

Lifestyle melts away with Uganda peak snow cap

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The Rwenzori mountain range in western Uganda. In 1906, Mount Speke, one of the highest peaks on the range was covered with 217 hectares of ice, according to the Climate Change Unit at Uganda's ministry of water and environment. In 2006, only 18.5 hectares remained

In 1906, Mount Speke, one of the highest peaks of Uganda's Rwenzori Mountains was covered with 217 hectares (536 acres) of ice, according to the Climate Change Unit at Uganda's ministry of water and environment. In 2006, only 18.5 hectares remained.

Satellite images taken in 1987 and again in 2005 show that much of the thaw has occurred over the past two decades.

When Yasamu Maate was a younger man, he could stand in his garden

on a clear, cloudless morning and stare at the ice caps on the range.

But on a recent Friday the 87-year-old lamented the loss of those ice caps, which have all but disappeared, as the world around him has gotten warmer.

"We used to use the snow and ice as our guide," he said, sitting on a roadside chair in Bundibugyo, a village in western Uganda at the base of the Rwenzoris, which run roughly 100 kilometres (60 miles) along the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo.

"We would say if there was a lot of snow on the mountains the rain was coming, but these days we are not seeing it. The coldness has disappeared."

"The ice is literally disappearing. In some cases it has disappeared, and I am more than certain that this is a result of [global warming](#)," said Philip Gagwe, who heads the Climate Change Unit.

"Man-made global warming is here. We are smelling it and we are touching it."

Uganda's National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) believes that if melting continues at the current rate the ice will be gone by 2023.

For the people of Bundibugyo who rely on agriculture to survive, temperature increases have changed their lives dramatically.

"I used to be able to plant beans down here at around March," said Nelson Bikalwamuli, 45, referring to his garden at the base of the mountain. "But now it has changed."

Beans serve as both a food crop and a cash crop for Bikalwamuli, so he can't afford to lose them.

He's had to secure a plot of land part way up the mountain, where he says temperatures are still cool enough to yield a decent crop, but the trek up is hard, and competition for space is growing increasingly fierce.

"People just keep moving up, up, up," he said. "I fear soon we may be on top of each other."

Goretti Kitutu, a climate change specialist at NEMA, said people might soon be competing for water as well.

The snow cap provides a steady trickle of water to the neighbouring communities and feeds the Nile river basin, which includes Lake George and Lake Albert.

"Once this ice disappears we shall have serious problems in the hydrology of the area. We will see reduced water in the lakes and that will impact the Nile basin," Kitutu explained.

"There are plenty of countries that depend on that water," she said. "You could easily have communities that will be fighting over water," she added.

-- 'The country is punished for someone else's crime' --

But on the dusty, quiet streets of Bundibugyo, the potential impacts on the region's hydrological system are remote concerns.

The locals are more bothered by the emergence of malaria, which they insist used to be a scarce occurrence in their cool mountain community.

"Earlier we used to not hear mosquitoes and we had no malaria here. Mosquitoes were down," Maate said, gesturing to the warmer lowlands in the distance. "But now they are here."

"When we used to slaughter goats we could leave the meat for two days and you would never see bugs flying around," Bikalwamuli told AFP. "When you slaughter a goat now, so quickly flying insects are everywhere."

Kate Kascinsky, a vector specialist at the British-funded Malaria Consortium, said that even a slight increase in temperature could affect malaria prevalence but admitted that measuring the change was difficult.

She warned that in warmer parts of the country, where mosquitoes thrive and malaria is transmitted on a regular and stable basis, people develop immunity.

"But people in a community with no history of malaria are never going to get immune," she said.

Though the melting ice caps offer the most poignant visual evidence that climate change has touched this east African nation, experts insist the impacts are being felt across the country.

Gagwe claimed that climate change was responsible for recent occurrences of severe hailstorms, prolonged drought and massive flooding as well as more erratic rain cycles.

In Karamoja, an under-developed pastoralist region in northeast Uganda, changing rainfall patterns have led to food shortages.

The Karimojong are not skilled agriculturalists and have historically led semi-nomadic lives, with greatest importance placed on cattle grazing.

The recent droughts and floods devastated their minimal agricultural production, and the Karimojong were unable to adjust, putting hundreds of thousands at risk of starvation.

"For the Karimojong it is not a question of choice," Stanlake Samkange, Uganda director for the World Food Programme, which launched a massive food distribution in January.

"Some practices that were sustainable in the past are just no longer sustainable because the climate is changing."

There is a clear sentiment among some Ugandans that the country is being punished for someone else's crime.

"Our contribution to climate change is almost insignificant but we are being impacted heavily," Kitutu of NEMA said.

The British charity Oxfam has begun advising the government on how to negotiate compensation from industrialized nations at upcoming international climate conferences, according to Maria Tusingwire, Oxfam's Uganda spokeswoman.

The charity has called for additional and unconditional foreign aid, to help less developed countries adapt to [climate change](#).

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