



Posted on Wed, Oct. 19, 2005

Wilma ties records, but records have limits

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Wilma's growth into a hurricane Tuesday ties the long-recognized records for the most Atlantic basin hurricanes (12) and named storms (21) in a year.

But the truth is, there likely were busier seasons in the past 200 years. For instance, the record for most named storms was set in 1933, long before satellite technology.

Before 1950, the majority of information on hurricanes at sea came from ship logs. If a tropical storm formed and died out quickly in an area of open ocean with no large ships around, it might never have been noticed, USC geography professor Cary Mock said.

While researching a weather history of South Carolina, Mock pored over ship records and plantation logs to find references to storms in the 1800s and earlier. He recently was awarded a \$300,000 National Science Foundation grant to expand that work from the Southeast to New England, Bermuda, the Bahamas and the Caribbean.

The National Hurricane Center acknowledges there are holes in the historical records.

"It wasn't until the advent of aerial reconnaissance in the mid-1940s that anyone had a handle on the number and location of tropical cyclones," said Frank Lepore, spokesman for the National Hurricane Center. "Better technology (in recent years) certainly played a role in distinguishing the most subtle of these systems."

Hurricane Vince this month is one example. It formed about 600 miles east of the Azores, briefly reached hurricane status and then made landfall in Spain with maximum winds of 35 mph. Such a storm might not have been recognized as a tropical system if not for satellites.

"Storms like Vince likely are very hard to detect in the 19th century records," Mock said.

If researchers focus on international ship records for one year, "they can find hurricanes that were previously not noticed in some weird spots," Mock said.

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