

Africa 's melting glaciers a warning sign for climate change

Over the past 100 years, the glaciers on Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak in Tanzania, have been melting away at an impressive rate, and scientists say the glaciers could disappear by the next century.

In the local Kikuyu language, Mount Kenya is called Kirinyaga, or the 'white thing'. The name Kirinyaga may become obsolete.

And indeed, its snow-capped top seems to be a wonder, especially compared to the equatorial heat down below.

While the ecological effects of the glaciers on the ecosystems of the two mountains are debatable, the melting snows at their summits act as a tangible way to show that climate change is actually happening.

'Those are visible indicators of climate change. When we start talking about shrinking of a forest belt, people have to start doing more research, but everybody can notice the shrinking of the glaciers,' said Christian Lambrechts, a project officer with the United Nations Environment Programme.

Lambrechts said the melting ice caps show the world what temperature rise caused by man-made activities has done.

'The presence of glaciers in Africa, being right under the equator, has always triggered people's imagination. Their disappearance calls for some attention,' he said.

While he doubts the melting snow will have a serious impact on the people and species below, he said it has been a way to get people around the world aware of climate change.

The glaciers atop Mount Kilimanjaro, at 5,895 metres above sea level, have receded about 82 percent since the area was first surveyed in 1912.

The phenomenon raised its heads at the 12th UN Climate Change Conference in Nairobi that began Nov 6, where developing countries have been placed at the forefront of talks.

Although they have contributed the least to the emission of greenhouse gasses, developing countries are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change since they are the least likely to be able to cope with their onset.

It is not just East Africa's glaciers that are feeling the heat. The Himalayas and Huascarán National Park in Peru are also threatened.

But the receding glaciers on Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro have raised a worldwide alarm.

The ice caps have forced the UN's cultural body UNESCO to question whether sites on its World Heritage List could be scratched off because of climate change.

Both the Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro national parks and their ecosystems are listed as World Heritage Sites.

'To be put on the World Heritage List, a site has to have a certain universal outstanding value that everyone appreciates. If that criterion ceases to exist then that site will no longer be on our list,' said Joseph Massaquoi, the director of UNESCO's regional office for science and technology in Africa.

'The glacier melting is obviously a visible sign that climate change is having a negative impact on our world heritage,' he said.

UNESCO has been studying these effects on both cultural and natural World Heritages Sites, but undoubtedly, the erosion of cultural sites are easier to address - buildings can be restored and rebuilt, but 'we can't replace an ice cap if it disappears', Massaquoi said.

The only way to avoid the effects the glacier's melting - from reduced tourism, to possible environmental impacts - is to reverse climate change, he added.

The Kenyan-based Green Belt Movement, created by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai, encourages tree planting as the best way to stop the glacial melt.

'If we can stop deforestation and plant enough trees, we can reverse this situation and maybe the snow would not be melting so fast,' Frederick Njau, a programme officer with the group told Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA).

But no matter what the science or what the solution, the ice shrinking on the two mountains has served as proof of climate change.

'It's serving the community to demonstrate something has happened,' Lambrechts said. 'It's become a good call to action.'

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