



High seas crash over the Newhaven harbour wall and lighthouse during a violent storm in 2000. Scientists have found that coastal storms battering the southern coast of England have sharply increased in intensity over the last century and a half -- but there is still some debate over whether their severity is due to global warming.

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## English coastal storms more intense, but is it climate change?

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TRIESTE, Italy (AFP) — Coastal storms battering the southern coast of England have sharply increased in intensity over the last century and a half, a possible consequence of global warming.

The research -- presented this week at the European Conference on Severe Storms in Trieste -- found that 12 of the 15 most powerful storms to hit the Dorset coast from 1865 to 2004 occurred after 1965.

The two most severe -- rated seven out of nine on a new intensity scale -- struck in 1987 and 1998, killing at least 15 people and causing more than a billion pounds in damage.

These are important findings, meteorologists gathered here say. But whether the increase in force is caused by global warming, largely driven by human activity, remains a point of sharp debate.

"It is very difficult to attribute one specific extreme weather event directly to climate change," said Robert Doe, a researcher at the University of Portsmouth and the study's principal architect.

There are at least two problems in trying to connect the dots between local weather phenomena and climate change, said Doe.

One is finding reliable historical data, which is notoriously spotty and inconsistent. Doe spent nearly three years creating a digital database drawing from every source available -- local press, early weather service reports, harbour records.

The result was "the longest continuous record of this kind of weather at a local level," he told AFP.

The other problem is time. "Covering 140 years is good for collected data, but for the time scales we use to assess climate change, it is a very short period," he said.

His findings would be consistent with the impact of global warming, which creates the warmer sea surface temperatures and lower atmospheric pressures that help drive coastal storms. But the surge in storm intensity could also overlap with a natural weather cycle.

"The key concern now is this: are human influences making it greater? I would say it is likely," Does said.

"But this will be debated for decades. Maybe in 200 years time we will know for sure."