Integrated Boundary Current Observations in the Global Climate System

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Project Summary

For over 20 years the Consortium on the Ocean's Role in Climate (CORC) has focused on implementing new ocean observing technologies and systems. After identifying inadequately measured properties of the ocean circulation that are important to understanding and predicting climate variability, CORC investigators have developed cost-effective technology, methodology and infrastructure to implement observing systems to measure them. These systems have been put into operation to refine and demonstrate their abilities. Examples of past and ongoing projects are the High-Resolution Expendable Bathythermograph network operating from commercial ships, the Surface Velocity Program, the Argo network of profiling floats, the array of California Current glider transects, and moorings to capture high-frequency processes.

Motivated by national and international planning efforts, CORC is now focused on methods to observe boundary currents, both western boundary currents whose powerful circulation signatures affect global climate fluctuations and eastern boundary currents where the circulation affects local weather, ocean acidification, and valuable fisheries. The boundary current data streams are intended primarily for scientists developing societally valuable analyses and prediction products that are influenced by persistent ocean conditions i.e. ocean climate. Examples are developing models to predict seasonal temperature or precipitation anomalies over land, assessing and predicting trends in ocean productivity and fisheries, or planning coastal development in a changing climate.

More specifically, CORC is now developing regional observing systems in the California Current and the Solomon Sea and developing methods to merge these observations with global ocean climate observations like altimetry, winds, Argo profiles and the Surface Velocity Program. In and inshore of the California Current, changes in processes like alongshore currents from the north and south, upwelling, changes in stratification and mixing, and the frequency and strength of near-surface fronts have been implicated in large changes in the abundance of fish and their prey. CORC data is being used to look for relations between ecosystem properties and coastal circulation. The Western Boundary Current in the Solomon Sea is the main source of the Pacific's Equatorial Undercurrent. This makes it a central part of the shallow overturning circulation that influences central Pacific surface temperatures that drive the El Niño – Southern Oscillation (ENSO) fluctuations with global temperature and precipitation consequences. CORC observing systems are delivering data to test and improve methods of predicting ENSO and its decadal-variability relatives as well as ecosystems and local weather along the California coast. This delivery is done primarily through public web sites where data can be plotted or downloaded. CORC does not intend to operate these observing systems indefinitely and hopes to transition them to a program better suited to sustaining them.

CORC has identified circulation in mid-latitude western boundary currents (WBCs) as another type of inadequately observed components of the ocean climate system and is planning to address them with new methods. We are therefore exploring new ways of observing the transport processes of such WBCs with an eye toward sustaining measurements at a reasonable cost.