

# Mount Everest's Death Zone

Climate change and crowds of climbers are making the world's tallest mountain more dangerous than ever

Mara Grunbaum

Last year, 73-year-old Tamae Watanabe of Japan became the oldest woman to climb Mount Everest, the world's tallest mountain. In 2010, 13-year-old Jordan Romero of California became the youngest to reach the top.

All sorts of people of varying abilities scale the massive mountain in Asia these days. That may not be a good thing—for Everest or the climbers. Last year, more than 500 people reached the top of the Himalayan mountain, which towers 8,850 meters (29,035 feet) above sea level. Hundreds more climbed partway up.

While it's a great achievement to scale Everest, it can sometimes cause problems for the climbers and the mountain itself. Everest is changing.

## Warming Up

Why is Everest becoming more dangerous to climb?

One reason is changes in its environment. Much of the mountain is covered in huge sheets of ice called **glaciers**. Lately, warmer temperatures in the region have been melting these glaciers. Some places that used to be covered in ice year-round are now completely ice-free in the summer. Shrinking glaciers put climbers at risk. As glaciers melt, snow, ice, and rock are more likely to tumble down the mountain in huge **avalanches**. These snowslides can injure or even kill climbers.

"As it gets warmer, more debris tends to fall down," says American climbing guide Freddie Wilkinson. He's one of a number of people who think that climbing Everest is becoming too risky.

## Too Much Traffic

The weather on Everest is extremely harsh. Climbers can attempt to reach the summit only during a few weeks in the spring, when the peak is the

least windy. As a result, crowds of people dash to get to the top. In the rush, piles of garbage can get left behind.

To reach the summit, climbers scramble up single file, grasping ropes to keep from falling. In recent years, traffic jams along these ropes have sometimes forced climbers to wait hours for their turn to reach the peak.

These waits can have dangerous consequences. The highest part of Everest is the deadliest part to climb. It's nicknamed the "death zone." That's because the air there contains very little oxygen. This can cause **altitude sickness**, which makes climbers weak and confused. The extreme cold can cause **frostbite**. Too much time in these conditions can be lethal.

Most climbers use oxygen tanks to breathe. But if they get stuck for too long, their oxygen supplies can run out. Last May, four climbers died when they were caught in long lines near the peak. More than 200 people had been trying to reach the summit in a single weekend.

## Climbing Rookies

In 1953, explorer Edmund Hillary of New Zealand became the first person to scale Everest. For many years afterward, only elite climbers attempted to conquer the world's highest peak. Today, only some Everest climbers are experienced mountaineers. Anyone is allowed to try as long as he or she joins an expedition.

"The abilities of the average Everest climber aren't what they were 30 years ago," says Wilkinson.

## Other Options

It's natural for climbers of all skill levels to want to challenge themselves. But Wilkinson thinks amateurs should find different peaks to climb. Everest may be the most famous mountain, he says, but plenty of other places are just as exciting and much less dangerous.

"There are places for rock climbing and hiking all over the United States," says Wilkinson. "You don't need to go to Everest to have a really cool adventure."

## Glossary

**glacier:** a large mass of ice flowing very slowly through a valley or spreading outward from a central point

**avalanche:** the fall or slide of a large mass of snow or rock down the side of a mountain

**altitude sickness:** a condition that occurs when a person can't get enough oxygen from the thin air at high altitudes, or heights

**frostbite:** damage to a part of the body caused by extreme cold

**tectonic plate:** one of the sections of Earth's crust, or upper layer, that moves slowly over Earth's inner layers

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