

## Ever Heard of El Niño?

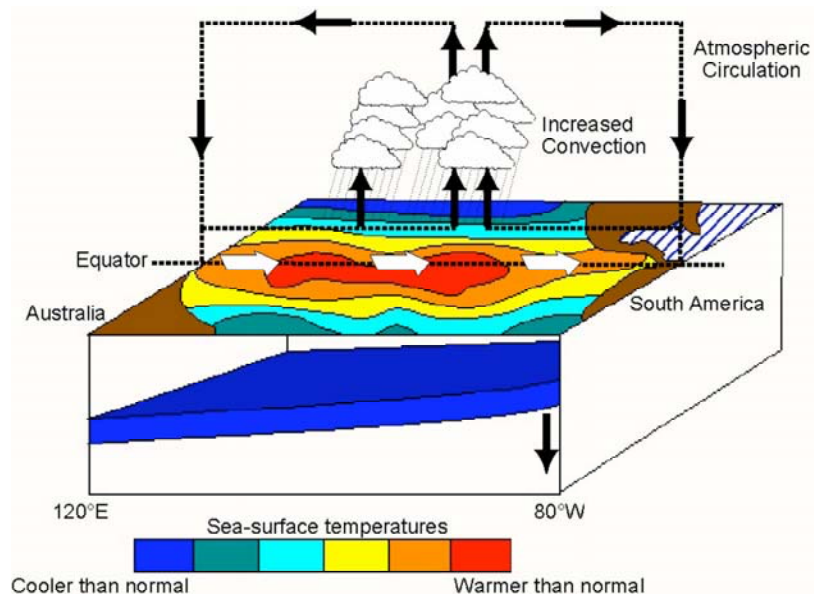
By Monica Bulger

Have you ever heard anyone talk about the El Niño? If you have, you might have been confused. For starters, El Niño means little boy in Spanish. So if you speak Spanish, you might have been even more confused. The El Niño is actually a type of weather phenomenon that occurs in the Pacific Ocean. It is highly unpredictable, and it can be very destructive.

The El Niño is a strange event during which the temperature of ocean water in the Pacific can warm between 2 and 10 degrees Fahrenheit. Now, that might not sound like a lot to you, but to the huge variety of animals that live in the ocean, it's a gigantic change. First, let's explore some of the many species of animals that live in this diverse ocean.

The Pacific Ocean is the largest ocean in the world, making up almost one third of the world's entire surface. The Pacific Ocean has a lot of different animals. Many different mammals live in the ocean, including lots of unusual whale, sea lion, and dolphin species. There are also many species of sea birds that make homes right near the ocean. They often eat fish that they dive for in the Pacific Ocean, and feed their young with the same fish. Many types of coral also call the Pacific Ocean home.

The warming of the surface starts a domino effect, meaning that one event triggers another. The warming of the surface stops the cold water at the bottom of the ocean from moving to the top. This means that the plankton, whom usually lives in the constant cycle of moving water, can't survive. Plankton are small, floating organisms that are hard to see who live in water. Without plankton, the entire ecosystem can suffer. Fish and whales, which diet depends on plankton, die off very quickly. They soon migrate out of the area to try to find new food.



Another adverse effect that the El Nino has on the earth is that the algae on coral tend to die with an increase of water temperature. This gives the coral a bleached white appearance and often causes it to die as well.

Ecosystems usually cannot prepare for an El Nino because they cannot be predicted. To recover from an unexpected El Nino an ecosystem has to restart and begin with the basic necessities of life. Even humans feel the effect of the El Nino. The El Nino was named off the coast of Peru, where it was originally noticed. There, the strange happening can cause devastating mud slides and unexpected snow storms. In Peru there is a huge mountain range called the Andes, and thousands of people get trapped in these mountains because of these unexpected snowstorms.

The El Nino affects weather all over the Pacific Ocean, including the entire United States. The El Nino has an affect much like that of a coastal storm (Nor'easter) in Massachusetts where the bad weather comes in off of the ocean and up the coast of California. These storms cause mudslides and floods in California, destroying crops and houses and hurting people. El Nino has affects across the country; Florida has larger numbers of tornadoes and the Midwest and Northwest can have warmer temperatures and droughts all because of El Nino raising ocean temperatures in the Pacific Ocean. The El Nino can be very destructive and even more devastating to the people inhabiting areas it affects.

Alright, so let's think about this for a minute. All of this destruction was caused by a rise by just a few degrees in the earth's oceans. Can anyone think of something that is causing oceans all over the world to get warmer? That's right, global warming. El Nino can warn us of many of the effects that global warming will have on the ocean's delicate balance of life. As a result, the El Nino can also tell us what the ocean's change will do to human settlements. If the above events are any warning, then there is certainly trouble ahead for coastal regions like eastern Massachusetts.

