

El Nino covers arid Atacama desert in flowers

October 30 2015, by Jaime Esquivel



Flowers bloom at the Huasco region on the Atacama desert, some 600 km north of Santiago, on October 27, 2015

Here's a softer side to the disruptive weather phenomenon known as El Nino: an enormous blanket of colorful flowers has carpeted Chile's Atacama desert, the most arid in the world.

The cyclical warming of the central Pacific may be causing droughts and

floods in various parts of the world, but in the vast desert of northern Chile it has also caused a vibrant explosion of thousands of species of flowers with an intensity not seen in decades.

Yellows, reds, purples and whites have covered the normally stark landscapes of the Atacama, where temperatures top 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) this time of year.

From violet-and-white Chilean bell flowers, or "countryside sighs" (*Nolana paradoxa*), to red "lion claws" (*Bomarea ovallei*), to yellow *Rhodophiala rhodolirion*, they have filled the normally pale desert valleys with rivers of color.

"This year has been particularly special, because the amount of rainfall has made this perhaps the most spectacular of the past 40 or 50 years," said Raul Cespedes, a desert specialist at the University of Atacama.

Sleeping beauty

El Nino, which wreaks havoc on world weather patterns every two to seven years, has hit particularly hard this year, causing unusually heavy rainfall in the world's driest desert.

That has caused dormant flower bulbs and rhizomes—underground stems that grow horizontally—to germinate.

"When you think of the desert, you think of total dryness, but there's a latent ecosystem here just waiting for certain conditions to arise," said Cespedes.



A gigantic mantle of multicolored flowers covers the Atacama Desert, the driest in the world, with an intensity not seen in decades, an effect caused by the El Nino phenomenon, which alters weather patterns across the Pacific basin

The desert flowers are perhaps nature's consolation for what has been a devastating year for Atacama.

They first bloomed in March, after heavy rains that caught the region by surprise and caused massive floods that killed more than 30 people.

They are now blooming for the second time this year, at the outset of the southern hemisphere summer.

Tourist drawcard



El Nino, which wreaks havoc on world weather patterns every two to seven years, has hit particularly hard this year, causing unusually heavy rainfall in the Atacama Desert in Chile, the driest non-polar desert in the world

"This is a very unusual phenomenon. Because of the floods in March there was an exceptional winter bloom, which had never before been recorded... and then there was another bloom in spring," said Daniel Diaz, director of the National Tourism Service for Atacama region.

"Two flowerings a year is very unusual in the most arid [desert](#) in the

world, and that's something we've been able to enjoy this spring, along with people from all over the world. There's a lot of interest in seeing it," he told AFP.

The region has seen a 40 percent increase in tourists since the [flowers](#) began blooming.

"It is so unusual, yet so real," said British tourist Edward Zannahand, who made a special stop in Atacama on what he described as a road trip around the world.

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