Mendenhall – A Shrinking Glacier

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Ir. Chin Mee Poon *is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.*

In Juneau, the capital of Alaska, my wife and I visited the world-famous Mendenhall Glacier 19km away, one of the most easily accessible glaciers in the world.

A 45-minute bus ride brought us from downtown Juneau to the junction between Mendenhall Loop Road and Glacier Spur Road, where we alighted and walked 2km along Glacier Spur Road that cuts through Tongass National Forest to the glacier car-park. The Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area is part of the Tongass National Forest. We took an hour to cover the 2km walk because I spent much time photographing the mushrooms we saw on the way.

The Glacier Visitors Centre provides a superb view of the glacier and the lake as well as Nugget Falls nearby. Seven hiking trails radiate from the Centre. Because of our slow pace, we only had time to walk two of them – the 800m round-trip Photo Point Trail and the 3.2km round-trip Nugget Falls Trail. Both are very easy trails.

The Photo Point Trail led to a viewing platform for an unobstructed view of the magnificent glacier and waterfalls across the lake. The longer trail took us through some interesting landscape and vegetation before we ended up in front of the waterfalls and the glacier. Other than more mushrooms to add to my photograph collection, we also saw a porcupine busy feeding on a high branch of a Sitka spruce tree.

The 22km Mendenhall Glacieris one of the glaciers originating from the Juneau Icefield. The lake in front of the glacier was first formed in 1958. It has since grown to its present size as the glacier keeps retreating.

A glacier will retreat if the amount of snowfall in winter is less than the amount of snow and ice melted away in summer. It will advance if the snowfall is more than the meltwater. The difference between the snowfall and the meltwater is known as mass balance. A glacier

with a negative mass balance retreats and a glacier with positive mass balance advances. The negative mass balance of glaciers is a strong indicator of the effects of global warming.

Mendenhall Glacier has retreated 2.8km since 1958, and it will continue to retreat due to global warming, just like Franz Josef Glacier in New Zealand and many other glaciers in the world. Some of these retreating glaciers may eventually reach a new equilibrium and stop retreating, but others will continue to retreat until they disappear altogether. The loss is irreversible. ■

Editor's Note: *We welcome contributions from all members on travel stories.*