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Can the pope save Europe's largest glacier?

The villagers of Fiesch and Fieschertal in canton Valais have offered prayers to God against the advancing Aletsch glacier that has threatened their homes since 1678.

Global warming and the slowly receding ice mass are making them want to reverse their petitions. But for that they need the blessing of the Vatican.

Over the past three centuries the glacier has retreated 3.5km and is about 300 metres thinner. The Aletsch glacier, the largest in the Alps, is 23.6km long, contains 26.5 billion tons of ice and covers more than 120 square kilometres in southern Switzerland. The glacier is located in the Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn area, which was inscribed on the World Heritage list in 2001.

Over the past decade Switzerland's glaciers shrank by 12 per cent, melting at their fastest rate due to rising temperatures and lighter snowfalls. Researchers are predicting that the temperatures in the Swiss Alps will rise by 1.8 degrees Celsius in winter and by 2.7 degrees Celsius in the summer by 2050.

From the 17th to the 19th centuries the problem was very dif-

ferent. The inhabitants of the alpine villages of Fiesch and Fieschertal suffered countless natural disasters, mostly avalanches and floods from glacial lakes.



The 23.6km long Aletsch glacier, extending over 120 square kilometres, is the largest river of ice in the Alps

Over a 100-year period nearby glacial lakes overflowed 35 times, causing flooding and destroying local villages. To try to tame the forces of nature the local population turned to their faith.

In 1678 the villagers made a formal vow to live virtuously and to pray against the growth of the Aletsch glacier and the flooding of Lake Märjelen, which formed on the east side of the glacier.

The prayer was sent to Pope Innocent XI in Rome for his official approval via the bishop of Sion and the pope's ambassador in Bern.

Since 1862 the locals have also held an annual five-hour procession to Ernerwald chapel on July 31, St Ignatius's feast day, to reinforce their prayers. Now they want to seek permission from Pope Benedict to reverse the vow. An official request is being made by the priest and will be sent to the Vatican via the local bishop and the nuncio in Bern. Fiesch's mayor is convinced the Pope will give them his blessing.

In summer over 2500 tourists a day take the cable car to the top of Fiesch Eggishorn (2934m), which has a panoramic view of the glacier and dozens of 4000-metre peaks in the Valais Alps.

from swissinfo

Ancient trees stir modern passions

Experts are debating whether a larch in the Valais mountains, estimated at 1500 years old, is indeed Switzerland's oldest tree.

For the moment, officially the oldest trees in the country are also larches, in the Hittuwald forest near the Simplon Pass - larches up to 1000 years old. Larches are hardy trees, they live at high altitude, braving extremes of temperature, but they are rare because many of them were cut down in the high mountain pastures for cheesemaking.

If the Goms tree is indeed 1500 years old then it will be as old as the larches that currently hold the European age record in northern Italy.

But of course, this is still a lot younger than the world's most ancient trees in the United States. In the White Mountains between California and Nevada there are pines that are more than 4000 years old.

Dendrochronology allows the tree's exact age to be pinpointed. To date a tree, the growth patterns of its rings are analysed. The technique normally involves drilling into the trunk to take a timber sample. This doesn't hurt the tree, it's just like taking blood from humans. The sample is taken to the dendrochronology laboratory in Neuchâtel and examined. The information is fed into a computer, which produces a pattern that looks rather like a heart monitor read-out.

This is then matched to a historical chart of patterns to find the exact date of the tree - a method also used to great success to date ancient sites in archaeology. The laboratory's main work is dating wood from Neolithic and Bronze Age lake dweller settlements (4000-850 BC) in the area. The laboratory has a reference bank of around 6000 samples, with emphasis on oak, fir, spruce and larch.

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