* **12**, e1001905; 2015). Since free antiretroviral treatment became available in South Africa in 2004, declines in life expectancy have reversed for both genders. But progress is uneven, with women gaining more years of life than men. The authors recommend that HIV outreach activities be targeted to men.

### HIV LIFE EXPECTANCIES DIFFER BY GENDER

Freely available antiretroviral therapy has decreased the mortality rate of HIV-positive women more than are HIV-positive men in one region of rural South Africa.

