

A Science Service Feature

Released upon receipt
but intended for use
December 1, 1931

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed November 24, 1931

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WHAT IS A DESERT?

The word "desert" is as difficult to define as the word "drought," and many definitions have been proposed for it. The Meteorological Glossary published last year by the British Meteorological Office, says that a desert is "a region in which the high temperature and small rainfall render the evaporation in excess of the precipitation, and consequently there is insufficient moisture to support vegetation," but this definition ignores barren polar lands often classed as deserts. Dr. Hugh Robert Mill writes of "ice deserts" surrounding the poles, while the Encyclopaedia Britannica, after defining deserts as "those lands which produce insufficient vegetation to support a human population," says: "In 'cold deserts' the absence of vegetation is consequent on the prevailing low temperature, while in 'hot deserts' the causes are high temperature and deficient rainfall."

Some writers classify as a desert any region having a mean average rainfall below some specified amount; ten inches being a favorite limit. The great German climatologist Koeppen limits deserts according to a somewhat complex method, which takes account of temperature as well as the amount and seasonal distribution of rainfall. Prof. J. W. Gregory defines a desert as "a country with such an arid climate and such a scanty water supply that agriculture is impracticable and occupation is found possible only for a sparse population of pastoralists." Dr. Griffith Taylor, of the University of Chicago, has lately suggested that the definition of this word is a task that should be tackled by an international geographical congress. Taylor himself distinguishes between "deserts," which appear to be permanently unfit for human occupation, and "sparselands," which, in the course of time, attract a small population of non-nomadic pastoralists.

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