

Q12: Is there depletion of the Arctic ozone layer?

Yes, significant depletion of the Arctic ozone layer now occurs in some years in the late winter/early spring period (January-April). However, the maximum depletion is less severe than that observed in the Antarctic and is more variable from year to year. A large and recurrent “ozone hole,” as found in the Antarctic stratosphere, does not occur in the Arctic.

Significant ozone depletion in the Arctic stratosphere occurs in cold winters because of reactive halogen gases. The depletion, however, is much less than the depletion that now occurs in every Antarctic winter and spring. Although Arctic depletion does not generally create persistent “ozone hole”-like features in Arctic total ozone maps, depletion is observed in altitude profiles of ozone and in long-term average values of polar ozone.

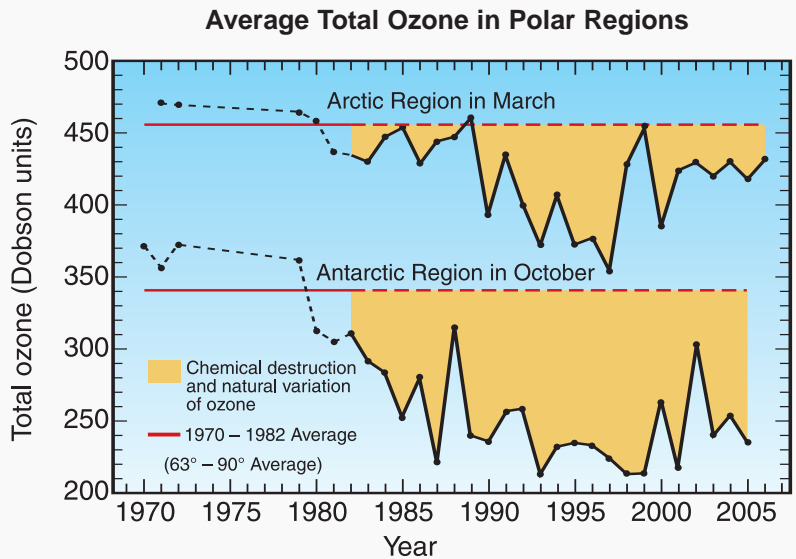
Altitude profiles of Arctic ozone. Arctic ozone is measured using a variety of instruments (see Q5), as for the Antarctic (see Q11). These measurements show changes within the ozone layer, the vertical region that contains the highest ozone abundances in the stratosphere. Figure Q11-2 shows an example of balloonborne measurements of a depleted ozone profile in the Arctic region on 30 March 1996, and contrasts the depletion with that found in the Antarctic. The 30 March spring profile shows much less depletion than the 2 October spring profile in the Antarctic. In general, some reduction in the Arctic ozone layer occurs each late

winter/early spring season. However, complete depletion each year over a broad vertical layer, as is now common in the Antarctic stratosphere, is not found in the Arctic.

Long-term total ozone changes. Satellite and ground-based observations can be used to examine the average total ozone abundances in the Arctic region for the last three decades and to contrast them with Antarctic abundances (see Figure Q12-1). Decreases from the pre-ozone-hole average values (1970-1982) were observed in the Arctic beginning in the 1980s, when similar changes were occurring in the Antarctic. The decreases have reached a maximum of about 30% but have remained smaller than those found in the Antarctic since the mid-1980s. The year-to-year changes in the Arctic and Antarctic average ozone values reflect annual variations in meteorological conditions that affect the extent of low polar temperatures and the transport of air into and out of the polar stratosphere. The effect of these variations is generally greater for the Arctic than the Antarctic.

Figure Q12-1. Average polar ozone.

Total ozone in polar regions is measured by well-calibrated satellite instruments. Shown here is a comparison of average springtime total ozone values found between 1970 and 1982 (solid and dashed red lines) with those in later years. Each point represents a monthly average in October in the Antarctic or in March in the Arctic. After 1982, significant ozone depletion is found in most years in the Arctic and all years in the Antarctic. The largest average depletions have occurred in the Antarctic since 1990. The ozone changes are the combination of chemical destruction and natural variations. Variations in meteorological conditions influence the year-to-year changes in depletion, particularly in the Arctic. Essentially all of the decrease in the Antarctic and usually most of the decrease in the Arctic each year are attributable to chemical destruction by reactive halogen gases. Average total ozone values over the Arctic are naturally larger at the beginning of each winter season because more ozone is transported poleward each season in the Northern Hemisphere than in the Southern Hemisphere.



Arctic vs. Antarctic. The Arctic winter stratosphere is generally warmer than its Antarctic counterpart (see Figure Q10-1). Higher temperatures reduce polar stratospheric cloud (PSC) formation, which slows the conversion of reactive chlorine gases to form ClO and, as a consequence, reduces the amount of ozone depletion (see Q10). Furthermore, the temperature and wind conditions are much more variable in the Arctic from winter to winter and within a winter season than in the Antarctic. Large year-to-year differences occur in Arctic minimum temperatures and the duration of PSC-forming temperatures into early spring. In a few Arctic winters, minimum temperatures are not low enough for PSCs to form. These factors combine to cause ozone depletion to be variable in the Arctic from year to year, with some years having little to no ozone depletion.

As in the Antarctic, depletion of ozone in the Arctic

is confined to the late winter/early spring season. In spring, temperatures in the lower stratosphere eventually warm, thereby ending PSC formation as well as the most effective chemical cycles that destroy ozone. The subsequent transport of ozone-rich air into the Arctic stratosphere displaces ozone-depleted air. As a result, ozone layer abundances are restored to near-normal values until the following winter.

High Arctic total ozone. A significant difference exists between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres in how ozone-rich stratospheric air is transported into the polar regions from lower latitudes during fall and winter. In the northern stratosphere, the poleward and downward transport of ozone-rich air is stronger. As a result, total ozone values in the Arctic are considerably higher than in the Antarctic at the beginning of each winter season (see Figure Q12-1).