

Introduction to climate dynamics and climate modelling



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If you want to cite this textbook, please use the following reference:

Goosse H., P.Y. Barriat, W. Lefebvre, M.F. Loutre, and V. Zunz (2010). Introduction to climate dynamics and climate modeling. Online textbook available at <http://www.climate.be/textbook>.

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Contents

Preface

Acknowledgements

1. Description of the climate system and its components

1.1 Introduction

1.2 The atmosphere

1.2.1 Composition and temperature

1.2.2 General circulation of the atmosphere

1.2.3 Precipitation

1.3 The ocean

1.3.1 Composition and properties

1.3.2 Oceanic circulation

1.3.3 Temperature and salinity

1.4 The cryosphere

1.4.1 Components of the cryosphere

1.4.2 Properties of the cryosphere

1.5 The land surface and the terrestrial biosphere

Cited references and further reading

Exercises

2. The Energy balance, hydrological and carbon cycles

2.1 The Earth's energy budget

2.1.1 The heat balance at the top of the atmosphere: a global view

2.1.2 The "greenhouse" effect

2.1.3 Present-day insolation at the top of the atmosphere

2.1.4 The heat balance at the top of the atmosphere: geographical distribution

2.1.5 Heat storage and transport

2.1.6 Heat balance at the surface

2.2 The hydrological cycle

2.3 The carbon cycle

2.3.1 Overview

2.3.2 Oceanic carbon cycle

2.3.3 Terrestrial carbon cycle

2.3.4 Geological reservoirs

Cited references and further reading

Exercises

3. Modelling of the climate system

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 What is a climate model ?

3.1.2 Types of models

3.2 A hierarchy of model

3.2.1 Energy balance models

3.2.2 Intermediate complexity models

3.2.3 General circulation models

3.3 Components of a climate model

3.3.1 Atmosphere

3.3.2 Ocean

3.3.3 Sea ice

3.3.4 Land surface

3.3.5 Marine biogeochemistry

3.3.6 Ice sheets

- 3.3.7 Coupling between the components - Earth system models
- 3.4 Numerical resolution of the equations
 - 3.4.1 Consistence, convergence and stability
 - 3.4.2 Time and space discretisations using finite differences
 - 3.4.3 Spectral representation and finite element methods
- 3.5 Testing the validity of models
 - 3.5.1 Verification, validation, testing
 - 3.5.2 Evaluating model performance
- Cited references and further reading
- Exercises
- 4. The response of the climate system to a perturbation
 - 4.1 Climate forcing and climate response
 - 4.1.1 Notion of radiative forcing
 - 4.1.2 Major radiative forcings
 - 4.1.3 Equilibrium response of the climate system - a definition of feedback
 - 4.1.4 Transient response of the climate system
 - 4.2 Direct physical feedbacks
 - 4.2.1 Water vapour feedback and lapse rate feedback
 - 4.2.2 Cloud feedback
 - 4.2.3 Cryospheric feedbacks
 - 4.3 Geochemical, biogeochemical and biogeophysical feedbacks
 - 4.3.1 The carbonate compensation
 - 4.3.2 Interaction between plate tectonics, climate and the carbon cycle
 - 4.3.3 Interactions between climate and the terrestrial biosphere
- Cited references and further reading
- Exercises
- 5. Brief history of climate: causes and mechanisms
 - 5.1 Introduction
 - 5.2 Internal climate variability
 - 5.2.1 El Niño-Southern Oscillation
 - 5.2.2 The North Atlantic Oscillation
 - 5.2.3 The Southern Annular Mode
 - 5.3 The climate since the Earth's formation
 - 5.3.1 Precambrian climate
 - 5.3.2 Phanerozoic climate
 - 5.3.3 Cenozoic climate
 - 5.4 The last million years: glacial interglacial cycles
 - 5.4.1 Variations in orbital parameters and insolation
 - 5.4.2 The orbital theory of paleoclimates
 - 5.4.3 Glacial-interglacial variations in the atmospheric CO₂ concentration
 - 5.5 The Holocene and the last 1000 years
 - 5.5.1 The current interglacial
 - 5.5.2 The last 1000 years
 - 5.5.3 The last century
- Cited references and further reading
- Exercises
- 6 Future climate changes
 - 6.1 Emission scenarios
 - 6.1.1 The purpose of the scenarios and scenario development
 - 6.1.2 Special Report on Emission Scenarios (SRES)
 - 6.1.3 Representative concentration pathways (RCPs)

6.2 Climate projections for the 21st century

6.2.1 Changes in global mean surface temperature

6.2.2 The spatial distribution of surface temperature and precipitation changes

6.2.3 Changes in the ocean and sea ice

6.2.4 Changes in the carbon cycle and climate-carbon feedbacks

6.3 Long-term climate changes

6.3.1 The carbon cycle

6.3.2 Sea level and ice sheets

Cited references and further reading

Exercises

Symbols and acronyms

Glossary

Preface

The climate has a significant impact on life on Earth as well as on human activities. Temperature and precipitation strongly constrain the type of vegetation that could grow in a particular region. The design and location of houses depend on summer and winter temperatures but also on the probability of flooding. One single late frost or a heavy hail storm could ruin an entire crop. Since the beginning of humanity, people had thus to cope with climate and, if possible, to adapt to it. As a consequence, the various human civilisations have observed and have tried to understand the climate variations. They first provide mythological or religious explanations, often relying on weather lore to obtain forecast. In parallel, climate has evolved as a science, elaborating more and more sophisticated representations of the observed phenomena. Such a description of climate involves now a very broad range of expertise, corresponding to different domains of the sciences including physics, chemistry, biology and geology.

A comprehensive analysis of all the components of the climate system (atmosphere, ocean, ice sheets, etc) and of all the interactions between them is out of the scope of any course or book. We have thus chosen here to provide only a brief overview of the processes that rule the behaviour of those different components. More detailed descriptions are provided in meteorology, oceanography and glaciology courses, for instance. Our first goal here is rather to provide enough information on the interactions between the different elements of the climate system and on the dominant feedbacks to allow the student to analyse the variability of the climate and its response to a perturbation. By this mean, the reader should be able to understand the dominant causes of past climate changes and to critically evaluate the projections of the climate change over the next centuries or millennia.

Because of the complexity of the climate system, many analyses devoted to a quantitative estimate of climate change or climate variability rely on the use of comprehensive three-dimensional numerical models. However, simple models are also widely used to underline clearly the fundamental properties of the climate. Our second goal is thus to give the student the bases to understand how climate model are built and how they could be used to make quantitative estimate of climate variability and climate change as well as to illustrate how models could be used to understand the most important concepts of climate science.

At the origin, this textbook was designed as a support to a course proposed to students in their first year of Master at the Université catholique de Louvain. However, the majority of the sections could already be followed by undergraduate students. Quizzes including questions that provide an overview of the matter covered in the different chapters are available online. If you are able to answer all of them, this likely shows that you have not missed the most important elements of the discussion. As the textbook is devoted to an audience presenting different backgrounds, some fundamental terms or concepts, highlighted using **bold** characters, are explicated in the glossary. If you do not understand some terms or notion, do not hesitate to contact us so that we could append the glossary.

In addition to the material freely proposed online, the UCL students registered for the course PHY2153 “Introduction à l’étude du système climatique et à sa modélisation” will also receive some practical information on the course, including a precise list of the chapters or sections of the online textbook that will be studied during the academic year. Registered students are also encouraged to answer the quizzes on the virtual campus of UCL rather than on the textbook web site.

Acknowledgements

Many colleagues have read carefully the various sections of this online textbook and suggested modifications that improved significantly the quality of the published material. We would like to thank particularly André Berger, Victor Brovkin, Michel Crucifix, Eric Deleersnijder, Anne de Montety, Thierry Fichefet, Hans Renssen, Benoit Tartinville and Kevin Trenberth. We benefit of very useful advices from Françoise Docq, Marcel Lebrun, Denis Smidts of the Institut de Pédagogie universitaire et des Multimédias of the Université catholique de Louvain (IPM, <http://www.ipm.ucl.ac.be>). Antoine Barthélemy helped in the introduction of revisions in the text and on the textbook web site. We also want to acknowledge the organisations, publishers and scientists who allow us to reproduce their work without any charge. This work is supported by the Fonds de Développement Pédagogique of the Université catholique de Louvain in the framework of the project: "Réalisation de simulations interactives comme support à l'apprentissage dans le cadre du cours d'introduction à la physique du système climatique et à sa modélisation."