

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE DOLDRUMS

In old-fashioned nautical language a ship was said to be "in the doldrums" when she was becalmed or beset by baffling winds so that she could make no progress. In common usage, however, the term "doldrums" is applied to a belt of low barometric pressure lying within a few degrees of the equator and between the two trade wind belts. The doldrums are characterized by copious rainfall, frequent calms, and violent thunderstorms and squalls. They are also the breeding ground of tropical cyclones.

The doldrums have always been a notorious obstacle to the navigation of sailing vessels, which may be becalmed for weeks in crossing them. It is therefore to the mariner's advantage to find a place where the belt is relatively narrow, and it was partly with a view to this desideratum that Lieutenant Maury, in the middle of the last century, undertook the construction of his famous wind charts.

The doldrum belt is not continuous around the globe. Roughly speaking, it tends to be situated more on the eastern side of an ocean than on the western. With the progress of the seasons the belt oscillates north and south, following the sun, but with a lag of from one to two months behind the solar movement. In the Atlantic and Pacific the doldrum belt tends to broaden out when at its most northerly position.

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