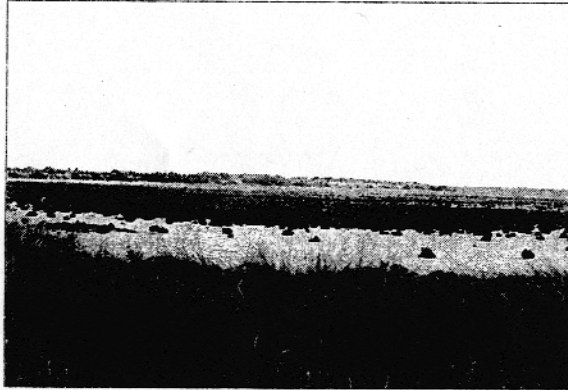


When I was in Kenya in the fall of 2000, a terrible drought was ravishing the country. Multiple rainy seasons had come and gone with sporadic light rains, leaving the country parched as a whole. Crops and livestock were dying, and therefore across the country people suffered from malnutrition and death. Even Nairobi, the fairly modernized capital city of Kenya, was impacted by the lack of water. There wasn't enough water for the people's needs, and there wasn't enough water to run the hydroelectric plants that supplied the city with electricity. Therefore, these resources were rationed throughout the city, and were turned on and off at unpredictable intervals.

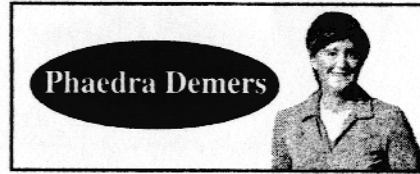
Out of Africa

With my Kenya experience fairly fresh in my mind, when I arrived in northern Wisconsin in August, it came as quite a surprise that they too were suffering from a drought. Droughts are completely natural recurring facets of the environment that occur everywhere, so it wasn't a surprise that one could occur. But with the green plants and all the



This area, once frequented by wading birds, has been dry for so long that knee-high plants have grown. *(Photo by author)*

Gee, I'm Parched



lakes and rivers, it was surprising that one was occurring. The truth is, although droughts occur in all climactic regions, there are significant differences in the characteristics of droughts in different areas.

Droughts originate from an abnormally low amount of precipitation in a specific area over a period of time. Therefore, areas that experience a lot of rain annually can still get more rain during a drought than an arid area could get in a wet year.

Even though they aren't as spectacular as tornadoes or fires, droughts are a significant natural disaster. Droughts have affected more people in North America than any other natural hazard, causing losses in the United States that average \$6-8 billion annually. The most costly natural disaster documented in U.S. history was the

drought of 1987-1989, which severely affected about 45% of the country, and cost a total of \$39 billion. Even though it was the most costly, the extent of the drought of 1987-1989 pales in comparison to the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s, which spread across approximately 75% of the country.

When talking about losses, crops are the first things that come to mind, but droughts can have dramatic impacts on social interactions when water-use conflicts arise, or negative impacts on tourism. People are less willing to vacation on the lake if the lake is reduced to a puddle, and won't be as quick to go snowmobiling for the weekend if there's no snow.

One thing that can make droughts even harder to deal with than some other natural disasters is that they have no clear beginning or end. A rain-shower during a drought can mean that relief has finally come, or it can simply be a tease, evaporating before it has the chance to do any good. Although trends can be seen when they occur due to El Nino/La Nina events, in most instances long-term droughts cannot be predicted. They can last a couple months, or they can last multiple years, and their impacts can be significant.

What now?

Although droughts are unavoidable in the U.S., through better farming techniques and advances in irrigation, their potential impacts have been lessened. There will be many more droughts in the future, but chances are slim that in those droughts the U.S. will be turned into the dust bowl that it was in the 1930s. Also, as parched as it may seem at times, the rain will come again.

