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Mountain ecosystems vital to SA

According to United Nations (UN) data projections for 2100, sub-Saharan Africa is set to experience a demographic explosion.

The most rapid population growth zones in Africa are in or around mountainous areas, and the importance of managing these mountain ecosystems sustainably in order to maintain the benefits to such a growing population is critical.

This is according to Dr João Vidal, a research fellow at the Department of Plant Sciences and the Afromontane Research Unit at the University of the Free State.

The link between human population growth and the demand for water will have an impact on these mountain grasslands.

All of Africa's important rivers originate in mountainous areas.

"Water is already limited in some places. Had it not been for the mountains, it could have been much worse," said Vidal.

"The long-term resilience of Southern Africa's mountains and their ecosystem services should be an absolute priority for both research and conservation."

As a mountain ecologist, his recent research is centred on developing indicators for monitoring biodiversity change in Southern Africa's mountains.

This is a collaborative research project with the South African Environmental Observation Network, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and the University of Pretoria.

Human population growth, as predicted for Southern Africa, has several implications for natural resource management and biodiversity conservation.

"Southern Africa has one of the highest proportions of grassland-dominated mountains in the world, comparable only to Central Asia," said Vidal.

During the launch of the 2021 Global Humanitarian Overview in December, UN secretary-general António Guterres said conflict, climate change and Covid-19 have created the greatest humanitarian challenge since the Second World War.

"The number of people at risk of starvation has doubled. Hundreds of millions of children are out of school. Levels of extreme poverty have risen for the first time in 22 years."

According to Vidal, this new scenario significantly increases the pressure on mountain environments and their biota, since people will have to find alternative ways of feeding their families and animals while the global economy struggles to recover.

"Policymakers are finally realising how disproportionately important mountain environments are and how dramatically they are affected by climate change," said Vidal.

However, African mountains are underrepresented in research literature – it is the only continent for which there is no data included in the International Panel of Climate Change report.

"There is an urgent need to represent African mountains – especially Southern Africa's mountains – on the global stage when it comes to climate change."

Dr João Vidal is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Plant Sciences and the Afromontane Research Unit at the University of the Free State.
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