

Ships warned about icebergs headed for New Zealand

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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 are on alert and maritime authorities are monitoring the movements of hundreds of menacing icebergs drifting toward New Zealand in the southern Pacific Ocean, officials said.

The area is not a major shipping lane and few sailors are out in November - spring in the <u>southern hemisphere</u> - but ships that traverse the area have little hull protection and could be significantly damaged by a collision with an <u>iceberg</u>, which typically has 90 percent of its mass under water.



"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 of an official navigation warning issued for the area south of the country.

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

The current flotilla of icebergs that split off Antarctic ice shelves is slowly drifting in the direction of New Zealand. The nearest one, measuring about 330 to 660 feet (100 to 200 meters) long, was 160 miles (260 kilometers) southeast of New Zealand's Stewart Island on Tuesday, Australian glaciologist Neal Young said. He said it was impossible to tell from the <u>satellite image</u> how tall the iceberg is.

He couldn't say how many icebergs in total were roaming the Pacific, but he counted 130 in one satellite image alone and 100 in another.

New Zealand oceanographer Mike Williams said the icebergs are drifting at a speed of about 25 kilometers (16 miles) a day and he expects most won't reach New Zealand, similar to the 2006 flotilla, of which many were directed eastward away from the country by ocean currents and wind.

Williams, a scientist with the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research, said he was "pretty sure these icebergs came from the break up of the Ross <u>Sea Ice</u> Shelf in 2000" - an ice shelf the size of France and the origin of the 2006 flotilla of icebergs.

Icebergs are routinely sloughed off as part of the natural development of ice shelves. As temperatures have risen in the Antarctic Peninsula area near South America by as much as 5 degrees Fahrenheit (3 degrees



Celsius) in the past 60 years, "whole ice shelves have broken up," Young said.

But Young said the iceberg flotilla south of New Zealand came from the Ross Sea, a completely different area of Antarctica, and is unrelated to climate change.

The appearance of the bergs in waters south of New Zealand depends as much on weather patterns and ocean currents as on the rate at which icebergs are calving off <u>Antarctic</u> ice shelves.

In the current case, a cold snap around southern New Zealand and favorable ocean currents conspired to push the towering visitors, which have drifted around Antarctica for the past nine years, into the region's ocean.

"Icebergs this far north (near New Zealand) are not that unusual," said New Zealand glaciologist Dr. Wendy Lawson, noting that an iceberg's reach was determined by its size.

"If an iceberg starts off large, it will last longer in the sea. Its movement and where it ends up is determined by the weather, wind, ocean currents and the temperature," Lawson, head of the department of geography at Canterbury University, told The Associated Press.

On Monday, Rodney Russ, expedition leader on the tourist ship Spirit of Enderby, spotted an 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.

Maritime New Zealand safety services general manager Nigel Clifford said as the icebergs drift closer, "the more the potential risks grow of



them posing a hazard to shipping" as they break up and float lower in - or just under - the ocean surface.

The agency was "keeping a close eye on the increasing risk ... it's tracking iceberg positions and has begun initial planning for any incident," he told the AP.

He noted the area is not a major shipping lane, with commercial fishing vessels and a limited number of passenger cruise ships passing through and reporting positions for the drifting ice.

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.

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

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