

Drought, heat kill Arizona 'sky islands'

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Arizona's "sky islands," mountainside oases that provide a cool lush retreat from the desert, are falling victim to higher temperatures and a long drought.

Debbie Fagan told The New York Times that she settled in Summerhaven near Tucson 25 years ago after a country-wide search for the perfect place.

"Nature is confused," Fagan said. "We used to have four seasons. Now we have two. I love this place dearly, and this is very hard for me to watch."

In 2003 and 2004, wildfires devastated thousands of acres. The trees were first weakened by high temperatures, and then hit by insects with fire finishing the job.

Scientists say that the devastation of the "sky islands" suggests that the combination of record warmth and drought is not just a normal climate swing.

"A lot of people think climate change and the ecological repercussions are 50 years away," said Thomas Swetnam, head of the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research at the University of Arizona in Tucson. "But it's happening now in the West. The data is telling us that we are in the middle of one of the first big indicators of climate change impacts in the continental United States."

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