

Q11

How severe is the depletion of the Antarctic ozone layer?

Severe depletion of the Antarctic ozone layer was first reported in the mid-1980s. Antarctic ozone depletion is seasonal, occurring primarily in late winter and early spring (August–November). Peak depletion occurs in early October when ozone is often completely destroyed over a range of altitudes, thereby reducing total ozone by as much as two-thirds at some locations. This severe depletion creates the “ozone hole” apparent in images of Antarctic total ozone made using satellite observations. In most years the maximum area of the ozone hole far exceeds the size of the Antarctic continent.

The severe depletion of Antarctic ozone, known as the “ozone hole,” was first reported in the mid-1980s. The depletion is attributable to chemical destruction by reactive halogen gases that increased in the stratosphere in the latter half of the 20th century (see Q16). Conditions in the Antarctic winter and early spring stratosphere are highly suitable for ozone depletion because of (1) the long periods of extremely low temperatures, which cause polar stratospheric clouds (PSCs) to form; (2) the large abundance of reactive halogen gases produced in reactions on PSCs; and (3) the isolation of stratospheric air, which allows time for chemical destruction processes to occur. The severity of Antarctic ozone depletion

can be seen using satellite observations of total ozone, ozone altitude profiles, and long-term changes in total ozone.

Antarctic ozone hole. The most widely used images of Antarctic ozone depletion are derived from measurements of total ozone made with satellite instruments. A map of Antarctic early spring measurements shows a large region centered near the South Pole in which total ozone is highly depleted (see Figure Q11-1). This region has come to be called the “ozone hole” because of the near-circular contours of low ozone values in the maps. The area of the ozone hole is defined here as the geographical region contained within the 220-Dobson unit (DU) contour in total ozone maps (see white line in Figure

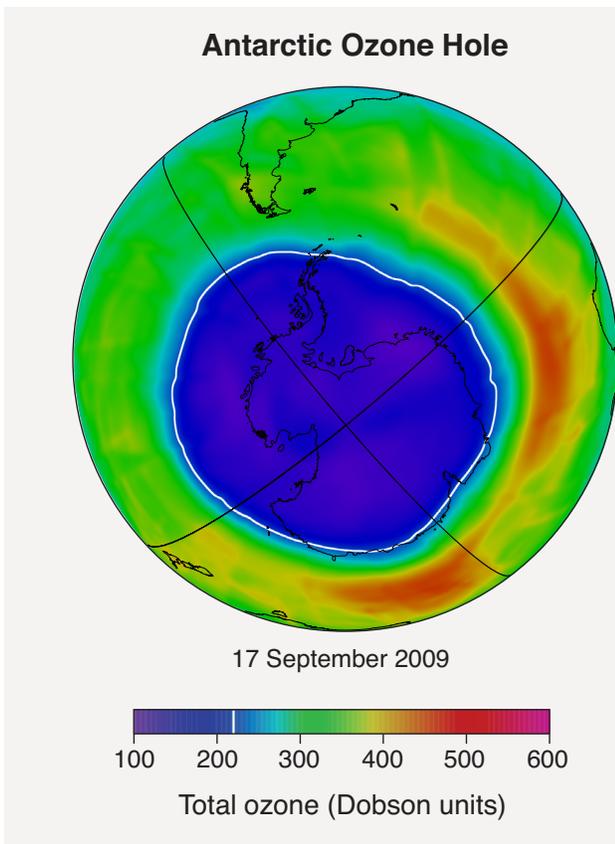


Figure Q11-1. Antarctic ozone hole. Total ozone values are shown for high southern latitudes on 17 September 2009 as measured by a satellite instrument. The dark blue and purple regions over the Antarctic continent show the severe ozone depletion or “ozone hole” now found during every spring. Minimum values of total ozone inside the ozone hole are close to 100 Dobson units (DU) compared with normal Antarctic springtime values of about 350 DU (see Figure Q11-3). The ozone hole area is usually defined as the geographical area within the 220-DU contour (see white line) on total ozone maps. In late spring or early summer (November–December) the ozone hole disappears in satellite images as ozone-depleted air is displaced and mixed with ozone-rich air transported toward the pole from outside the ozone hole. Note that maximum total ozone values in the Southern Hemisphere in this late winter period are generally located in a crescent-shaped region surrounding the ozone hole.

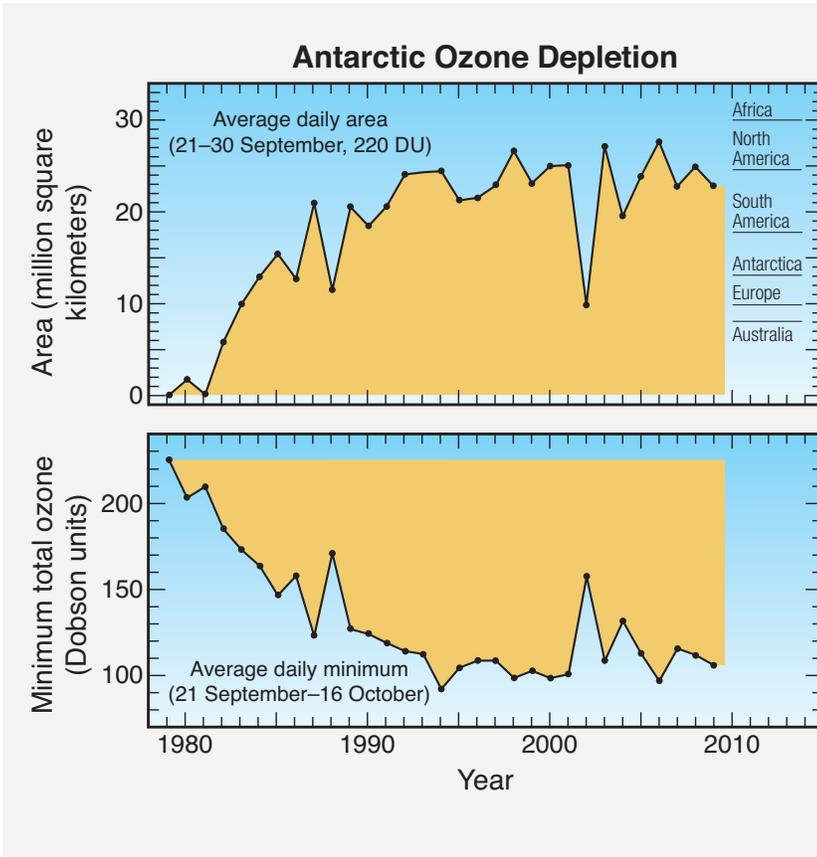


Figure Q11-2. Antarctic ozone hole features. Long-term changes are shown for key aspects of the Antarctic ozone hole: the area enclosed by the 220-DU contour on maps of total ozone (upper panel) and the minimum total ozone amount within the 220-DU contour (lower panel). The values are derived from satellite observations and averaged for each year at a time near the peak of ozone depletion, as defined by the dates shown in each panel. The areas of continents are included for reference in the upper panel. The magnitude of ozone depletion gradually increased beginning in 1980. In the 1990s, the depletion reached steady year-to-year values, except for the unusually low depletion in 2002 (see Figure Q11-4 and following box). The magnitude of Antarctic ozone depletion will decrease as ODSs are removed from the atmosphere (see Figure Q16-1). The return of Antarctic total ozone to 1980 values is not expected to occur before 2050 (see Q20).

Q11-1). The maximum area has reached 25 million square kilometers (about 10 million square miles) in recent years, which is nearly twice the area of the Antarctic continent (see Figure Q11-2). Minimum values of total ozone inside the ozone hole averaged in late September to mid-October are near 100 DU, which is two-thirds below normal springtime values of about 350 DU (see Figures Q11-3 and Q12-1). Low total ozone inside the ozone hole contrasts strongly with the distribution of much larger values *outside* the ozone hole. This common feature can also be seen in Figure Q11-1, where a crescent-shaped region with maximum values of about 500 DU surrounds a large portion of the ozone hole in September 2009.

Altitude profiles of Antarctic ozone. The low total ozone values within the ozone hole are caused by nearly complete removal of ozone in the lower stratosphere. Balloonborne instruments (see Q5) demonstrate that this depletion occurs within the ozone layer, the altitude region that normally contains the highest ozone abundances. At geographic locations with the lowest total ozone values, balloon measurements show that the chemical destruction of ozone is complete over an altitude region of several kilometers. For example, in the ozone profile over South Pole, Antarctica, on 9 October 2006 (see Figure Q12-3), ozone abundances are essentially zero over

the altitude region of 14 to 21 kilometers. The lowest winter temperatures and highest reactive chlorine (ClO) abundances occur in this altitude region (see Figure Q8-3). The differences in the average South Pole ozone profiles between the decades 1962–1971 and 1990–2009 in Figure Q12-3 show how reactive halogen gases have dramatically altered the ozone layer. In the 1960s, a normal ozone layer is clearly evident in the October average profile with a peak near 16 kilometers altitude. In the 1990–2009 average profile, a broad minimum centered near 16 kilometers now occurs with ozone values reduced by up to 90% of normal values.

Long-term total ozone changes. The significant springtime ozone depletion represented by the ozone hole has only been observed since the early 1980s even though low winter temperatures and isolated conditions occur each year in the Antarctic stratosphere. Prior to 1980, the amounts of reactive halogen gases in the stratosphere were insufficient to cause significant depletion. Satellite observations can be used in multiple ways to examine how ozone depletion has changed in the Antarctic region over the last 30–40 years:

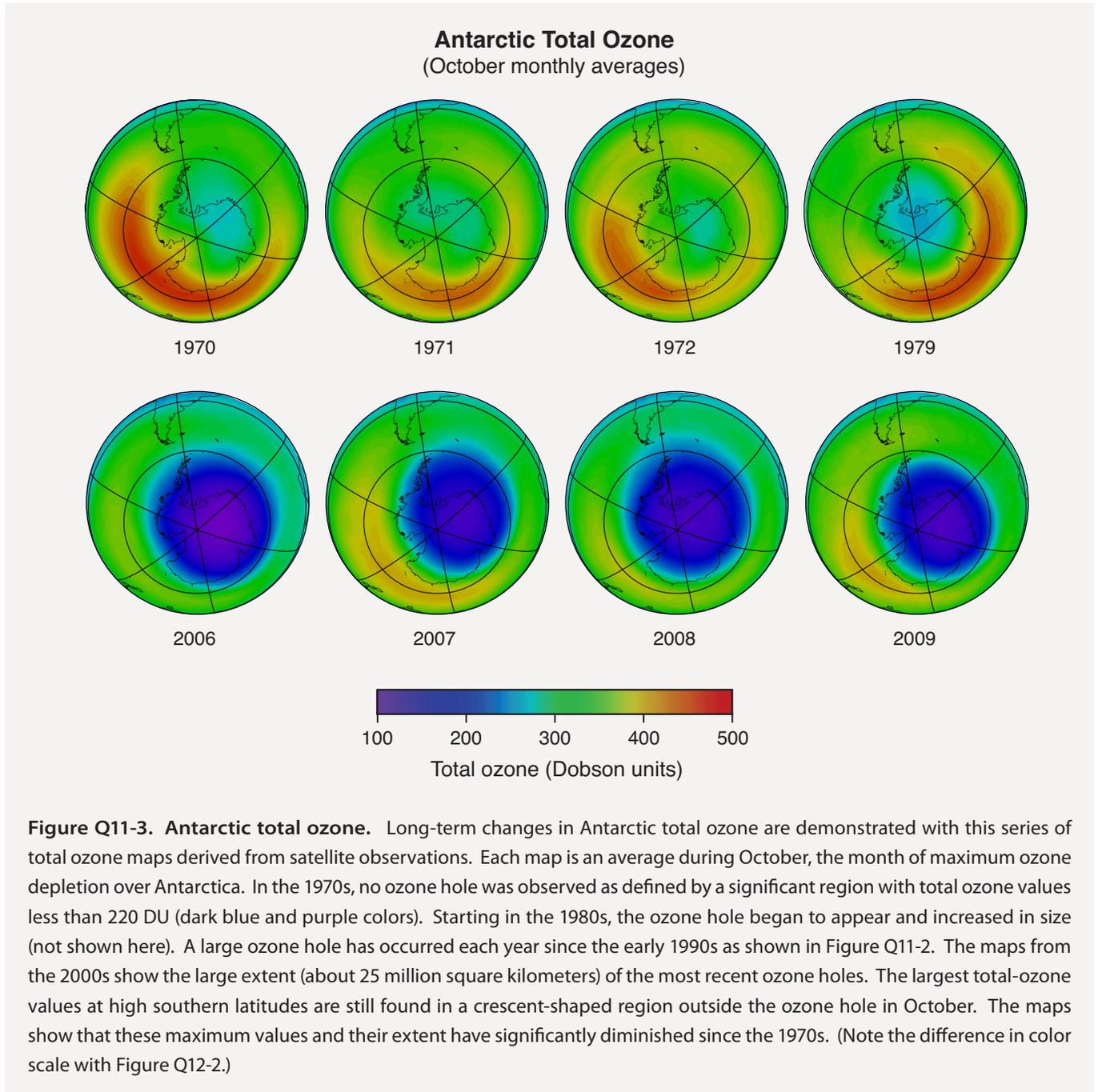
- First, *ozone hole areas* displayed in Figure Q11-2 show that depletion has increased since 1980 to become fairly stable in the 1990s and early 2000s near a value of 25 million

square kilometers. The exception is the unexpected low depletion in 2002, which is explained in the box at the end of this Question. The ozone-hole area is defined here as the geographical area inside the 220-DU contour on total ozone maps (see Figure Q11-1).

- ▶ Second, *minimum Antarctic ozone* amounts displayed in Figure Q11-2 show that the severity of the depletion has increased beginning around 1980 along with the ozone hole area. Fairly constant minimum values near 100 DU

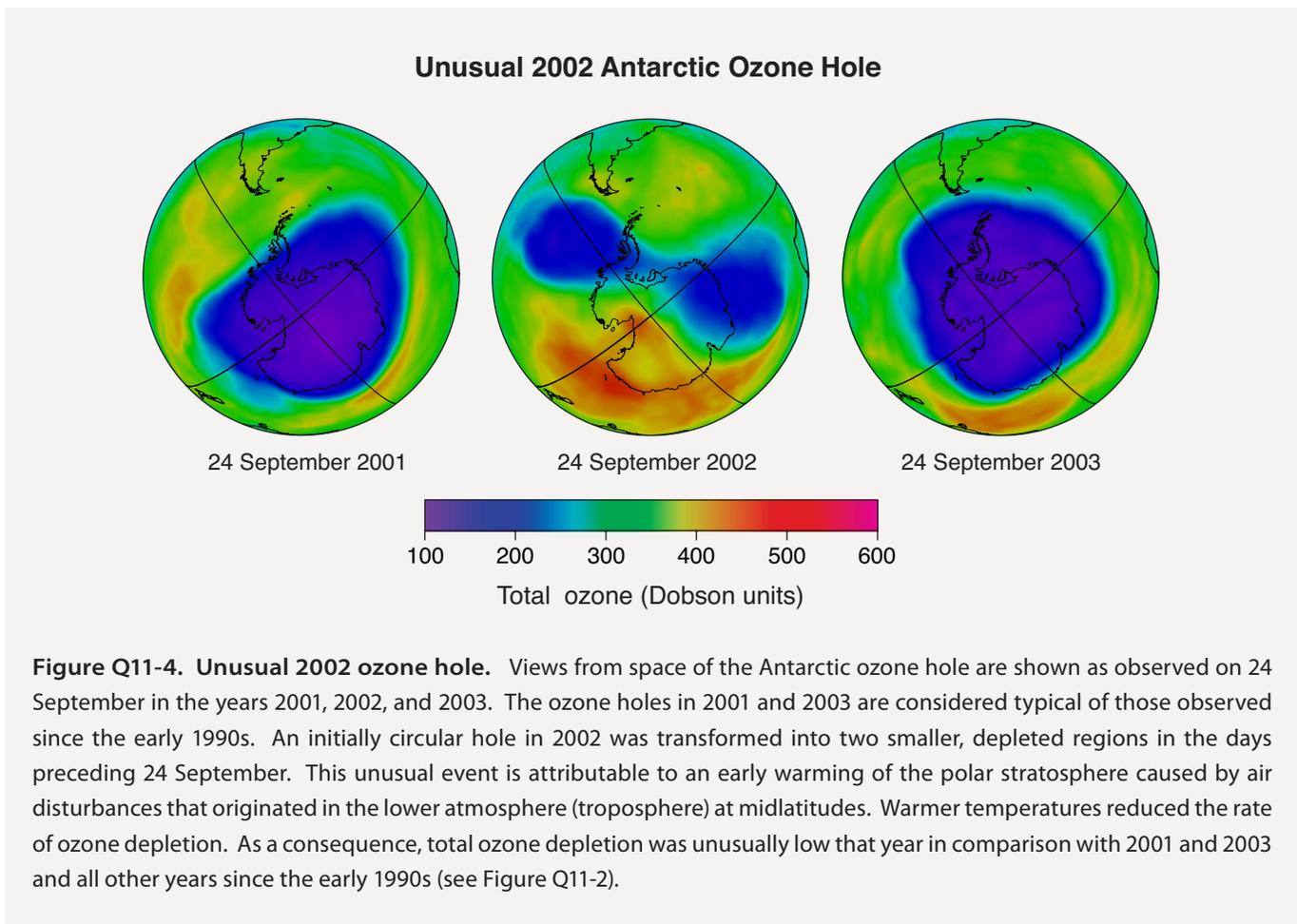
were observed in the 1990s and 2000s with 2002 being an exception.

- ▶ Third, *total ozone maps* over the Antarctic and surrounding regions show how the ozone hole has developed over time (see Figure Q11-3). October averages of total ozone confirm the absence of an ozone hole in the 1970s and its persistent occurrence in the late 2000s.
- ▶ Fourth, values of *total ozone poleward of 63°S* averaged for each October show how total ozone has changed when



averaged over the ozone hole and its surrounding areas (see Figure Q12-1). The values decrease strongly starting from those found in the 1970s and now are approximately 37% less than in pre-ozone-hole years (1970–1982). The average values show a larger year-to-year variability than found for the other ozone measures noted above because the average includes areas outside the ozone hole where the distribution of total ozone varies in response to meteorological conditions. The maps in Q11-3 show also how the maximum in total ozone surrounding the ozone hole each year has diminished over the last three decades, adding to the decreases noted in Figure Q12-1.

Disappearance of the ozone hole in spring. The severe depletion of Antarctic ozone occurs in the late winter/early spring season. In spring, temperatures in the polar lower stratosphere increase (see Figure Q10-1), ending PSC formation and reactions on aerosols and, consequently, the most effective chemical cycles that destroy ozone. Winter-time isolation of high-latitude air ends during this time with increasing exchange of air between the Antarctic stratosphere and lower latitudes. This allows substantial amounts of ozone-rich air to be transported poleward, where it displaces or mixes with air depleted in ozone. As a result of these large-scale transport and mixing processes, the ozone hole disappears by December.



The 2002 Antarctic Ozone Hole

The 2002 Antarctic ozone hole showed features that looked surprising at the time (see Figure Q11-4). It had much less ozone depletion as measured by the area of the ozone hole or minimum total-ozone amounts in comparison with the 2001 ozone hole. The 2002 values now stand out clearly in the year-to-year changes in these quantities displayed in Figure Q11-2. There were no forecasts of an ozone hole with unusual features in 2002 because the chemical and meteorological conditions required to deplete ozone, namely low temperatures and available reactive halogen gases, were present that year and did not differ substantially from previous years. The ozone hole initially formed as expected in August and early September 2002. Later, during the last week of September, an unexpected and surprisingly strong meteorological event occurred that dramatically reshaped the ozone hole into two separate depleted regions. As a result of this disturbance, the combined area of these two regions in late September and early October was significantly less than that observed for the previous or subsequent ozone holes.

The unexpected meteorological influence in 2002 resulted from specific atmospheric air motions that sometimes occur in polar regions. Meteorological analyses of the Antarctic stratosphere show that it was warmed by very strong, large-scale weather systems that originated in the lower atmosphere (troposphere) at midlatitudes in late September. At that time, Antarctic temperatures are generally very low (see Q10) and ozone destruction rates are near their peak values. The influence of these tropospheric systems extended poleward and upward into the stratosphere, disturbing the normal circumpolar wind flow (polar vortex) and warming the lower stratosphere where ozone depletion was ongoing. Higher temperatures reduced the rate of ozone depletion and led to the higher minimum values observed for total ozone in Figure Q11-2. The higher-than-normal impact of these weather disturbances during the critical time period for ozone loss reduced the total loss of ozone in 2002.

The strong influence of the 2002 warming event is unique in the many decades of Antarctic meteorological observations. Another warming event occurred in 1988 causing smaller changes in the ozone hole features in Figure Q11-2. Large warming events are difficult to predict because of the complex conditions leading to their formation.

In 2003 through 2009, ozone hole features returned to values observed from the mid-1990s to 2001 (see Figure Q11-2). The high ozone depletion found since the mid-1990s, with the exception of 2002, is expected to be typical of coming years. A significant, sustained reduction of Antarctic ozone depletion, leading to full recovery of total ozone, requires comparable, sustained reductions of ODSs in the stratosphere. Even with the source gas reductions already underway (see Q16), the return of Antarctic total ozone to 1980 values is not expected to occur before 2050.