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## THE INDEPENDENT

June 16, 2009

# Climate change divides the Alps down the middle

By Michael Day in Milan

*Global warming is already causing flooding in the north and water shortages in south, report says*

The dramatic effect of climate change on the Alps comes into focus as never before this week with the publication of a major report which reveals that the mountain range is rapidly dividing into two contrasting climatic zones, each posing new problems.

The Convention on the Protection of the Alps is a statutory EU body set up in 1991 and its magisterial second report, published tomorrow, which has been seen by The Independent, reveals that the northern ranges of the Alps are suffering ever more serious flooding while the parched southern mountains see less and less snow.

According to the report, precipitation in the south-east of the region has fallen nearly 10 per cent in the past 100 years while rain and snowfall in the north-west ranges has increased by the same amount over this time.

"Predictions that the European climate is dividing into two are becoming all too real," said Marco Onida, secretary general of the Convention, who will present the report at the organisation's headquarters in Bolzano, Italy, tomorrow, in the presence of EU officials and national representatives. "The result will be havoc for the Alps and the communities and wildlife that rely on area."

Changing patterns of rain and snowfall, shrinking glaciers and rising temperatures will affect not only the mountains but also the communities which rely on their resources, the report warns. Already some Alpine villages in the north of the range face flooding, while areas further south are seeing tourist and other trades increasingly threatened. Some areas have already suffered water shortages.

The Alps' most famous high peaks, Mont Blanc, The Matterhorn and Monte Rosa mark part of the dividing line between the increasingly wet north of the region and Italy and Slovenia in the dryer south.

North of the dividing line, flooding and mud slides are becoming a common threat in some Alpine communities. In the south, some of the Europe's most celebrated Alpine beauty spots, including Italy's Dolomites are under threat, although some micro-climates mean the dividing line does not following a rigid north-south line.

As a result of these changes, only one Alpine river – Italy's 178-mile-long Tagliamento in the north-east of the country – has not suffered drastic modifications, the reports says. And even the Tagliamento may not be safe: the wildlife charity WWF has warned that even this, the Alps' last river system, is threatened by water abstraction in the upper Tagliamento valley, organic pollution, and gravel exploitation.

The situation across the Alps is made worse, the Convention report says, by the increasing demand for artificial snow created during the winter months by snow machines working on the ski slopes. This is needed to sustain the winter sports industry which is an economic mainstay of the slopes, but places a further heavy burden on water and energy supplies which are already under great stress.

"The Alps are the water tower of Europe," Dr Onida told The Independent, "But increasingly much of the water is not reaching the places downstream where it is needed, for ecosystems, agriculture and energy production."

Around 16 million people in eight countries, from France in the west to Hungary in the east, live in the arc of Europe's biggest mountain range. Rain and snow from its mountains provide the Danube, Rhine, Rhone and Po rivers with up to 80 per cent of their water.

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Representatives from all eight Alpine countries – France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Lichtenstein, Slovenia and Hungary – together with the European Union – signed up to the Alpine Convention in 1991.

The report warns not only that the destruction of the Alps is accelerating, but that disruption to water supplies will be felt much further afield than originally thought.

Glacier shrinkage earlier this year led the Italian and Swiss governments to propose the first changes in the border line between the two countries in more than a century.

Dr Onida said there was "a battle between agriculture and tourism for control over water supplies" owing to the increasingly intensive exploitation of the slopes.

Climate change is also driving Alpine species further up the mountains while exotic species including palms get a foothold lower down.



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