

# Climate's Long Journey



The earth's climate has changed many times over thousands of years. Some climate changes have made a big impact on human, plant, and animal life. The ice ages, for example, led to extinctions of animal species (SPEE sheehs). They also caused problems for human beings.

## Ancient Climate History

The first people arrived in America between 15,000 and 30,000 years ago. During that time, much of North America was covered by great ice sheets. Some 14,000 years ago, the last ice sheet began to melt very fast. By 7,000 years ago it was gone.

This end to the ice ages caused big changes on the earth. The changes caused many kinds of plants and animals to die. For example, mastodons—elephant-like animals—and other large mammals that preferred cold climates may not have been able to live in the warmer, drier conditions.

## The Little Ice Age

Starting in the 14th century, Europeans lived through what is known as the "Little Ice Age." The Little Ice Age lasted for several hundred years. During the Little Ice Age, the advance of glaciers (GLAY shuhrs) along with hard winters and famines caused some people to starve and others to leave their homes.

The global warming that is now occurring is unique. It marks the first time that human activities may be making the earth warmer.

## Recent Climate History

Scientists have discovered that the years 1990, 1995, 1997, and 1998 were the warmest years since at least 1400 A.D. Periods of increased heat from the sun may have helped make the earth warmer. But more than 2,000 of the world's leading climate scientists think that greenhouse gases produced by human activities are making the earth warmer, too.

## What Might Happen?

Global climate change may bring big changes for life on earth. For example, climate change may affect wildlife and even our health.

