

Field investigators of the Lake Nyos tragedy were at first baffled by the event, but focused quickly on carbon dioxide (confirmed by lake water analysis), questioning where all the gas had come from and why it has been released so violently.

The event was eventually traced to the sudden release of one billion cubic metres of carbon dioxide gas from the lake, which dropped the lake level by more than a meter. Carbon dioxide escaping from hot rock into ground water and eventually into the lake was held in a dissolved state by the weight of the water above it until it shot to the surface (Stager, 1987). An earth tremor, an eruption of a volcanic pipe connected to a magma source, a landslide, or turbulence from strong wind or rain may have caused a disruption of the water stratification and released the gas.

Similar events, although not well documented, have been reported from other lakes located close to the so-called Cameroon Line, a volcanic chain stretching from the Atlantic Ocean island of Annobon to the mountainous mainland of Africa, where it forks to the north and east. A few months after the eruption, Lake Nyos's carbon-dioxide levels were still dangerously high. Claims of chemical burns, heat sensation and foul odours later proved to be unsubstantiated, but attest to the difficulty in unravelling what first appeared to be a most unusual, probably unnatural, event.

4.3 Domoic Acid; Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning in Canada, 1987

Between mid-November and mid-December, 1987, 156 people (mainly in Quebec [Bird et al., 1988]) suddenly became ill after eating cultured blue mussels. The most obvious symptoms were acute (within 12 hours) and included nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps or diarrhea, followed by confusion, disorientation and loss of memory (in about 24% of cases) after 24 to 48 hours. Most affected