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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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FACTS ABOUT LIGHTNING

According to a recent estimate, about 100 flashes of lightning occur each second, on an average, in the entire world.

Franklin did not "snatch the lightning from heaven." The electric current that flowed down his wet kite string and caused sparks to dart from the insulated key at the lower end to the experimenter's knuckle was due to a strong potential gradient in the atmosphere, such as exists during thunderstorms and sometimes also in fine weather. If it had been an actual stroke of lightning it would have cut short Benjamin's career.

On the southwest shore of Lake Maracaibo, in Venezuela, lightning is almost incessant during the rainy season. The spectacular display serves as a beacon to mariners entering the lake and is known as the "lighthouse of Maracaibo" ("el faro de Maracaibo.")

Fires due to lightning are not always the result of direct hits. A cloud-to-cloud discharge or a distant discharge from cloud to earth often sets up secondary or "induced" discharges, which, by causing sparks, ignite any combustible material present. Many fires have thus been started in oil-storage tanks, owing especially to the presence of highly combustible gas between the surface of the oil and the roof of the tank. The danger is greatly reduced when the roof is allowed to float directly on the surface of the liquid.

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