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Scientists hope melting glaciers raise awareness

By CHRIS PETERSON

Scientists and environmentalists are hoping Glacier National Park's melting glaciers will raise national awareness on the threats of global warming.

Glacier Park had about 150 glaciers in 1850. Today it has 27 and those are retreating at a rapid pace. It's not that Glacier hasn't gone "glacier-less" through the eons - it has.

But scientists are warning that global warming is happening at such a rapid pace that species that rely on glaciers won't be able to adapt quickly enough to the changes.

Last month the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the World Heritage Committee to list Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park as a "World Heritage Site in Danger."

The World Heritage Committee was established by the World Heritage Convention, an international treaty to protect natural and cultural sites of outstanding universal value.

Waterton-Glacier was named a World Heritage site in 1995.

The glaciers have been melting for decades. Why petition now?

"It's really, really time to recognize (global warming) is happening not just in Greenland and Antarctica ... the effect is also loss of one of our national treasures," said Erica Thorson, a clinical law professor with the International Environmental Law Project at Lewis and Clark Law School in Oregon.

The Bush Administration's response to the petition has been negative, Thorson claimed.

But the concern isn't just coming from outside activists.

Glacier Park's own Web site, in a resource paper written by Karen J. Schmidt, also warns for the impacts of global warming on the Park.

"Predictions about the extent and the effects of human-caused global warming may sound improbable and apocalyptic, but many scientists feel that, far from exaggerating possible impacts, they may in fact be understating the magnitude of changes we are about to experience. Our release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere has been called a grand and gigantic ex-

periment, but it is a highly dangerous one as well," she writes. "We only have one Earth to play with, and we may be risking serious ecological, economic, political, and social consequences if the experiment goes awry as it seems likely to do if we fail to make rapid changes in our patterns of energy and resource consumption."

Schmidt also details the possible impacts on the Park, including potential impacts on a variety of plant and animal species that call Glacier home. As the Park warms, plant species - particularly trees, gradually live higher and higher on the mountain slopes, which could impact species that live in high country areas without trees.

Schmidt was part of the Park's interpretative staff more than 10 years ago and is no longer with Glacier, but her writing is used to train staff new to Glacier.

The petition was presented to the World Heritage Commission last month.

It will be considered in July, Thorson said.

The petitioners, also include Defenders of Wildlife and Defenders of Wildlife-Canada; David Suzuki

Foundation; Green House Network; ForestEthics; Humane Society International and Humane Society of the United States; Montana Wilderness Association; The Pembina Institute; Wildlands CPR; and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative.