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[Columnists](#)

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[Politics/Gov](#)

[Census](#)

[Health](#)

[Religion](#)

[Technology](#)

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[Sports Insider](#)

[Lions/NFL](#)

[Pistons/NBA](#)

[Red Wings/NHL](#)

[Tigers/MLB](#)

[Shock/WNBA](#)

[MSU](#)

Saturday, December 11, 2004

## From the Himalayas to the South Pacific, 'climate witnesses' testify about global warming

By Kevin Gray / Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina -- A Nepalese Sherpa fears his mountain valley will be flooded by melting glacier runoff high in the Himalayas.

A Fiji islander frets about rising sea levels, while villagers cope with the destruction of mangrove swamps in India.

As scientists debate whether global warming is affecting Earth, "climate witnesses" told a U.N. environmental conference Friday they are already feeling the heat of the changing weather patterns they say are drastically affecting the way of life from the Himalayas to the South Pacific.

"In the past we just accepted it was the will of God," said Penina Moce, a woman from Udu, a fishing village in Fiji. "But now we believe there could be other reasons."

Moce spoke as delegates from nearly 200 countries sat down in Buenos Aires for an annual gathering by government officials, scientists, and environmentalists aimed at trying to reduce "greenhouse" emissions believed by many to be causing a rise in Earth's temperatures.

The 44-year-old mother of five said many on her South Pacific island of 400 people are alarmed by recent signs of altering climate: shortened rainy seasons, eroding coastlines and dwindling fish stocks. Water, already in short supply, has become even harder to come by, she said.

"When it rains, everyone will leave whatever they're doing and rush outside to try and save as much water as possible," she said. "We are lucky if it rains for two days straight."

Environmentalists say her testimony exemplifies what is occurring in some areas affected by global warming and climate change -- issues the world has tried to address through the Kyoto Protocol, an agreement requiring initial cuts in "greenhouse gas" emissions by 2012 that comes into force in February.

With only a few months remaining before Kyoto takes effect, the science over global warming remains divided. The United States -- the largest industrialized country not to join the treaty -- has cited scientific uncertainties as one of the reasons.

Debate has dragged on for decades over the causes of climate change and whether it is already being felt.

Many scientists believe carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases -- released by factories, vehicles and coal-burning power plants -- seriously threaten life on Earth by causing a gradual rise in the planet's temperature. Global warming has been blamed for more violent storms,

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- [Names on Shiite candidate list hint at shape of Iraq's political future](#)
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rising sea levels and shrinking animal habitats.

Caspar Ammann, a scientist and climatologist with the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., said changes are apparent around the world.

"You see the massive changes in the mountain ranges around the world. Where you see the glaciers disappearing very rapidly, you see changes in vegetation and changes in the whole seasonal cycles. The sea ice that is going back ... these are indications."

A study by Tom Wigley of NCAR and Sarah Raper of the Climatic Research Unit in Britain found a 90 percent probability global temperatures will rise 3.1 to 8.9 degrees between 1990 and 2100 as a result of human influences if greenhouse gas emissions continue unchecked.

Other experts disagree, saying Earth's temperatures have varied greatly over time, and little is known about how the atmosphere copes with temperature change.

"If you look at the long-term records of temperatures, you will see periods warmer than today and periods colder than today," said John Cristy, a climatologist at the University of Alabama.

"We don't see the same warming in the deep atmosphere," he said. "If it were man-made, that's where you would see the warming."

But Anil Krishna Mistry, a 37-year-old rice farmer living in mangrove swamps along India's border with Bangladesh, said he is worried by what he sees as changing climate patterns.

He said the region is under constant threat of flooding from heavy rains and that rising sea levels have washed away huge tracts of land and made others too salty for rice growing.

"There were 64 types of mangrove plants in the region, but now half of those species are dying out," said Krishna Mistry. "The mangrove stands act as a barrier against high tides from the oceans," he said, but rising sea levels and high tides are making the freshwater salty.

He said subsistence farmers are losing rice paddies and freshwater drinking supplies to the rising saltwater tides and that many try to survive by poaching and by overfishing in the 104 islands in the region.

"We are surrounded by water, but don't have a single drop to drink," Krishna Mistry said. "The changes in monsoon patterns are leading to more unpredictable weather. Many people are living on the edge, with no other place to go."

Norbu Sherpa, an expedition guide in the Himalayas, also warned of a changing landscape in the Everest region.

"In the years that I have worked as a trekking expedition guide, I have seen snow lines and glaciers go back higher and higher, he said.

"Meanwhile, new lakes are forming, others are growing larger and larger."

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