

Melting Pace of Glaciers Is Accelerating, Report Says

By Andrew C. Revkin

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Most of the world's mountain glaciers, many of which feed major rivers and water supplies, are shrinking at an accelerating pace as the climate warms, according to a new report.

The report charts changes through 2006. It was issued Monday by the World Glacier Monitoring Service, which is based at the University of Zurich and supported by the United Nations Environment Program.

“The latest figures are part of what appears to be an accelerating trend with no apparent end in sight,” said Wilfried Haeberli, the director of the glacier service.

The study included data from 30 glaciers spread around nine mountainous regions.

Several ice experts not associated with the report said year-to-year changes in the overall mass of ice locked in these moving frozen rivers did not always denote a trend. But they added that the long-term trend was clearly toward a warming world with less mountain ice and related water troubles, including both floods and shortages, from the Andes to the Himalayas.

The global average temperature dropped from its seasonal norm in recent months, and the Northern Hemisphere has had unusually extensive snow. But many experts have said those developments are almost assuredly a short-term wiggle on the way to more warming and melting from the influence of long-lived greenhouse gases produced mainly by burning fuels and forests.

The big danger ahead, several glacier experts said, is that the loss of glaciers would take away a summertime source of river water, drinking water and hydroelectric power in populous, relatively poor places like South Asia and the cities along the western slope of the Andes.

“Millions of people depend on the runoff from mountain snow and ice in the warm seasons,” said Peter Gleick, who has studied water and climate for two decades and is the president of the Pacific Institute, a private research group in Oakland, Calif. “Climate change is going to make that runoff disappear.”