

## Feud over 'racist' peak

Herald on Sunday, July 12, 2015

**Swiss geologist's name stripped from New Zealand glacier.**



Jeff Mahuika and Sasha Huber ceremoniously "un-named" the West Coast's Agassiz Glacier. Photo / Tom Hoyle

It has stood proudly for more than 150 years - but the South Island's Agassiz Glacier is no more.

The West Coast icecap hasn't disappeared but it has been "un-named" as part of a global campaign to remove the use of the name of Agassiz, a Swiss geologist who believed not all races were created equal.

In the 1860s, German geologist Sir Johann "Julius" von Haast named the Agassiz Glacier, on the West Coast, after 19th-century Swiss-born biologist and geologist Louis Agassiz.

But Agassiz' legacy has been widely criticised since his death in 1873, with some labelling him a racist.



Biologist and geologist Louis Agassiz.

In 2007, the Swiss Government acknowledged the racist thinking of Agassiz and in recent years, landmarks, schoolhouses and other institutions named after him have been renamed.

Last month one of the campaign's backers, Swiss-Haitian artist Sasha Huber and Ngai Tahu representative Jeff Mahuika, went to Agassiz Glacier where the ice sheet had its name ceremonially removed after a *karakia*.

"The performance was like a resetting. The place can be free again," Huber said.

Huber's project seeks to raise awareness about Louis Agassiz's "scientific racism", with her latest work attempting to cleanse and un-name the sites named after him in New Zealand.

Huber, artist in residence at Massey University, sought the backing of local iwi Ngai Tahu before travelling to the West Coast glacier. But her work in New Zealand is still only symbolic, with the ice sheet's official name remaining the Agassiz Glacier.

An Agassiz Range also exists in Canterbury. Wendy Shaw, secretary to the New Zealand Geographic Board, Land Information New Zealand, said the place-naming authority had not received any formal proposals for the landmarks to be renamed.

Huber learned about Agassiz' controversial beliefs after reading a book on slavery written by Swiss academic Hans Fässler. She then became involved with his Demounting Louis Agassiz project in 2008.

The project's original aim was to create awareness of Agassiz's work and rename a mountain in the Swiss Alps, Agassizhorn to Rentyhorn, after an African slave he photographed.

"[Agassiz] used these photographs to 'prove' the inferiority of the black race and presented those photographs in his lectures," Huber said.

The fight to rename the Swiss mountain is ongoing. Before travelling to New Zealand, Huber visited Brazil for another "intervention" at a square named after Agassiz.

The New Zealand chapter of her work, titled Agassiz Down Under, is being exhibited at Wellington's Te Whare Hera Gallery until July 22.