Headline: Unsought legacy

Byline: Juan L. Mercado

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How long can we dawdle in yesterday? The world has already moved on to “day after tomorrow.”

This old question acquired greater urgency Friday, when the journal Science published an NCAR (National Center for Atmospheric Research) analysis of 10 years’ humidity. Culled from National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) satellites, the data indicate that “temperature surge could reach eight degrees Fahrenheit by 2100.”

That would overshoot the threshold-before-disaster line drawn by world leaders: a 3.6-degree Fahrenheit increase. Scientists John Fasullo and Kevin Trenberth, however, reported: NCAR’s “most closely matched humidity measurements predicted the most extreme global warming.”

“In the Philippines, rice yields drop by 10 percent for every degree centigrade increase in night-time temperature,” BBC’s environment correspondent Richard Black wrote. As droughts dried reservoirs, yields fell by 10-20 percent over the last 25 years. More declines are ahead.

Here, “expect sea waters to rise by at least 20 centimeters in the next 40 years,” Wendy Clavano wrote in an earlier Environmental Science for Social Change analysis. The severest threat stretches “along the Pacific seaboard: from Samar down to eastern Mindanao. NCAR’s new data will revise Philippine estimates and expand the number of threatened areas.”

Already, “trees fail to flower,” Aetas from Bataan reported (Inquirer, 5/7/12). “Bees are disappearing. Storms blow away our nipa huts as never before.” That resembles Superstorm “Sandy” ripping the US Eastern seaboard last week.

University of Bern’s Oeschger Centre for Climate Change Research scientists in Swtizerland, documented what the Aetas learned from seat-of-the-pants. The university’s experiments span two decades, four continents and 1,634 plant species.

“Spring flowering and leafing advance 5 to 6 days per year for every degree celsius of warming,” notes the journal Nature. Bern scientists fret that they “underestimated how much plants change.” A plant community that sprouts a week earlier demands far more water.

Edges of the “Tropical Belt”—outer boundaries of the subtropical dry zones—are drifting toward the poles, noted Geoscience. Temperature and rainfall changes alter yields, including politically volatile crops like corn and wheat. The “most extreme summers last century could become routine (by the) end of this century,” predicts the University of Seattle.

“Many crops are photosensitive,” notes Dr. Geoff Hawtin of the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture. “We cannot just move (them) north or south…. Tipping points could come quickly.”

“We’re seeing changes happening… in ways we didn’t expect to see for hundreds of years,” 27 scientists, led by Oxford University’s Alex Rodgers, cautioned in their 2011 “State of the Oceans” report to the United Nations. As polluted seas warm, we enter “a phase of extinction of marine species unprecedented in human history,” they warned. Overfishing, pollution and climate change interlock “in ways not previously recognized.”

In that far warmer world, fish sizes could shrink by almost a quarter as their metabolic rates alter, says Dr. Walter Cheung of the University of British Columbia. “In the future, expect to see smaller-bodied fish in tropical waters.” And most fish populations will edge toward the earth’s cooler poles, probably at 36 kilometers per decade.

“Accelerated” changes include the melting of the Greenland ice sheets. Long trapped in the seabed, methane gas is seeping out.

Before the Rio+20 Environmental Summit opened, two significant reports were published: (a) “A Review of Evidence,” by the journal Nature; and (b) United Nations’ “5th Global Environmental Outlook.”

“Meaningful progress was made in only four of 90 critical concerns,” the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) said. The four were: making gasoline lead-free, easing ozone layer depletion, broadened access to clean water and beefed-up marine pollution research. “Some progress” was achieved in 40 issues, including protected habitats for plants and animals. In 24, there was “little or no progress.” “Clear deterioration” was marked in eight, among them coral reefs.

Only 4 percent of Philippine reefs remain in “pristine condition.” Other countries with equally threatened reefs include Haiti, Vanuatu, Tanzania and Indonesia.

Earth may be on the way to an irreversible “tipping point,” wrote Anthony Barnofsky from the University of California. “It really will be a new world, biologically, at that point.”

Too late now to reverse global warming with earlier tools like cutting emissions, Johannesburg-based Wits University geoscientist Jasper Knight and University of Exeter’s Stephan Harrison told Science Daily. Focus instead on adaption policies to mitigate the harsh impacts of altered weather. Slumping water tables in Cebu and Metro Manila are just one example.

Imelda Marcos, meanwhile, wails that the confiscated Roumeliotes gems, of which a 37-carat diamond is the center piece, be returned. Bickering Estradas—JV and Jinggoy—were whacked by the family patriarch, still trying to shuck off the stigma as the first-ever president of the Philippines to be convicted. Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile leans on anybody crossing his son’s senatorial bid. Local officials try to gut the 20-percent development fund, after an airplane crash loosened Jesse Robredo’s firm hand.

Obsession with the petty resonates in primetime newscast’s unvarying intro: “Magandang gabi, bayan… patay (killed) or binaril (gunned down), even sinaksak (stabbed)…” Our grandchildren’s unsought legacy is day after tomorrow’s ecological crisis, as today’s officials wallow in yesterday’s squabbles. In “Midsummer’s Night(mare),” Puck says: “What fools these mortals be.”