Extensive glacial retreat in the Mount Everest region

Researchers from the University of Milan have found that glaciers in the Mount Everest region are shrinking. Glaciers are large thickened ice masses made up from fallen snow after many years. Glaciers retreat or advance periodically, and these movements are usually very slow and only evident after a long period of time. However, retreat of glaciers can occur rapidly over a few months or years.

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A study led by PhD student Sudeep Thakuri integrates satellite images and topographic maps to reconstruct the glacial history and analyse the extent of glacial change in the Sagarmatha National Park. They found that the glacier in this region has shrunk by 13% in the last 50 years, and the snowline shifted upward by 180 meters. The team has yet to establish what the causes of this phenomenon are, but they suspect it is caused by human-generated greenhouse gases which alter global climate.

The Himalayan glaciers and ice caps are a source of water supply and storage for Asia. Downstream populations depend on melt water for agriculture, power production and drinking, Thakuri reports. With future research the team plans to understand the behaviour of the hydrological cycle to predict future water availability in the region.

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