

Drought hits South America river, threatening vast ecosystem

August 6 2021, by Victor Caivano and Almudena Calatrava



Birds fly over a man taking photos of the exposed riverbed of the Old Parana River, a tributary of the Parana River during a drought in Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. Parana River Basin and its related aquifers provide potable water to close to 40 million people in South America, and according to environmentalists the falling water levels of the river are due to climate change, diminishing rainfall, deforestation and the advance of agriculture. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano

The Paraná River, one of the main commercial waterways in South America, has reached its lowest level in nearly 80 years due to a prolonged drought in Brazil that scientists attribute to climate change.

At peril is a vast ecosystem that includes potable water for 40 million people, the livelihood of fishing communities and farmers, and the navigability of a major grain export hub.

The National Water Institute of Argentina has defined the low water level of the Paraná River, which goes through Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, as "the worst since 1944."

"This natural asset is clearly giving us signs that it's not infinite," said environmentalist Jorge Bartoli, coordinator of the organization "El Paraná No Se Toca" (Parana Should Remain Untouched).

The low water level is due to a record drought in Brazil, where the river begins.

The midwestern and southern regions of Brazil are in a big water crisis. Water reservoirs, including the giant Itaipu dam, are at their lowest levels in 91 years and Brazilian authorities have issued an emergency alert for five states: Minas Gerais, Goiás, Mato Grosso do Sul, São Paulo and Paraná.

Reduced water levels are part of a natural cycle, but specialists warn that the scenario is more extreme because of climate change.



Children play on the exposed shores of the Parana River, in a fishing village on Espinillo Island, on the other side of the river from Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. Argentina's National Water Institute has defined the river's falling water levels as the worst since 1994, saying that in September, the water levels in several provinces will reach their lowest ever. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



A section of the Rosario River bank is eroded right in front of a high school, triggered by a drought in Rosario, Argentina, Friday, July 30, 2021. The Parana River Basin and its related aquifers provide potable water to close to 40 million people in South America, and according to environmentalists the falling water levels of the river are due to climate change, diminishing rainfall, deforestation and the advance of agricultural frontier. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



Piers are exposed on the dry riverbed of the Old Parana River, a tributary of the Parana River during a drought in Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. Argentina's National Water Institute has defined the river's falling water levels as the worst since 1994, saying that in September, the water levels in several provinces will reach their lowest ever. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



Marcelino Carrizo, 50, rests outside his home in a fishing village on Espinillo Island, a Parana River island in front of Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. The falling water levels of the Parana River have affected cattle ranching near its shores, commercial fishing, transportation and the supply of potable water for the region. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



A fishing net hangs to dry in a fishing village on Espinillo Island, on the other side of the Parana River from Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. The falling water levels of the Parana River have affected cattle ranching nears its shores, commercial fishing, transportation and the supply of potable water for the region. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



Fisherman Alberto Albil, 60, nets a "sabalo" fish in the Parana River near Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021, amid an ongoing drought. The falling water levels of the Parana River have affected cattle ranching nears its shores, commercial fishing, transportation and the supply of potable water for the region. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



A boats sit stranded on a dry creek bed in a fishing village on Espinillo Island, a Parana River island in front of Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. The falling water levels of the Parana River worry environmentalists and authorities alike because it impedes river traffic, creates a shortage of drinking water, and effects productivity in the northeast of the country through which the river flows. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



People who live in the fishing village of Espinillo Island walk their goods across the Old Parana River delta now that boats can't reach their community and others, amid a drought that turned the river into a sand bank, across the river from Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. The falling water levels of the Parana River worry environmentalists and authorities alike because it impedes river traffic, creates a shortage of drinking water, and effects productivity in the northeast of the country through which the river flows. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



A grain ship sits anchored in the middle of the Parana River as it waits its turn to enter the port of Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. Ports along the Parana River are the largest exporters of grain in the world and ships have had to reduce their cargo capacity to be able to navigate the river's falling water levels. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



The massive Rosario-Victoria Bridge crosses the Parana River near Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021, amid a drought. Argentina's National Water Institute has defined the river's falling water levels as the worst since 1994, saying that in September, the water levels in several provinces will reach their lowest ever. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano



The pillars of the massive Rosario-Victoria Bridge are exposed during a drought affecting the Parana River near Rosario, Argentina, Thursday, July 29, 2021. At the port city of Santa Fe the river registered a level of 22 centimeters, the lowest in 50 years. Credit: AP Photo/Victor Caivano

"These climate changes that were less frequent before are becoming more frequent," said Brazilian climatologist José Marengo.

Environmentalists say deforestation is contributing to the problem.

The Paraná waterway and its aquifers supply fresh water to some 40 million people in countries including Brazil and Argentina.

In turn, it receives water from the Paraguay River, which has among its main sources the Pantanal area, a huge wetland located in the Mato

Grosso region of southern Brazil.

The drought of the river is impacting the transport of goods.

Guillermo Miguel, president of the port of the city of Rosario, said vessels had to reduce their tonnage by approximately 20% to continue moving. He said transport costs are increasing.

In 2019, 79 million tons of grain, flour and oil were exported from Rosario, according to the city's stock exchange, making it one of the biggest agricultural export hubs in the world.

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