Volcán Chimborazo is a towering presence - both physically and culturally - in the Andes of Central Ecuador (Photo 1). Its glaciers are the most visible component of a hydrologic system that provides essential water for the agrarian households on its lower flanks (Photo 2). The mountain’s glaciers are rapidly retreating as the regional climate changes to one of warming temperatures and more variable precipitation. Locals are very aware of these changes and they voice concern about the transitions they see occurring on the mountain, where once white slopes are now growing increasingly bare. They say, “when we were young there was more snow and ice on the mountain. We need water to survive. What will happen ten years from now?” As a geographer trained to recognize the tightly interwoven character of human and natural systems, I am using my expertise to help answer that question.

Chimborazo is a challenging research environment, with its high altitude and frequently poor weather (Photo 3). Chimborazo is also a tremendously satisfying research environment, with its warm and generous people (photo 4) and spectacular landscapes (Photos 5 and 6). In the end, this work will not alter the climatic changes the people of Chimborazo are facing, but it will, hopefully, reduce a little of their uncertainty and give them the information they need to make informed water management decisions for the future (Photo 7).