

A Satellite-Based Multi-Pollutant Index of Global Air Quality

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Air pollution is a major health hazard that is responsible for millions of annual excess deaths worldwide. Simple indicators are useful for comparative studies and to assess trends over time. The development of global indicators has been impeded by the lack of ground-based observations in vast regions of the world. Recognition is growing of the need for a multipollutant approach to air quality to better represent human exposure. Here we introduce the prospect of a multipollutant air quality indicator based on observations from satellite remote sensing.

A variety of air pollution indices exist around the world. The air quality index of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency at a given time and place is based on the highest concentration relative to the ambient air quality standard for PM_{2.5}, PM₁₀, O₃, NO₂, SO₂, and CO. The Canadian Air Quality Health Index is a multipollutant index based on the sum of PM_{2.5}, NO₂, and O₃, weighted by their contribution to mortality in daily time-series study across Canadian cities. Gurjar et al.¹ proposed a multipollutant index for megacities based on the sum of annual concentrations of total suspended particulates, NO₂, and SO₂, weighted by their deviation from World Health Organization

(WHO) guideline. These indices require observations from air pollution monitors. Yet most of the global population lives further than 100 km from monitors of even the most densely monitored pollutants, such as PM_{2.5}.

Satellite remote sensing of air quality has advanced markedly over the past decade. The two pollutants for which global ground-level concentrations have been derived from satellite remote sensing are PM_{2.5} and NO₂. Satellite-based estimates of PM_{2.5} and NO₂ serve as a useful starting point for a global long-term multipollutant index. PM_{2.5} is a robust indicator of mortality and other adverse health effects. NO₂ likely serves as a marker of other short-lived products of atmospheric combustion sources that increase the toxicity of the air pollution mixture.² Thus we propose a satellite-based multipollutant index (SAT_MPI) in which we scale the local PM_{2.5} concentration by its ambient NO₂ concentration:

$$\text{SATMPI} = \frac{\text{PM}_{2.5}}{\text{AQG}_{\text{PM}_{2.5}}} \left[1 + \frac{\text{NO}_2}{\text{AQG}_{\text{NO}_2}} \right] \quad (1)$$

Following Gurjar et al.¹ we reference PM_{2.5} concentrations to the WHO Air Quality Guideline (AQG) of 10 µg/m³ and NO₂ to the AQG of 40 µg/m³. This equation represents a starting point for discussion. Several variations on this concept can be considered, including additional pollutants and area or population weighting for ranking of cities. Ground-level concentrations are taken from van Donkelaar et al.³ for PM_{2.5} and from Lamsal et al.⁴ for NO₂. Both studies used a chemical transport model (GEOS-Chem, www.geos-chem.org) to relate satellite observations of the atmospheric column to ground-level concentrations. The lack of observational estimates of global ground-level O₃ is lamentable, however global mortality estimates for PM_{2.5} are 5 times larger than for O₃.⁵

Figure 1 shows the resultant SAT_MPI. Regional enhancements in the eastern U.S., Europe, northern India, and China reflect regional anthropogenic sources of PM_{2.5}. Broad enhancements across northern Africa and the Middle East are driven by wind-blown mineral dust. Local enhancements over urban areas are due to the combination of NO₂ and PM_{2.5}. The bottom-left inset contains SAT_MPI for selected cities. Most of

Received: July 3, 2012

Accepted: July 9, 2012

Published: August 2, 2012

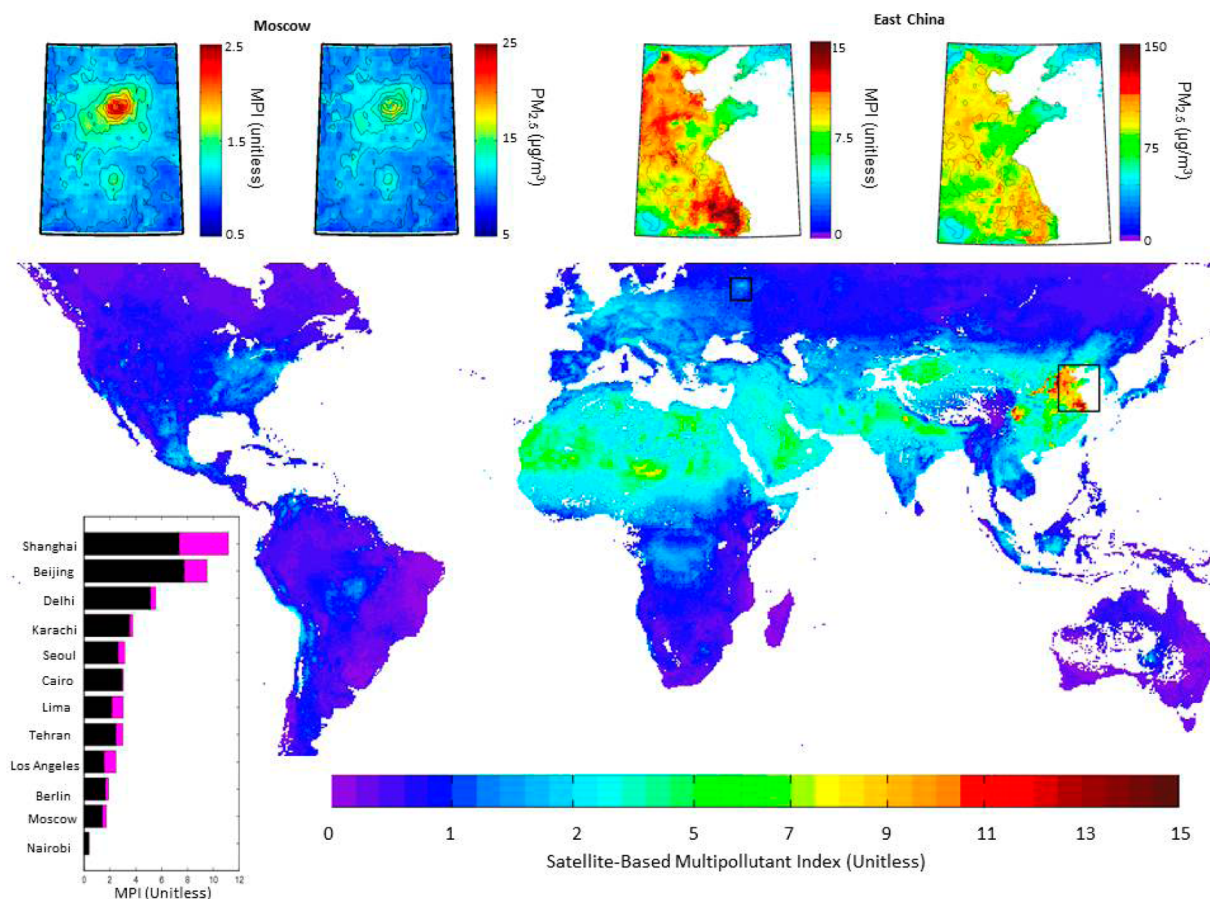


Figure 1. Annual mean satellite-based multipollutant index (SAT_MPI). The bottom left inset contains SAT_MPI for select cities (black indicates the contribution from PM_{2.5} and violet indicates the contribution from NO₂). Top insets show the index for Moscow and East China. Contours indicate population density. White space indicates water and missing data.

the effect is driven by PM_{2.5}, however the addition of NO₂ does change the relative ranking (e.g., Shanghai and Beijing). The top inset illustrates the spatial structure in the index, using Moscow and East China as examples. In both cases, the addition of NO₂ indicates the influence of local combustion sources that increase the contrast between urban and rural locations. This index provides observational information about the worldwide distribution of pollution from local and global sources.

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Rick Burnett from Health Canada for stimulating discussion. This work was supported by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) of Canada.

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