

## “Hurricane!”

### Background Information

Hurricanes, also called cyclones, are a type of natural disaster. A hurricane is a weather-related natural disaster. Natural disasters cause fascination as well as fear in most people.

Hurricanes start out as ordinary storms and then build enough strength to cause disasters. Many people remember Hurricane Katrina for its 175-mile-per-hour winds and the disastrous loss of life and property it caused in 2005. People from New Orleans were forced to evacuate, and some never returned. More than 1,800 people died. It was the costliest natural disaster and one of the five deadliest hurricanes in the United States. More recently, Hurricane Sandy demolished portions of the northeastern United States, especially in New Jersey and New York. Its effects will be felt for a long time—just like those of Hurricane Katrina.

Hurricanes can be scary. For thousands of years, people have been trying to predict disasters like these to save lives. Records of terrible storms exist from the ancient Mayans. The Mayan god of storms was named Hurukan, which is likely where the word *hurricane* originated.

Paleontologists have found evidence of prehistoric hurricanes all over the world. Hurricane Elisenda of Nicaragua is estimated to have struck land around 1,300 B.C. Through studying fossils, scientists have discovered that Elisenda was very large and unique. Her winds brought so much new soil and sand that the plant life in the area was significantly changed.

In 1502, famous explorer Christopher Columbus encountered his first hurricane off the coast of Hispaniola, the island made of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. He recognized the storm from the tales he heard from the natives on earlier voyages. They called them *huracan*. Columbus tried to warn the governor of Hispaniola, but he wouldn't listen. The governor sent out ships bound for Spain. Only five of them survived the storm. About 500 people lost their lives during the hurricane.

Hurricanes have not changed from the period of the dinosaurs to the present. The major difference is how we can successfully predict these storms and spread the word—saving lives in the process.