

“The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works.”

Former Facebook executive **Chamath Palihapitiya**, in a speech to Stanford University students on the harmful effects of social media.

## IN BRIEF

Edited by Catherine Matacic

## California fires shut down telescope



The Thomas wildfire has burned tens of thousands of hectares across Southern California.

**W**ith the Thomas wildfire burning more than 90,000 hectares just south of Santa Barbara, California, researchers in nearby Goleta had to shut down the Las Cumbres Observatory, an international telescope network, for 2 days this week until the threat passed. “We have lived through many wildfires, but nothing like this,” said Sandy Seale, director of development for the observatory, which operates 21 robotically controlled telescopes at six sites around the world. Just one of its telescopes, in Santa Barbara County, was at risk, but power outages were disrupting work. The fire—one of five continuing to ravage southern California—was only 20% contained when *Science* went to press on 12 December, and the hot, dry Santa Ana winds fueling it continued to blow. Future fires may cause even more damage: A climate modeling study published 2 years ago in *Environmental Research Letters* suggests the Santa Ana winds will become more destructive as local temperatures rise, increasing annual burned areas by up to 64% by 2050.

## AROUND THE WORLD

### Research gets Brexit reprieve

**LONDON** | EU citizens can keep living in the United Kingdom after the country leaves the European Union in 2019, the U.K. government has announced. That’s welcome news for EU nationals doing research at U.K. universities, which from 2015–16 included 33,735 staff members and postgraduate research students, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. The agreement is likely to be approved by the European Council this week. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom also said it will remain in Horizon 2020, the major EU funding program for research, which means that U.K. researchers can apply for Horizon grants up to the end of the program. It remains to be seen whether the United Kingdom will be allowed to pay to take part in Horizon 2020’s successor; several non-EU members (including Switzerland, Norway, and Israel) participate in the current program for a fee. <http://scim.ag/EUstay>

### U.N. tackles plastic in oceans

**NAIROBI** | More than 200 countries signed a resolution to address marine litter and microplastics at the United Nations Environment Assembly last week. By recent estimates, humans have generated 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic since 1950 and more than half of that has ended up in landfills or as pollution in the environment. Microscopic bits of plastic known as microplastics are of particular concern because they can end up in sea creatures of all sizes, including those we eat, such as mussels. Without changes to waste management systems, the amount of plastic entering the oceans could increase by an order of magnitude by 2025. Although the U.N. agreement aims to end marine pollution of all kinds by that year, the resolution doesn’t include any timetable or intermediate reduction targets, and is not legally binding.

### Rochester researchers sue school

**ROCHESTER, NEW YORK** | Nine scientists sued the University of Rochester in New York, its President Joel Seligman, and its

Provost Robert Clark last Friday, alleging retaliation, defamation, and (in two cases) breach of contract after they criticized the university's investigation of alleged sexual harassment by linguist T. Florian Jaeger. They are seeking unspecified monetary damages. Four of the complainants work in the university's Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, from which Jaeger is on administrative leave; others have left the university—driven out, they say, by the hostile environment. The lawsuit, filed on 8 December in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of New York, was “not unexpected,” said Sara Miller, a university spokesperson. She declined further comment until a new investigation of the allegations against Jaeger, overseen by the university's Board of Trustees, is completed in early January 2018. In a 9 December letter to the board, Seligman wrote that “many of the allegations [in the lawsuit] were thoroughly investigated by the University and could not be substantiated.”

## Back to the moon—again

WASHINGTON, D.C. | Another administration means yet another course correction for the United States's space program. U.S.



Trump wants to send NASA astronauts to the moon.

President Donald Trump on 11 December announced that he would refocus NASA's manned space flight program on a return mission to the moon, which would be the first for the United States since 1972. That's a reversal of former President Barack Obama's policy to send astronauts first to explore an asteroid and then Mars, but it's in line with that of the past two Republican presidents, the elder and younger Bush. Trump said the lunar missions, abetted by the United States's burgeoning private space industry, would develop technology for the eventual exploration of Mars—and destinations beyond. The announcement did not mention details of a budget or timeline. And space experts continue to debate to what extent a mission to the moon will help prepare the know-how to reach the Red Planet.

## FINDINGS

### African forest loss overestimated

A new analysis suggests that far less forest was destroyed in Africa during the 20th century than previously estimated—some 22% in the continent's tropical regions, compared with earlier estimates of 35% and 55%. The forested area today is well known; the challenge is figuring out its historical extent, which covered a swath from Sierra Leone to Mozambique. Previous estimates relied on vegetation models based on climate, and some studies had broader definitions of “forest.” To get a firmer measure, researchers at Yale University gathered colonial maps and records of plant material such as pollen and charcoal preserved in soil or lakes. The data, reported this week in *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, suggest there was more savanna and less forest in 1900 than previously believed. Earlier estimates were likely off because the models don't account for grazing and fire. The authors say that future tree-planting efforts should be focused in west Africa, where the most forest was lost, rather than farther east in the savanna, which has its own biodiversity and also supports cattle.



## Little Foot's big reveal

The world's most complete *Australopithecus* skeleton.

**A**fter 20 years of preparation by its discoverer, a remarkably complete hominid skeleton dubbed “Little Foot” has been separated from the rock encasing it and unveiled to the media. The bones, found in the Sterkfontein Caves in South Africa, include the skull, limb and hand bones, foot, pelvis, vertebrae, and ribs of a female *Australopithecus*—the most complete skeleton of that genus ever, surpassing even the famous Lucy (*Science*, 9 September 2011, p. 1374). Paleoanthropologist

Ron Clarke of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, and his team began to carefully expose the soft, fragile bones in 1997, doing much of the work in the cave itself to avoid damage. Researchers have debated the skeleton's age, which Clarke's team puts at 3.67 million years. Last week's announcement includes no new analysis of the bones; Clarke said in a press release that scientific papers would be forthcoming next year.

# Science

## News at a glance

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