

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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WHAT IS A CYCLONE?

The word "cyclone" was coined by Henry Piddington, of Calcutta, in the year 1848, as the generic name for all "circular or highly curved winds", but it has undergone a twofold process of evolution since it was introduced. Probably on account of its early associations with the storms of the tropics, this term came to connote, in popular usage, a violent wind, and at the present time, especially in America, it is very widely used, outside of scientific circles, as a synonym of "tornado".

In scientific language the word is not applied to tornadoes or other small and local whirlwinds, but signifies a somewhat extensive area of low barometric pressure with its attendant system of winds. The cyclones occurring within the tropics (called "tropical cyclones") are smaller, on the average, than those of higher latitudes and in many cases are the most violent of all storms except tornadoes. Those occurring in higher latitudes ("extra-tropical cyclones"), whether originating there or in the tropics, usually bring about marked changes of weather and temperature during their passage, while their winds may be either high or otherwise. Tropical cyclones are called "hurricanes" when violent but not when of moderate force. In the Far East a tropical cyclone is commonly called a "typhoon", or, in the Philippines, a "baguio".

There is a marked tendency on the part of meteorologists to avoid the word "cyclone" in referring to extra-tropical cyclones and to speak, instead, of "lows", "depressions", "cyclonic disturbances", etc. This is presumably the result of the popular identification of this word with the tornado.

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