

Studying the heart of El Niño

By Henry Fountain, New York Times

HONOLULU – A thousand miles south of Hawaii, the air at 45,000 feet above the equatorial Pacific was a shimmering gumbo of thick storm clouds and icy cirrus haze, all cooked up by the overheated waters below.

In a Gulfstream jet more accustomed to hunting hurricanes in the Atlantic, researchers with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration were cruising this desolate stretch of tropical ocean where the northern and southern trade winds meet. It's an area that becalmed sailors have long called the doldrums, but this year it is anything but quiet.

This is the heart of the strongest El Niño in a generation, one that is pumping moisture and energy into the atmosphere and, as a result, roiling weather worldwide.

The plane, with 11 people aboard including a journalist, made its way Friday on a long westward tack, steering clear of the worst of the disturbed air to the south. Every 10 minutes, on a countdown from Mike Holmes, one of two flight directors, technicians in the rear released an instrument package out through a narrow tube in the floor. Slowed by a small parachute, the devices, called dropsondes, fell toward the water, transmitting wind speed and direction, humidity and other atmospheric data back to the plane continuously on the way down.

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