A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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WHERE RAIN NEVER (?) FALLS

If a climatologist were to hunt for a region where no rain would occur, he would seek a plateau surrounded on all sides by mountain barriers rising many thousand feet above it and towering at least 15,000 feet above any nearby warm ocean. Parts of Tibet and western China come pretty close to meeting these specifications.

Regions such as these are practically, if not wholly, rainless; no water channels can be seen, and the mountain heights show signs of erosion by winds rather than water. Light snow falls at some of the higher elevations, but it evaporates, leaving no water.

About ten years ago Sir Aurel Stein crossed the Lop Desert, part of the lowland north of Tibet, and found a well-preserved portion of an old road abandoned some 16 centuries ago. This part of the road was trodden about a foot deep in the salt bed of an ancient lake bottom. Near by, Sir Aurel picked up an old steel dagger in excellent condition. The explorer says, "Interesting light was thrown on the climatic conditions prevailing here from early times by the fact that ...the inscribed slips of wood, the 'waste papers',... thrown out of ancient office rooms were found often in refuse layers covered by a few inches only of gravel or debris. Their preservation in such conditions presupposes a remarkable dryness of the climate for the last 2000 years."

Parts of the coast of Peru are nearly as dry as these great interior deserts; the rain which occurred in desert Peru and northern Chile two years ago was said to have been for some places the first within historic time. Other desert regions seem rarely to go more than two or three years without rain.

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