

Why the ocean is warmer than usual and could stay that way for a while

Laylan Connelly, Orange County Register, 7-25-16

Surf instructor Richard Dagampat tried to warn two students, both from North Dakota, that the ocean off Doheny State Beach was too warm for wetsuits.

But they insisted and wore the thick neoprene anyway -- until they couldn't stand it.

"After about 20 minutes of paddling, they said 'Can we take them off? We are burning up'," Dagampat said.

The water isn't that hot every day, but after two summers of sometimes strange El Nino-fueled conditions, the ocean off Southern California this summer remains warmer than normal. This week, ocean temperatures off San Clemente reached the mid 70s, about 10 degrees higher than what is normal for early July. Typically, ocean temperatures peak in August and September.

On the one hand, it's pleasant. Why buy a ticket to Hawaii or drive down to Baja when Orange County's water feels like the tropics. Surfers are shedding their wetsuits, or in surfer slang "trunking it."

At the same time, it's an environmental oddity.

The El Nino pattern heating up our ocean has been a semi-regular visitor to this region far longer than the phrase "global warming." But this particular El Nino -- now in its third summer -- is more profound, and sticking around longer, than previous El Ninos. Just as hurricanes have become more frequent and more severe, this El Nino might be as big and gnarly as it is because of climate change.

Whatever the cause, the warm ocean temperatures are changing the definition of "normal" when it comes to the area's fish, mammals and birds.

"The weather around here is getting more tropical," said Tom Southern, a captain on Capt. Dave's Dolphin and Whale Safari who for 15 years has taken people on boats to check out ocean creatures.

Earlier in the week, three Bryde's whales were spotted off Laguna Beach and Newport Beach. There are only an estimated 20 or so Bryde's Whales in the entire Northern Pacific, he said. Last year, three showed up and stuck around Orange County. Before that, Southern could recall only a single local Bryde's Whale sighting over the past decade.

The Bryde's whales Southern and customers saw - each in the 40 to 50 foot range - were zooming down the coast, chasing sardines, going about 7 knots off the coast of Laguna Beach.

Bryde's whales were again spotted by a Dana Wharf Whale Watching on Wednesday, and captain Calvin Cooper reported spotting an oddity in the air, a Frigatebird usually found in the tropics.

"It's pretty rare up here," Cooper said.

The early spike in water temps have people wondering if the ocean this summer will reach last year's peak of almost 80 degrees. They also wonder if this is the new normal.

Dana Wharf manager Donna Kalez said fishermen are buzzing about recent Dorado catch, courtesy of the

warm water. Usually, when Dorado do reach as far north as Orange County, they get here in August and September. A typical temperature for Dorado is 74 degrees.

Another sportfish causing a buzz is an unusual number of Bluefin Tuna, which are biting in deeper waters. But they can require several hours to haul out of the ocean, so Kalez said many boats have been chasing Dorado.

“This is early, but the water is perfect for (Dorado),” Kalez said. “We’re really excited.”

Cooper said a 150-pound striped marlin, a tropical fish usually found here closer to September, was caught on Thursday.

National Weather Service meteorologist Mark Moede said the warm water is likely attributed to the lack of upwelling in recent weeks, and a general lack of northwest winds pushing down from Point Conception to Southern California. That usually brings cooler water temperatures to the surface.

Instead, Southern California has had the opposite -- a south wind that circulates water from the south. It could be a small element of El Nino’s lingering affects, he said.

The ocean is even warmer in San Diego, where Mission Beach was clocking 75 this week. San Clemente Pier was at about 73 degrees, when Newport was a tad cooler at about 70.

Moede said we can expect summer water temps to stay toasty.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it lasted all the way through the summer time,” he said.

Another change in the climate making Orange County seem more like the tropics are lightning showing up with tropical storms. A year ago, in July, beaches from San Clemente to Seal Beach had to evacuate the entire coast during a lightning storm. That weather pattern is so rare here that local lifeguards had to consult with counterparts on the East Coast for a protocol on how to deal with such events.

Dagampat said surfers once could feel confident about predicting ocean temperatures. Now, even with online weather tools and modern technology, it’s tougher for the average surfer to know when to pack a wetsuit or plan for trunks only.

“Never has it been so unpredictable,” said Dagampat, who started surfing decades ago while growing up in Hawaii.

In the meantime, he’ll trunk it.

And the two North Dakota visitors? They got a souvenir to take home after trunking it during their surf session.

“You are going to get the gift of surfing for a few weeks: the sunburn and the rash,” Dagampat said.

“You’ll remember the time you spent in the water.”