

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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ABNORMAL WEATHER

With the aid of daily weather observations made at thousands of places through long periods of years meteorologists have compiled climatic "normals" for nearly all the inhabited portions of the globe. These figures, which represent average conditions, serve a variety of purposes, both scientific and practical, but they are often utterly misleading as indications of what will happen at a particular time and place. It is a paradoxical fact that normal weather is exceptional. For example --the average temperature--the so-called "normal"--for the month of January at Chicago, as deduced from records covering a period of 83 years, is 24 degrees; yet during the 83 years in question there were only two in which Chicago actually had a mean temperature of 24 in January. What is true of temperature, at Chicago and elsewhere, is true of the other weather elements, such as rainfall, wind force, and so on. Nature laughs at "normals" in distributing weather.

I once received a letter from a magazine editor asking for an article about "the unusual weather we have been having lately." I looked up the records and found that the weather had indeed been unusual, but not in the way he supposed. He had jumped to conclusions from a few sporadic weather happenings and was disconcerted when I reported that over the country in general the weather had been running far closer to normal values than it usually does. It had been abnormally normal! There was a real "story" in this exceptional state of affairs, but he had set his heart on something different, and the article was never written.

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