

MODELING OPEN-OCEAN DEEP CONVECTION

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LONG-TERM GOALS

To understand the convective process in the ocean, develop numerical models to study it, and so improve the representation of convection in ocean circulation models.

OBJECTIVE

To understand the relative importance of vertical mixing by convection and lateral advection by geostrophic eddies in setting the volume and properties of water-masses formed by intense winter storms blowing over the open ocean. The insights gained will inform and improve parametric representations of convection used in large-scale ocean models.

APPROACH

We are interpreting data gathered in the ONR Labrador Sea Convection Experiment, making use of process models of convection and a high-resolution model of the Labrador Sea developed at MIT.

We have developed non-hydrostatic, hydro-dynamical models exploiting parallel computational architectures and languages [see Marshall et al. (1997 a, b), Hill and Marshall (1996), Adcroft et al. (1997)] which are capable of explicitly resolving the convective scale in the ocean. The model has been used to study convection modified by rotation in idealized settings; these have led to much insight into the nature of the convective process, have provided input to the planning of the field program, and are helping in the interpretation of the measurements that have been taken.

WORK COMPLETED

The MIT model was configured in a realistic geometry appropriate for the Labrador Sea, and an ice model embedded. The model was initialized with a hydrographic analysis making use of hydrographic sections taken in Autumn 1996 and driven by analyzed NCEP fields through the period of the field experiment. The output of the model is being used:

- to study the cycle of convection and restratification in the Labrador Sea;
- to help in the interpretation of the field observations.

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RESULTS

Models of convection and ocean circulation developed at MIT, made possible by ONR's support, played a central role in the planning and execution of the field experiment conducted last winter. Using our limited-area model of the Labrador Sea, together with historical data, analyzed buoyancy fluxes heat fluxes and quasi-real-time temperature and salinity profiles from ALACE floats, we were able to predict three months ahead of time where to expect deep convection in the Labrador Sea. Based on those predictions the small-scale float array was deployed at a location that turned out to be exactly where deep convection down to 1500 m was observed during early March 1997 (see Figure 1).

IMPACT /APPLICATIONS

The research has had the following impacts:

- led to the development of numerical methods and highly optimized parallel code for solution of the Incompressible Navier Stokes equations in the highly irregular geometry's typical of ocean basins and marginal seas [see publications (1), (2), (9), and (10)].
- applied maturing parallel architectures and languages to the numerical solution of the Navier Stokes equations.
- deepened our understanding of convection in the presence of rotation, and its role in the ocean circulation [see publications (3) to (8); (11) to (14)].
- provided a theoretical and modeling context for the ONR 'Deep Convection' ARI in the Labrador Sea [see publication (15), figure 1 + legend].

TRANSITIONS

Our models and approaches are being used by an increasingly wide community, both at MIT and elsewhere. Our work on convection has led to numerous publications in the literature starting from the paradigms we have set out.

RELATED PROJECTS

1. The Labrador Sea Deep Convection Experiment

<http://www.ldeo.columbia.edu/~visbeck/labsea/labsea.html>

2. MIT AUV development program

http://seagrant.mit.edu/~auvlab/AUV_home.html

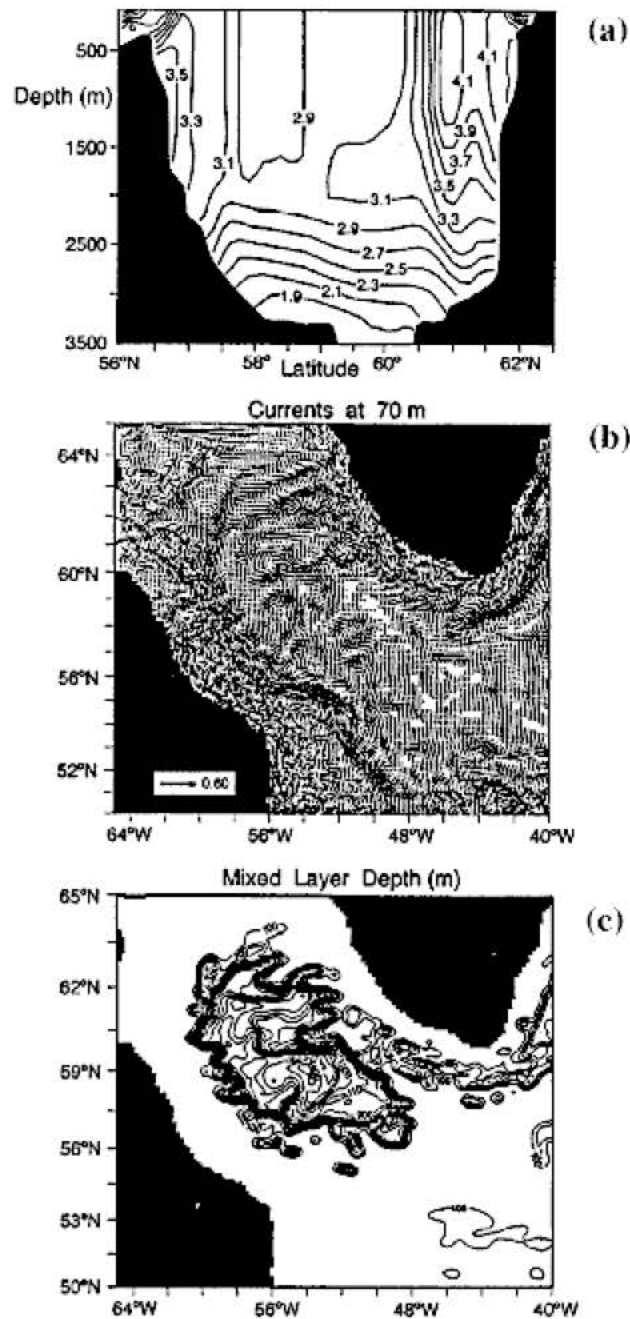


Figure 1.—Limited area model of the Labrador Sea during the month of March, obtained from the MIT ocean circulation model. The model was initialized from a summer hydrographic climatology, driven by 12-hourly NMC winds and fluxes and stepped forward through an annual cycle. Boundary conditions along the open boundaries were taken from a global version of the model run at much coarser (1°) resolution.

- (a) Hydrographic section through the model in March cutting across from Canada to Greenland, showing a deep layer of mixed fluid created by the convective process.
- (b) Surface currents at a depth of 70 m.
- (c) Mixed layer depth in March.

PUBLICATIONS

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