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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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MAPS OF AVERAGE RAINFALL

A familiar feature of geographical literature is the chart of mean annual rainfall. Such a chart is instructive and useful as far as it goes--but it does not go very far in showing the actual distribution of rain over the earth's surface. In the first place, it gives no indication of the way the rain is, on an average, distributed through the year, and the distribution may be extremely uneven. In the second place it shows only average conditions, whereas in any individual year the actual rainfall generally differs at least a little from the average, and in many years it may differ from it very widely.

If you look, for example, at a chart of mean annual rainfall in California, you will see a broad coastal belt extending from Monterey Bay to the Mexican border in which the yearly amount of rain averages from 10 to 20 inches or more, according to locality. There is nothing in the chart to suggest that, in the same region, the summer months are, in the average year, almost rainless.

Again, if you consult a similar map for Brazil, you will find an area inland from Cape St. Roque where the rainfall averages 20 to 40 inches a year; which, if fairly uniform in occurrence, would be ample for agriculture. Yet this "Nordeste" of Brazil is one of the most notoriously drought-stricken regions in the world. In some years the crops are ruined by an excess of moisture, but in others nature goes to the opposite extreme, with tragic results.

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