

Name: _____

Date: _____

Hurricanes

Science Literacy Article

Have you or someone you know ever experienced a hurricane? If so, you probably know how frightening they can be due to the damage they are able to cause to widespread areas. Hurricanes are enormous storms that form in the ocean which bring extremely powerful winds and heavy rain to coastal regions. Although hurricanes vary in intensity, they all have the ability to cause mass devastation.

In order for hurricanes to form, a few very important conditions must be present. First, hurricanes need warm ocean water of 80 degrees Fahrenheit (27 degrees Celsius) or warmer. Next, they also require the warm, moist air of low pressure weather systems. Warm ocean water and warm, moist air act as the fuel for hurricanes. For this reason, hurricanes tend to weaken once they travel over land. Lastly, light winds are needed in order to give the storm a counter-clockwise wind rotation. If all of these conditions are present, then a hurricane is able to form. Hurricane season in the Atlantic Ocean usually begins in June and ends in November. However, hurricane season can vary from year to year based on the temperature of the ocean water.

All hurricanes consist of 3 major components which are known as the eye, eye wall, and spiral bands. The eye is the calm, central portion of a hurricane. It is circular shaped and is typically 20 to 40 miles in diameter. The eye wall surrounds the eye and it consists of a ring of towering thunderstorms. This is where the most severe weather and highest winds occur. The spiral bands are the outer rain bands of dense thunderstorms that are able to extend several hundreds of miles from the center of the hurricane.

Hurricanes are categorized according to their wind speed. All hurricanes first begin as tropical depressions. Tropical depressions are storms with maximum wind speeds of 38 miles per hour. A tropical depression is reclassified to a tropical storm as the winds begin to intensify and reach speeds of 39 to 73 miles per hour. Once the wind speeds increase to 74 miles per hour or greater, these storms are then officially classified as hurricanes. The Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind scale is used to measure the intensity of a hurricane. This scale ranks hurricanes from Category 1 to Category 5 based on their wind speed. Category 1 hurricanes are the weakest and have wind speeds of 74 – 95 miles per hour. Category 5 hurricanes are the strongest and have wind speeds of 157 miles per hour or higher.

As you have read, the formation and intensity of hurricanes depends on several key factors. This explains why the vast majority of hurricanes only develop during certain months in specific areas of the Earth's oceans. Hurricanes not only bring extremely damaging winds, but also extreme flooding due to strong storm surges and large amounts of rain. However, advancements in technology such as satellite imaging, radar, coastal warning systems and hurricane-proof structures have helped to significantly reduce the amount of lives lost during these catastrophic events.