

Waterspout phenomenon

Written by Ng Moon-chiu September 2010

In July 2010, waterspouts were spotted on two occasions in Hong Kong waters and aroused much interest among members of the public. A waterspout is an intense columnar vortex of small horizontal extent which occurs over a body of water, usually containing a rotating funnel cloud extending from the base of a convective cloud to the water surface. When a tornado which developed overland moves over water, the associated funnel cloud can also be called a waterspout.

From September 1959 to September 2010, there were 30 days with waterspout sighted in Hong Kong waters. About one third of these events occurred in July.

Some people find waterspout an interesting phenomenon but actually it is quite dangerous. The waterspout that occurred on 10 May 1981 was reported to have sunk dozens of boats about 360 km west-southwest of Hong Kong killing many people.

Waterspouts commonly occur in severe thunderstorms. So if there are signs of severe thunder and lightning nearby, one should watch out for possibility of waterspouts and take precautionary actions.