Global warming can affect food supply, hitting closer to home than most Singaporeans think

WHEN my husband and I moved to Switzerland earlier this year, we were looking forward to skiing in the slopes.

But the weather had other ideas. We were deep into winter but many ski lifts — lifts carrying people up ski slopes — were closed due to poor snowfall. And the locals said that even if some were open, the snow wasn’t all that thick, so it could be dangerous for inexperienced skiers like us.

The technician who came to sort out our cable installation in late January said the winter temperature this year was as much as 20 deg C above what it should have been.

According to the Swiss Federal Office of Meteorology and Climatology, this winter was the warmest since records were kept in 1860. The average temperature was 3 deg C above the usual average.

The freak weather has continued past winter. It is April and my neighbours are sunbathing in the 25 deg C heat.
If these meteorological conditions had occurred in any other year, they would have been dismissed as one-off anomalies. But as scientists compared notes in Brussels at an Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) meeting earlier this month, it was clear that there is more at play here than just freak weather. The IPCC groups 2,600 leading scientists from across the world and is considered the world’s authority on the subject.

Last August, London experienced a rare drought and banned the use of hosepipes and sprinklers. The cause of the drought? Exceptionally low rainfall over the previous two winters. The usually green Hyde Park was parched yellow. This happened in a city which is known for its rain and fog.

Around the same time last year, France appealed for student medics and retired doctors to help out at hospitals to prevent a repeat of the heatwave in 2003 which killed up to 15,000 people.

In the climate report released in Brussels, scientists said evidence from all continents and most oceans shows that many biological systems are being affected by regional climate changes, particularly temperature increase.

If temperatures climb, islands could disappear under rising sea levels, starvation could be widespread as food sources come under threat and diseases could become pandemics, resulting in substantial pressure on health services.

Given the many doomsday predictions, the report could read like a bad science-fiction novel.

It is indeed tempting to shrug off the findings as scare-mongering.

After all, how bad can global warming be if it allows people in Europe to enjoy summer in spring, sparing them from getting soaked in April showers?

So what if there is little natural snowfall? Milder winters are always welcome, and ski resorts can simply generate more artificial snow. Or one can always go hiking instead.

For people in Singapore, lousy ski seasons and melting glaciers in the Antarctic would seem even more remote. One may even ask just what difference a one- or two-degree increase in temperature could make to an already warm Singapore.

But climate change is more than poor snowfall and a change in temperature.

Sitting in on the briefing by scientists, it was easy to see how vulnerable Singapore is to climate change.

Dr Martin Parry, who is co-chair of the IPCC team that produced the recent climate report, pointed out that small islands and Asian mega-deltas – land formed at the mouth of large rivers such as the Ganges that run into the sea – would be more vulnerable.

When enough glaciers as far away as the Antarctic melt, they add to the water volume in the sea, resulting in a higher sea level.

As Singapore is a small island, any change in sea levels would have profound effects. Singapore also relies on food imports to feed its population. A one- to three-degree change in temperature would wreak havoc on crop production abroad and affect food supplies here.

For a preview of what a food shortage could be like, just think back to the shortage of eggs during the bird flu crisis. With climate change, it would not just be eggs.

Last week, Asian and European environment ministers met in Copenhagen to discuss political responses to the problem.

A joint declaration issued at the end of the meeting said that carbon emissions can be cut without sacrificing economic growth. Although the ministers did not commit to a deadline for a new global treaty limiting carbon emissions, the declaration was hailed as a building block upon which future agreements could be built.

But beyond the politicians talking, ordinary people must do their part.

It can be as simple as starting to use one fewer plastic bag a day or swopping those incandescent bulbs at home for energy-saving ones.

Singapore burns discarded plastic bags and the burning releases carbon dioxide, which is a gas that contributes to global warming. Energy-saving bulbs use only 20 per cent of the energy used by incandescent ones, thus cutting down on carbon emissions generated in power plants.

These small changes would not just help reduce carbon emissions, but would also save you money on power and fuel bills.

Or do you want to wait until our roads and roofs disappear under rising sea-water before you start doing something?