Dying Guatemala lake underlines climate change threat

May 15 2017, by Carlos Mario Marquez

Lake Atescatempa in Guatemala is dying and with it the livelihoods of residents dependent on fishing

The dried-out oyster shells lie on a landscape parched and cracked by the sun.

This is what is left of Lake Atescatempa, once a vast blue-green body of water in southwestern Guatemala.

Now the lake is dying, a conspicuous victim of the climate change that is projected to profoundly and irreversibly affect Central America.

A prolonged drought descended on the region last year, shriveling two rivers that feed into Lake Atescatempa, and with it the flow of tourists to the area and the livelihood of residents.

"We have no more money coming in, nowhere to work. Our hopes for eating fish or supporting our families, that came from the lake," explained Juan Guerra, a 56-year-old who has lived his whole life by the lake.

Today however the lake's shore is dotted with abandoned boats left high and dry.

Wilman Estrada, an unemployed 17-year-old wearing jeans and a T-shirt who for the past nine years lived off fishing here, sat by one of the last puddles.

"It makes you want to cry," he said, casting a despondent gaze at the rainless sky.

Other locals said they began noticing water levels starting to shrink three years ago.

Lake Atescatempa has dried up due to drought and high temperatures along the "Dry Corridor," a zone that runs along the Pacific coast from Guatemala to Panama

And the weather forecast for Central America offers no relief.

From July, El Nino—the irregular weather system that raises the temperature of the Pacific Ocean and causes droughts in some regions—could return.

"Climate change is really affecting the lives and future of these countries and those of our children in Central America," said Hector Aguirre, coordinator of Mancomunidad Trinacional, a group representing towns and villages around the junction of the borders of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

El Nino

The "Dry Corridor," a zone that runs along the Pacific coast from Guatemala to Panama, felt the brunt of the last burst of El Nino.

In 2016, the weather phenomenon left 3.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Crop production from vulnerable small growers shrank badly.

"El Nino, bolstered by climate change, has made the Dry Corridor one of the most vulnerable areas on the planet," Aguirre said.

His group has tried to mitigate the problem by training more than 2,000 farmers in how to diversify their crops, with the aim of guaranteeing food security.

Local fisherman, Wilman Estrada is now unemployed as Guatemala's Lake Atescatempa has dried up

But malnutrition is already evident in some places, as in the village of La Ceiba Taquezal, in eastern Guatemala, where 114 families from the Ch'orti' people of the indigenous Maya population have long depended on coffee-growing to survive.

Four years ago, a fungus called coffee rust devastated their coffee plantations, and with it their revenues. Hunger soon set in, most noticeably among children.

Food rations

With help from the Mancomunidad Trinacional and European Union financing, the families were given rations of flour, rice, beans and oil. Nutritionists gave advice on how to improve the quality of their diet by adding tomatoes, herbs and various local plants.

"With the dishes we make from beans, rice and plants, we have managed to see the children starting to put on weight," said Marina Aldana, a 36-year-old mother of eight.

But Aguirre noted that "these malnutrition problems are worse in indigenous communities for one simple reason: they are not a priority for the governments."

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