

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE BEAUFORT SCALE

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The landsman generally describes a wind as blowing so many miles an hour, whether he is referring to an actual measurement or an estimate. The seaman is more likely to describe it as a wind of "force 3" or "force 6," or some other number, and this description implies an estimate rather than a measurement.

The estimate is made on the Beaufort scale, which was introduced by Commander (later Rear Admiral Sir) Francis Beaufort of the British Navy, about 1806 and the use of which on shipboard soon became general. Very few ships are equipped with wind-measuring instruments (anemometers). Hence the seaman estimates the strength of the wind in terms of this scale, which runs from 0 for calm to 12 for a wind of hurricane force.

As originally defined, each degree of the scale corresponds to certain effects of the wind upon a "well-conditioned man-of-war" -- a square-rigged sailing ship -- of the early nineteenth century. Various new specifications have been introduced from time to time to take account of the altered rig of sailing vessels and a set of specifications has also been introduced to adapt the scale to use on land.

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