Marijuana laws loosen

By Zach Colona

About two years ago 21-year-old Allen Johnson (not his real name), was arrested for possession of marijuana in Chester County. Although he did not possess any other drugs, he admits he was struggling with addiction.

Johnson was given two options: jail or drug court, which is similar to probation. He picked drug court, a process which took about two years, required a $2,000 fine and countless drug tests to clear his record. He successfully completed the requirements of the program over several months and was released.

Like Johnson, many are affected by laws that prohibit the distribution and consumption of a drug that is rapidly becoming legal in many states.

Nineteen states allow marijuana for medicinal purposes and four states (Alaska, Colorado, Oregon and Washington) have legalized it for recreational purposes.

The most recent to make a move towards decriminalization is the District of Columbia, which just passed a bill with 70 percent approval that as of Feb. 26 allows people to grow, consume and possess marijuana in Washington D.C.

This is just one of many places in America that now allows weed to be processed 50,000 people through any level of jail costs a lot of money.

Finally, proponents say marijuana has health benefits which some doctors support.

"Marijuana can be helpful," said Vivek Murthy, the United States acting Surgeon General. He also hopes to let science dictate policies on the drug.

Some clear benefits are easing the effects of chemotherapy and increasing one’s appetite for patients undergoing cancer treatments or suffering with terminal illness.

Many states have legalized cannabis for health purposes and many high profile doctors have good things to say.

"I think most of us have come around to the belief that marijuana is hugely beneficial when used correctly for medicinal purposes," said Dr. Mehmet Oz, a tv personality and professor of the Department of Surgery at Columbia University.

Some advocates wonder if prior charges will be removed from peoples records if the drug is made legal.

Johnson spent nearly two years attending meetings and was subject to random testing.

But if Johnson was arrested a couple of years later, he most likely would have been fined $25 to $100 and sent on his way. Still, Johnson, who works at a supermarket in Bear, Del., says he doesn’t regret it.

"My whole life would be drastically different. I don’t think I could do it again, but I think [the experience] made me a better son and brother.”

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Listening to loud music causes hearing loss, experts say

By Erica Setnick

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “1.1 billion teenagers and young adults around the world are at risk of hearing loss due to the unsafe use of personal audio devices, including smartphones, and exposure to damaging levels of sound at noisy entertainment venues such as nightclubs, bars and sporting events.”

WHO reports more than 41 million people aged 12-35 have hearing loss and the number is increasing.

"It’s a pretty obvious study, but I don’t think a lot of people really care about their hearing until it’s too late," said Jimmy Guaraldo, a healthcare major, in response to the WHO study.

That nonchalant attitude is a problem, experts say. “As they go about their daily lives doing what they enjoy, more and more young people are placing themselves at risk of hearing loss,” noted Dr. Etteme Krug, WHO director for the Department of Management of Disability, Violence and Injury Prevention.

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Student saves thousands by transferring to DCCC

Wicca: the spiritual path less taken

Depression is more common than you think: ways to cope

“A dark day” for Germanwings
By Marwa Benahmed-Ali
Special to The Communitarian

Brandon Formanes, 20, of Millbourne Pa., said he felt accomplished when he received his acceptance letter from Lees-McRae College in North Carolina. Formanes’ acceptance to Lees-McRae College was his golden ticket to freedom, he thought.

Growing up in what he called a strict household, Formanes said he rarely went out due to a curfew of eight-o’clock and limited places to go to. By living on a college campus far away from home, Formanes had the opportunity to stay out late, attend the best parties, and date the most beautiful girls on campus.

“My consistent late night partying caused me to be on probation for my most beautiful girls on campus. And, to tell the truth, I wasn’t taking classes very seriously. I was partying a lot and enjoying the freedom, but I wasn’t thinking about the thousands of dollars that I was flushing down the toilet. I told myself that I had to pack my bags and go back home to Millbourne.

Q: What did you do when you returned to Millbourne?
A: Well, I took a bit of time to reassess my situation. After that, I got offered a job, and transferred to Delaware County Community College that following semester. It was definitely the best option for me.

Q: Please explain why this was the best option for you?
A: Now that I had a job and I had a bit more help from my parents, I could pay for books out of pocket versus relying on credit cards. I also didn’t have to rely on a loan surplus, which is only going to benefit me later. And, of course, since I’m home, the option to go crazy and party all the time isn’t as available, so I had the opportunity to focus more. Overall, I feel like this option would have the least negative effect on my immediate and distant futures.

Q: Please elaborate.
A: The system is currently victimizing students and I don’t want to be another victim. I wanted to come out the other side of the educational system and be in control of my own future, and eventually become independent. By transferring to Delaware County Community College, I realized that the education was on par, and sometimes superior than my old school. I also saved myself the eventual $140,000 in loans that I would have accumulated if I had stayed [at my previous school].

Q: How does it make you feel knowing that you saved yourself from paying $140,000?
A: Relieved. It’s nice to know that regardless of my decision to drop out of that school, the connections here at Delaware County Community College keep the doors open for me to return to a four year college, and knowing that my future is in my hands keeps things in perspective.

Q: Would you recommend DCCC or other community colleges to prospective students?
A: Of course. Knowing what I know now, I’ve realized that going to a four-year college or university straight out of high school can be detrimental to your future. Once you’ve accumulated beyond $20,000 in debt, you have very few options left. You stay in school, or find a crappy job. Beyond a lot of luck, you’ll need your degree to be able to deal with all the debt. Community colleges at least give you the option to walk away if school isn’t for you, and let’s not forget that it costs around $4,000 a year compared to $33,000.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?
A: My advice to all students who are pursuing college is: Don’t screw up in college because your mistakes will follow you for the rest of your life. Make good decisions, not bad ones that can potentially derail your future.

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Mike Bianchi: Nick Saban, Alabama, SEC owe apology to all domestic violence victims

By Mike Bianchi Orlando Sentinel (TNS)

Too late, Nick Saban and all of his sycophant administrators at the University of Alabama. You can’t save face by kicking a football player off your team who should have never been allowed onto your team in the first place. The iconic Saban, athletic director Bill Battle and school President Judy Bonner ... yes, a woman ... owe domestic violence victims everywhere an explanation and an apology for Jonathan Taylor. Not only that, but they need to also apologize to the alleged victim in the latest domestic violence charges against Taylor and beg her not to sue the school for bringing a suspected domestic abuser onto campus. Aren’t school employees supposed to provide a safe and secure environment for fellow students and residents of Tuscaloosa? I wrote this when it happened back in January and I’ll reiterate it here: Why didn’t the national media skewer Saban in the first place for signing of Taylor, a 6-foot-4, 340-pound nose guard who was kicked off the University of Georgia team for aggravated assault and domestic violence? Now, two months later, Saban is forced to follow Georgia’s lead and kick Taylor off the team after he was arrested AGAIN for domestic violence victims.

The question is why did Saban sign Taylor in the first place? Better yet, why didn’t Saban even have the guts to stand up and explain the signing when it happened. Instead, he sent athletic director Bill Battle out to do his dirty work. Said Battle at the time to AL.com: “Our coaches and I feel he (Taylor) is worthy of a second chance.” As I wrote in January: Would the university be willing to give such a second chance to a swimmer or volleyball player with two pending felonies? Saban, a month after signing Taylor, came out and made a despicably emotional plea about why he signed an alleged domestic abuser: “We recruited this young man out of high school and we felt that from what we knew about him, what his high school coach said, what the people at the school that he was at said about him, and where he came from in junior college, that he was the kind of guy that deserved a second chance ... I said this before that when people are young ... and that is not a mistake that we condone in any shape or form. That’s any disrespect to any person, let alone a female. There’s some occasion to not condemn them for life, but to give them another chance.”

Gag! Saban sounded suspiciously like the Dallas Cowboys, who just signed Greg Hardy, a defensive end who was found guilty of assaulting and threatening to kill his girlfriend last year before the verdict was reversed when the alleged victim didn’t show up at trial. The Cowboys, like Saban with Taylor, laughably made it sound like they were signing Hardy out of the goodness of their hearts. Charlotte Jones Anderson, daughter of owner Jerry Jones and Nick Saban, told the Dallas Morning News: “We don’t believe in throwing people away: I'm a mom. I've got a daughter; I've got two sons. This is a serious issue for me, personally. I want my kids to know that domestic violence is not acceptable. But I also want them to know that if they make a mistake, no matter what the issue is, I'm not just going to throw them out. I've got to help them come back and make a better choice.” Why don’t the Crimson Tide and the Cowboys just tell the truth and tell us what we already know: “We'll sign anybody as long as they can help us win.” Come on, Jerry Jones and Nick Saban, we’re not a bunch of fools. The Cowboys signed Hardy because they were 28th in sacks last year and Hardy’s one of the most dynamic edge rushers in the league. Saban signed Taylor because Ohio State ran over his team in the College Football Playoff semifinal and he needed a dominant run-stuffer in the middle of his defense. For Saban to act like he was trying to save Taylor by giving him a second chance is insulting. Shame on you, Nick Saban. Shame on you, Alabama Crimson Tide. Shame on you, Southeastern Conference.
Depressed? You are not alone

By Maryleigh Sharp

According to Magill’s Medical Guide, 15 to 20 percent of adults will experience major depression at some point in their lifetime. I am one of those people and I know how it feels to want to end things in your life.

Some people may want to hurt themselves and others may want to seclude themselves from the world, yet I am telling you there is a way to get through this. It may not be easy, but I know it’s a day-by-day process.

In Magill’s Medical Guide, Oliver Oyama, Ph.D., and Nancy Piotrowski, Ph.D., state, “Depression is one of the most common psychiatric disorders to occur in most lifetimes, caused by biological, psychological, social, and/or environmental factors.”

Depression blindered my life when I thought it could never happen to me. I didn’t know at the time what activated my feelings, yet I knew I didn’t want to go down the path I was on.

Recently, I had thoughts of suicide which led me to a bridge in Manayunk. I was gripping the railing so tight my knuckles turned white.

With the thought of jumping to end it all, the only thing that saved me was the phone call from my mom who had no idea which led me to a bridge in Manayunk. I was gripping the railing so tight my knuckles turned white.

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I never felt good enough because I was too “curvy” for today’s ideal look. I thought I was doing something wrong even something as small as accidentally bumping into someone.

I have since learned there are different ways to treat depression, but it all comes down to what type you have.

There are two types of depression: one is clinical depression and the other is bipolar depression.

I have clinical depression, which can be treated with inhibitors, antidepressant drugs or psychotherapy.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Psychotherapy is treatment of mental or emotional illness by talking about problems rather than by using medicine or drugs.” I do psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy helps me calm down and realize that I have a chance to change someone else’s life, just by talking to someone I don’t know. They don’t know anything about me except that I have depression.

Treating depression can be difficult and it’s not easy to admit to someone you have it.

But in addition to medication and psychotherapy, there are many other ways to manage depression, according to the Australian Psychological Society, which include: creating a list of enjoyable activities, reflecting on past achievements, dwelling on the positive when experiencing a depression episode, and focusing your mind on constructive solutions to deter negative thoughts.

According to WebMD, “It is estimated that, by the year 2020, major depression will be second only to ischemic heart disease in terms of the leading causes of disability in the world.” I want to stop this statistic and be one less victim of depression.

Even though most of my days aren’t easy, I still push through because I know deep down that, no matter what, I am going to get better. I know that I can make a change and that is what makes me want to kick depression’s butt.

If you or a loved one is struggling with depression, these resources could be helpful: American Psychological Association, Centers for Disease Control, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Call 1-800-273-TALK.
HHS head: Feds will continue to build on Obamacare successes

By Sylvia M. Burwell
(TNS)

For more than a century, American leaders have struggled to find ways to extend quality, affordable health care to everyone. We made progress for the elderly, the under-served and children, but for many Americans, the goal remained unattainable.

Nathan Auldridge knew that truth too well. He was a senior in college when he started experiencing double vision and severe vomiting. He was diagnosed with a life-threatening brain tumor and had to undergo a craniotomy and six weeks of radiation. The treatments were successful and he was declared cancer-free in 2006.

But as a cancer survivor, Nathan found that a new health struggle was just beginning. In addition to having a pre-existing condition, he had developed nephropathy. He was suddenly very difficult to insure.

In 2013, Nathan worked with special needs adults, a job he was passionate about but that didn’t provide health coverage. So he found a plan on the private market for almost $500 a month with a $5,000 deductible. Still, with coverage his prescriptions and medical expenses were more than half of his yearly income of $20,000. He was able to get by only with help from his family.

But five years ago this week, Nathan _ and millions of Americans like him _ found hope in a new law, the Affordable Care Act. After years of dropped coverage, filthy plans and barriers to care, everyone’s coverage has improved, because consumers have new protections, including including requiring carriers to cover their employers. They can’t be turned away because of pre-existing conditions; they can’t be dropped just because they get largest industrial source of toxic air that Americans count on, like trips to the emergency room, prescriptions and preventive services.

And coverage is now affordable for millions of Americans. As of Feb. 22, nearly 11.7 million Americans had signed up or were re-enrolled through the marketplaces during this year’s open enrollment. And those shoppers found good deals. Nearly 80 percent of 2015 marketplace customers could get HealthCare.gov could purchase coverage for $100 or less per month after tax credits.

And we’re starting to see real progress toward ensuring that every American has access to affordable, quality coverage. Since the passage of the Affordable Care Act five years ago, about 16.4 million uninsured people have gained health coverage. That’s the largest reduction of the uninsured in four decades.

Nathan found a plan on the 2014 marketplace that, with the help of a premium tax credit, cost him just $811 per month. And this year it’s even lower, at $100. His new deductible is only $725. And since his prescriptions are now covered, his $1,200-a-month nephropathy drug costs him only $10.

Across the nation, consumers found quite a bargain. To support this claim, the health industry dishonestly asserts that the benefits of this particular standard are only $4 million to $6 million. But the technology needed to reduce mercury and other toxic air pollution will dramatically improve air quality, preventing thousands of non-fatal heart attacks, asthma attacks and hospitalizations and prevent up to 11,000 premature deaths a year. The EPA valued these health benefits at $37 billion to $90 billion annually.

This doesn’t even include facets that are too difficult to monetize. How do you put a price tag on reduced cancer risk? Or on a child born healthy, without mercury poisoning? And _ just as importantly _ they may not know what to do to keep themselves healthy.

Our next challenge is making these historic changes work for individuals by connecting people to the services they need. Going “From Coverage to Care.”

“From Coverage to Care” is about empowering people to take control of their own health. It focuses on three priorities: connecting people to the care they need, teaching them how to understand their benefits and their bills; and giving them the tools to make healthier decisions for healthier lives.

If you would like to learn more about how to take control of your health or how to help others, we have created a number of resources, including videos and printable materials, at the website From Coverage To Care.

Five years ago, we laid the foundation for a historic transformation in our health care system. Today, it’s paying off, for consumers, businesses and our economy. And we will continue to build on that foundation, to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, quality care _ and knows how to use it. Americans deserve no less.

Reining in the coal industry’s assault on public health

By Lisa Garcia
Los Angeles Times
(TNS)

One in five premature deaths are attributable to air pollution. Can EPA rules help?

On Wednesday the U.S. Supreme Court will hear arguments in a crucial case about regulating mercury and other toxic air pollution coming from coal-fired power plants. At stake is a very dangerous precedent: that industry profits are more important than thousands of lives.

In late 2011, the Environmental Protection Agency issued its first-ever Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, or MATS, to reduce the pollution emitted by power plants. Simply by requiring the worst-polluting plants to match the performance and technology of their more Responsible competitors, these standards will prevent between 4,200 and 11,000 premature deaths per year.

These public health protections already were years overdue because the coal industry and its allies tried to derail them from the beginning. In the current court case, the petitioners _ two industry trade groups and 21 states _ claim that the EPA can’t set limits on toxic air pollution without first considering the financial impact on the industry.

Last year, the D.C. Circuit Court rejected this argument. Industry _ in a last-ditch attempt to overturn these protections _ appealed, and the latest Supreme Court agreed to hear this case.

Air pollution is lethal. The EPA calculated that 1 in 20 deaths in the U.S. each year is related to air pollution, mostly excess instances of heart attack, stroke, lung cancer and cardiopulmonary disease. Coal-fired power plants are by far the largest industrial source of toxic air pollution, responsible for 50 percent of all U.S. emissions of mercury, a potent neurotoxin particularly dangerous to children. Scientific studies have found that nearly 7 percent of all U.S. women of childbearing age are exposed to mercury at levels that can be harmful for fetal brain development.

Many of those whose health is at risk are low-income and people of color. “Coal Blooded: Putting Profits Before People,” a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council, found that the 6 million people living near power plants in America have a per capita income 15 percent lower than the U.S. average income, and 39 percent are people of color.

The EPA’s emissions standard for power plants represented a huge step forward in protecting all of us from this assault on public health.

With this lawsuit, the coal industry is trying to revive an old, dysfunctional approach to environmental protection that Congress scrapped more than 20 years ago. Before the Clean Air Act was amended in 1990, the EPA was paralyzed for decades by wrangling over which toxins should be regulated and whether controlling them was worth the expense. That system worked well for industry, but failed the American public.

In 1990, Congress decided that the EPA could consider the costs when determining how stringent its standards should be. But such estimates should not prevent the agency from controlling hazardous air pollutants at all costs. Nevertheless, industry lawyers are now claiming that before the EPA can require power plants to cut their toxic pollution, the agency must weigh the costs of compliance against the benefits.

The air is polluted, almost imperceptibly, by microscopic particle produced by combustion of fossil fuels. One of its major sources is coal; a mountain of it is coaxed toward the boiler at a Central Pennsylvania power plant. (Michael Bryant/Philadelphia Inquirer/MCT)
Listening to loud music causes hearing loss, experts say

“They should be aware that once you lose your hearing, it won’t come back. Taking simple preventative actions will allow people to continue to enjoy themselves without putting their hearing at risk.”

Some preventive actions suggested by doctors are turning the volume down to about 60 percent on listening devices, moving away from loud sounds, or wearing noise-cancelling headphones, which can reduce the risk of raising the volume on listening devices.

The Hearing Health Foundation (HHF) lists common causes of hearing loss on their website. One of the causes is Presbycusis, which is slowly losing hearing with age.

Another cause is noise-induced hearing loss and, according to the HHF, many construction workers, farmers, musicians, airport workers, tree cutters, and people in the armed forces have hearing problems because of too much exposure to loud noise.

Sometimes loud noise can cause a ringing, hissing, or roaring sound in the ears, called tinnitus.

Other causes, according to HHF’s website, are viruses or bacteria, heart conditions or stroke, head injuries, tumors, and certain medicines. Even diabetes and hypertension can cause hearing loss.

WHO warns: “Hearing is a precious faculty. Hearing damage due to excessive noise cannot be reversed. Quality of life can decline among affected people, while health care costs for society can increase. Noise-induced hearing loss is preventable – so look after your hearing.”

According to Carlo Alcaraz, a communications major, there has to be some moderation when listening to music with headphones.

“I know when a song’s too loud and I adjust [the volume] so that I don’t get a headache or anything, but when you see guys walking around and all it sounds like is static coming from their heads, that might be an issue,” says Alcaraz. “I think that there needs to be a balance. If there are people that really need to cut down on the sound, they can still enjoy their music other ways like buying a small radio, playing [music] from your PC speakers, or by setting the volume limit on your MP3. There are a hundred ways you can enjoy [music] without having to give it up and still be kind to your ears.”

Contact Erica Setnick at communitarian@mail.dccc.edu

Amonie Holloman, a nursing major, relaxes and listens to music in the STEM building between classes.

Mickey Carroll, a business major, quietly listens to music between classes.

The World Health Organization’s safe listening times:

- 85 dB - the level of noise inside a car: eight hours
- 90 dB - lawn mower: two hours, 30 minutes
- 95 dB - an average motorcycle: 47 minutes
- 100 dB - car horn or underground train: 15 minutes
- 105 dB - mp3 player at maximum volume: four minutes
- 115 dB - loud rock concert: 28 seconds
- 120 dB - vuvuzela or sirens: nine seconds

Courtesy of The World Health Organization

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My path to Wicca

By Matthew Pellegrini

The circle is cast, and we are “in a place that is not a place, and a time that is not a time.”

The energy in the circle of robes, chanting wicca is overwhelming. I stand among them.

The gods and goddess enter in the bodied art of practices. Their presence is incredibly dramatic and powerful.

One of the gods begins to lecture us. During the conversation, one god shows off his godlike qualities when he says, “I am sorry that you humans need evidence.”

Later, the other god tells us that we are being lazy with our spiritual work. But then he says, “It is not my job to reprimand you, as I have just done.”

Several years ago, I never saw myself committing to a specific religion. I certainly never thought I would devote a large amount of time to spiritual practices, such as Wicca.

Wicca is a pagan religion in which practitioners often believe in many gods, branching out into the deities of many ancient religions. It focuses on an initiatory path, which means that it requires a great deal of work and commitment from me, even though I am a novice.

I was raised Catholic and attended a Catholic school for a few years. Before high school, I never questioned the initially unperceivable.

Once I began to question the divine, I resorted to logic and science.

Eventually, I may have told people I was agnostic, but that was a nice way of saying I really doubted the divine’s existence entirely.

It took a period of insanity to open up my mind to other realities.

In 2010, I met a woman at Clark University where I was studying at the time. She did not do anything but hang out with me, but I immediately fell for her. I became paranoid, and thought that this woman put a love spell on me. She did not do anything but hang out with me, but I immediately fell for her.

I was also intrigued by dark magick, meaning with practice, a witch can control people to do what he or she wanted. But I eventually began to believe that magick becomes unethical when too much control is involved.

My real fascination with magick began with the knowledge that when it was successful, there was real evidence of spiritual activity. For example, I once healed a swollen ankle overnight with energy healing. I focused my intention and will towards the injured area with the skills I had learned from reiki, and the next day it was healed.

Reiki is essentially a divine, healing energy that comes to the practitioner with training. It is one of the many kinds of things that Wiccans tend to perform.

I have had many successes while working with angels and other spirits, which is another kind of work many pagans perform. With this magick, I quit smoking, treated my ADD and anxiety, and made myself a better person.

While reading a book on the dead, I attempted to use willing spirits to rid me of my addiction to cigarettes. The next day I lit up a cigarette, and I only smoked half of it. I no longer wanted to smoke, and I have not smoked since.

I regularly work with an angel to help with my ADD. The first time I worked with this entity, I was able to sit and read for hours. It was a shock to me, because before then I struggled to even read books that I enjoyed.

I have had many successes while working with magick, often working with spirits) and the divine live, all interact with the physical world in ways too vast and complex to comprehend.

But I like to think I am getting there, and I understand more each day.

Contact Matt Pellegrini at Communitarian@mail.los.edu

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By Louis Sahagun
Los Angeles Times
(TNS)

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK — Yosemite National Park is bracing for its driest year on record, with visitor bureaus downplaying the allure of the park’s most famous waterfall and instead touting the park as a destination for hiking, bicycling and photography.

Yosemite Falls will probably go dry in June, two months earlier than usual, parks officials say. The Merced River, which powers the spectacular Nevada and Vernal falls before meandering across the Yosemite Valley floor, will probably slow to a shallow stream about the same time. And with the drought enabling western pine bark beetles to kill large areas of forest, the park is preparing for a bad fire season.

“Visitors bureaus are saying they’re not going to promote Yosemite Falls as much this year,” said Scott Gediman, assistant superintendent for public and legislative affairs at the park. “My response: No problem. We have to be realistic.”

March this year felt more like June to visitors. The snowpack that supplies the Merced River is less than 12 percent of normal, an unprecedented low that has prompted officials to close Badger Pass Ski Resort months ahead of schedule and advise prospective summer backpackers to plan trips near large lakes instead of dwindling streams.

The fourth consecutive year of drought is shaping up to be the worst of them all in the region of John Muir and Ansel Adams. Things started drying up as early as January.

Average annual rainfall in Yosemite Valley is 37 inches through July 31. So far, the area has received about 12 inches, and the rainy season is almost over.

Jeff Holmquist, a research scientist at the Institute of Environment and Sustainability at the University of California, Los Angeles, said the change will be stark for longtime park visitors.

“With the exception of September, it used to be that there was almost no place you could throw a sleeping bag down in Yosemite that was beyond the reach of water sounds: dripping, gurgling, roaring,” he said.

The last time it was this dry was more than 1,000 years ago, say scientists at the 747,000-acre park, which draws about 4 million visitors a year.

Now, the nervous chatter in Yosemite and nearby communities is: Have you noticed all the trees that are dead or dying? Throughout the Sierra Nevada, projections are for more frequent, larger and more intense wildfires fed in part by disease and infestations of bark beetles, which flourish during times of drought. Federal authorities say that forest mortality rose 300 percent from 2013 to 2014 largely because of the two scourges, leaving dead timber ripe for fire.

The bark beetle is endemic in California mountains. But years of fire suppression, coupled with increasingly dense growth and consecutive warm winters, have triggered beetle population explosions earlier in the year.

Healthy pine trees deal with bark beetles by drowning the invaders in sap produced with water. But in the drought-stricken mountains, hungry beetles land on stressed trees and emit an odor that attracts new swarms.

The beetles bore into the bark and feast on the moist inner core, where trees store and transport nutrients from roots to needles. The beetles carve egg galleries, where larvae hatch, mature and emerge to infect other trees.

“All these trees are competing for water,” park scientist Joe Meyer said recently as he looked at a stand of ponderosa pines. “But away from the rivers, and up on the slopes, the water is just not there. So, only the strongest will survive.”

The good news is that a warmer winter allowed firefighters to begin setting small, tightly controlled burns in some areas of the park to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfires and benefit wildlife by creating open areas in thick brush. Controlled burns also can give firefighters better access to any wildfires in the coming fire season, authorities said.

In some areas, nonnative fish that evolved in warmer waters elsewhere are likely to outlast cold-water native species. Of particular concern is the fate of a unique minnow known as the Redhills Roach, which is found only in a small stream just west of Yosemite’s boundary.

Last summer, the stream was reduced to a small pond shared by about 1,000 of the minnows and dozens of predatory nonnative green sunfish.

“This year, the drought will be even worse,” said Peter Moyle, an expert on stream ecology in the Sierra Nevada at the University of California, Davis. “We’re planning to go back in July and rescue all the minnows we can.”

“With the exception of September, it used to be that there was almost no place you could throw a sleeping bag down in Yosemite that was beyond the reach of water sounds: dripping, gurgling, roaring,” he said.

Tourists stop to view the Yosemite Valley at Tunnel View on March 20, 2015 in Yosemite National Park, Calif. (Robert Gauthier/Los Angeles Times/TNS)
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Germanwings co-pilot studied suicide methods online, officials say

By Jean-Baptiste Piggin in Berlin and Jessica Camille Aguirre in Paris dpa, Berlin (TNS)

April 02--BERLIN/PARIS -- Andreas Lubitz, the co-pilot alleged to have intentionally downed Germanwings flight 4U9525 killing himself and 149 others on board, researched suicide methods and cockpit door security mechanism on the internet, German prosecutors said Thursday.

Lubitz’s browser history for the period March 16-23 was still stored on a tablet computer found in his Dusseldorf apartment, the city’s prosecutor said. Lubitz is thought to have manually changed the plane’s flight trajectory and caused the fatal crash on March 24.

Prosecutor Ralf Herrenbrueck said he concluded that Lubitz had been the person searching based on login information, personal emails and the search terms.

“It showed the user searched on the one hand for medical treatment methods and on the other for suicide types and how to go about them,” Herrenbrueck said. “At least one person, the person also spent several minutes trying out search terms for cockpit doors and their security protection.”

The findings underscored a string of revelations about 27-year-old Lubitz’s precarious health, after prosecutors revealed he had a note in his medical file acknowledging suicidal tendencies years back.

Lufthansa, Germanwings parent company, also said they had an email from him saying he was grappling with depression during flight school training in 2009, sparking questions about why his history did not raise red flags at the airline carrier.

Two days after the crash, Lufthansa chief executive Carsten Spohr had said Lubitz had passed all his medical tests, and that he “was fit for flying without any restrictions.”

Lubitz had also passed medical and psychological evaluations to obtain a student pilot certificate from the US Federal Aviation Authority in 2010.

The plane’s second black box, the digital flight data recorder, was found Thursday in the remote region of the French Alps where the Airbus A320 slammed into a mountainside as it flew from Barcelona, Spain en route to Dusseldorf, Germany. The crash claimed victims from more than a dozen countries, and many on board were from Germany and Spain.

Speaking at a press conference, the French prosecutor in charge of the country’s criminal investigation said that 150 DNA profiles had been retrieved at the site after investigators had collected 2,854 pieces of human remains.

Brice Robin, head of the French probe that is parallel to the German investigation, had changed the status of the case from involuntary homicide after hearing audio captured on one of the plane’s two black boxes, the cockpit voice recorder.

But investigators hoping to glean more details from the flight recorder, which captures parameters of the plane, have been combing the mountainside searching for it since the crash. Brice said that the recorder was finally found in a condition that would probably allow the data it carried to be extracted.

DNA samples collected at the site will be transferred to laboratories where technicians begin the process of matching the snippets with other samples drawn from the victims’ belongings. Francois Daoust, the head of one of the DNA tracing labs, told dpa the process of formal identification could take up to four months.

Responding to mounting questions about safety procedures, Germany’s aviation regulator LBA and the airlines association BDL will include aircrew union leaders and aviation medical specialists, who will face the task of examining already stringent regulations.

“The co-pilot was repeatedly certified healthy,” BDL president Klaus-Peter Sieglöch said. “Airlines assume they can rely on a fitness-to-fly certificate.”

Officials at France’s aviation authority, BEA, who are conducting similar examinations have said they have narrowed the focus of their investigation to “cockpit door locking system logic and cockpit access and exit procedures, as well as the criteria and procedures applied to detect specific psychological profiles.”

An aerial photo shows what appears to be wreckage from the crash of a Germanwings plane in the French Alps, between Barcelonette and Digne, on Tuesday, March 24, 2015. The plane was carrying 150 people when it crashed Tuesday en route from Spain to Germany, officials said, warning that there are not expected to be any survivors. It is not clear if it sent a distress signal. The dead are believed to include 16 German schoolchildren. (Duclet Stephane/Maxppp/Zuma Press/TNS)

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