

Icebergs head from Antarctica for New Zealand

November 24 2009, By RAY LILLEY , Associated Press Writer



In this Nov. 16, 2009 photo released by the Australian Antarctic Division, an iceberg is seen at Sandy Bay on Macquarie Island's east coast, in the Southern Ocean 1,500 kilometers (930 miles) southeast of Tasmania, Australia. It is very rare to see icebergs from Macquarie Island and is uncommon to find icebergs in this general region. (AP Photo/Australian Antarctic Division, Eve Merfield)

(AP) -- Ships in the south Pacific Ocean have been alerted that hundreds of icebergs believed to have split off Antarctic ice shelves are drifting north toward New Zealand, officials said Tuesday.

The nearest one, measuring about 30 yards (meters) tall, was 160 miles (260 kilometers) southeast of New Zealand's Stewart Island and was part of a "flotilla" of icebergs that can be seen on satellite images, Australian glaciologist Neal Young said.

The alert comes three years after cold weather and favorable ocean currents saw dozens of icebergs float close to New Zealand's southern shores for the first time in 75 years.

New Zealand maritime officials have issued navigation warnings for the area south of the country.

"It's an alert to shipping to be aware these potential hazards are around and to be on the lookout for them," Maritime New Zealand spokeswoman Sophie Hazelhurst said.

No major shipping lanes or substantial fishing grounds are in the area, but most ships there have little hull protection if they collide with an iceberg - which typically has 90 percent of its mass under water.

On Monday, Rodney Russ, expedition leader on the tourist ship Spirit of Enderby, spotted a 500-foot-long (150-meter-long) [iceberg](#) about 60 miles (100 kilometers) northeast of Macquarie Island and heading north - about 500 miles (800 kilometers) south of New Zealand. Australian scientists reported another mass of 20 icebergs drifting north past Macquarie Island two weeks ago.

Young said [satellite images](#) showed the group of icebergs, spread over a sea area of 600 miles by 440 miles (1,000 kilometers by 700 kilometers), moving on ocean currents away from Antarctica. One of the images alone had 130 icebergs and another had 100, he said.

Large numbers of icebergs last floated close to New Zealand in 2006, when some were visible from the [coastline](#) in the first such sighting since 1931.

It is rare for whole icebergs to drift so far north before melting, but a cold snap around southern New Zealand and favorable ocean currents

have again combined to push the towering visitors to the region intact.

Icebergs are formed as the ice shelf develops. Snow falls on the ice sheet and forms more ice, which flows to the edges of the floating ice shelves. Eventually, pieces around the edge break off.

Young said that having the icebergs end up near New Zealand is not necessarily linked to global warming, but said that the rate of icebergs breaking off the Antarctic ice shelf in recent years may have increased due to dramatically rising temperatures on the continent over the past 60 years.

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