

Some Chilling Tales From Scientists Who Direct Traffic in the Cold South

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SUITLAND, Md. -- What's 40 miles long, 11 miles wide and moving 5.5 miles a day?

It's the B-10A iceberg, a giant frozen slab that was once part of the Antarctic ice shelf and is now adrift in the Southern Ocean, between South America and Antarctica. It's the object of intense scrutiny at the National Ice Center, a little-known pocket of the nation's natural-disaster bureaucracy that is keeping close tabs on an unusually high number of Southern Hemisphere icebergs these days.

Working inside a secure federal office building topped with satellite dishes, a dozen or so ice scientists track 27 Antarctic icebergs, pointing and clicking at radar images on their computer screens. The waters surrounding the Antarctic seem like Times Square compared with a decade ago, when the center was keeping tabs on only about 10 or 12 bergs in a given year.

The B-10A is the largest iceberg they've seen in years. In August, the ice center issued a warning about it to mariners, and in the weeks since, it has become even more of a threat to shipping routes: As oceanic currents take B-10A into warmer water, major chunks break off, posing additional hazards.

The B10A's sheer size -- from 50 to 100 feet high out of the water at its edges -- has experts at the ice center fascinated. The bergs "calving" off of it are two miles long. "This berg is unusual because we haven't seen many this big in the last 10 years," says Andy Ulak, spokesman for the center. "There have been sightings of them over the last century, but not many recently."

Some scientists studying global warming suggest rising temperatures may be what's causing so many large pieces of the Earth's polar ice shelves to break free. But the National Ice Center scientists say it's premature to add marauding icebergs to the list of global warming's insidious symptoms. They refuse to speculate on possible links between higher atmospheric temperatures and the number of bergs on their radar screens.

'Better Sensors'

In fact, says Jeff Andrews, a National Ice Center physical scientist, the unusually high number of bergs under observation may not reflect an increase in the number of bergs out there. "We have better sensors so we're seeing more bergs than in the past," Mr. Andrews says. "I have no idea if there are more bergs than before. ... It's too early to think about trends."

Normally a rather quiet place, the ice center has become far busier in the weeks since the B-10A appeared. Mr. Andrews has been regaling camera crews with chilling tales told in his deadpan, Joe Friday manner. There was the time a Danish dog-sled team got trapped on a piece of floating ice in Greenland, Mr. Andrews recalls. "We were called to give a forecast for where the ice would move so rescue teams could get to them," he says. "They got the two guys off in about 15 hours, but the dogs didn't make it."

The National Ice Center also has coached cruise ships through icy waters in Northern Alaska and aided in the rescue of some Alaskan whales trapped in pack ice, Mr. Andrews boasts. "When I tell people where I work, they say 'Who cares about ice?' But we do a lot of things."

A joint venture of the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the ice center monitors, analyzes and forecasts ice activity around the world. It has been tracking Southern Hemisphere bergs since 1976. Tracking Arctic icebergs is the job of the International Ice Patrol, based at the Coast Guard Research and Development Center in Groton, Conn. The patrol, made up of 17 countries, was formed back in 1914 in the wake of the sinking of the Titanic.

Icebergs come in all shapes and sizes. There's a "bergy," the size of a small cottage, according to the center's Ice Observation Handbook. The "growler" is the size of a piano. Antarctic icebergs are flat slabs broken off from the glaciers of the Antarctic ice shelf. Arctic icebergs, by contrast, have peaks and are what most people envision when they think of icebergs.

The B-10A iceberg was once a part of the Thwaites Ice Tongue extension of the Thwaites Glacier in the Amundsen Sea. B-10A's parent berg, the even bigger B-10, broke off there more than 10 years ago. The National Ice Center began tracking it in 1992. In 1995, B-10 broke in two, creating the now-famous B-10A berg and another, much smaller one. Depending on currents, Mr. Andrews says, B-10A could last for six months to a year, as it drifts into warmer waters and slowly melts.