Secular changes in the solar semidiurnal tide of the western North Atlantic Ocean

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[1] An analysis of twentieth century tide gauge records reveals that the solar semidiurnal tide S2 has been decreasing in amplitude along the eastern coast of North America and at the mid-ocean site Bermuda. In relative terms the observed rates are unusually large, of order 10% per century. Periods of greatest change, however, are inconsistent among the stations, and roughly half the stations show increasing amplitude since the late 1990s. Excepting the Gulf of Maine, lunar tides are either static or slightly increasing in amplitude; a few stations show decreases. Large changes in solar, but not lunar, tides suggest causes related to variable radiational forcing, but the hypothesis is at present unproven. Citation: Ray, R. D. (2009), Secular changes in the solar semidiurnal tide of the western North Atlantic Ocean, Geophys. Res. Lett., 36, L19601, doi:10.1029/2009GL040217.

1. Introduction

[2] This work commenced as part of a broadened effort to understand some puzzling features of the tides in the Gulf of Maine. Godin [1995], following up earlier work by Doodson [1924], noticed that at St. John, New Brunswick, on the western shore of the Bay of Fundy, the amplitude of the M2 tide is increasing by an unusually large rate, of order 10 cm century^{-1}, and further that S2 is decreasing at roughly half that rate. By itself the phenomenon might be easily dismissed as a local curiosity, reflecting possibly some sort of environmental changes near the harbor, but the same secular changes were subsequently found to occur throughout the entire Bay of Fundy and Gulf of Maine system [Ray, 2006].

[3] As is well known, the tides of the Bay of Fundy are highly resonant and are therefore likely sensitive to small changes in basin geometry or depth. A plausible explanation for the tidal changes is a shift of the basin’s fundamental resonance frequency away from S2 toward M2. But there are two serious objections to this explanation: (1) For the ocean to respond differently to forcing at such close frequencies (30.000 h^{-1} and 28.980 h^{-1} for S2 and M2, respectively), and by amounts large enough to induce the observed changes, an unusually sharp (high Q) ocean resonance would be required. (2) Observations of tidal admittances as functions of frequency as well as numerical ocean modeling suggest that the Bay of Fundy resonance lies below the frequencies of M2 and S2 [Garrett, 1972, 1974], and not between them.

[4] To make progress it seems desirable to take a larger perspective, in part by testing for tidal changes over a larger region. Secular changes in tides are, in fact, not uncommonly detected when measurements over a long timespan are examined [Cartwright, 1972]. Flick et al. [2003] recently compiled statistics for rates in mean tidal range for 90 tide gauges in the United States, as Woodworth et al. [1991] had previously done for 13 British ports. More recently Jay [2009] analyzed tidal changes at 34 stations along the western coasts of North and South America and found secular trends in the M2 and K1 tides with surprisingly wide-scale coherence: all stations between Panama and Alaska showed increasing amplitudes, with an average increase of 2.2% per century.

[5] The present paper reports similar coherent trends for 12 stations along the boundary of the northwest Atlantic Ocean, plus one station (Bermuda) in the interior. In this case, however, attention is drawn to the solar constituent S2, which is decreasing in amplitude at all 13 stations and by amounts significantly larger than the changes observed by Jay. Section 2 briefly describes our methods of analysis and presents the main findings. Implications for the curious tidal changes seen in the Gulf of Maine are addressed in Section 3. An obvious mechanism for large changes in solar, but not lunar, tides relates to radiational forcing and the atmospheric tide. This is discussed, somewhat inconclusively, in Section 4.

2. Observed Secular Tidal Trends

[6] Long time series of hourly data from thirteen stations (see Figure 1) form the basis for this work. The stations, all open directly to the sea, were selected based on the long lengths of their time series (as archived primarily at the University of Hawaii Sea Level Center). The time series at St. John’s, Newfoundland, is 44 years long, much shorter than the others, but is included because it is the longest series in the western Atlantic Ocean north of 46°N. Key West is the southernmost station and is used even though all semidiurnal constituents there are small and it is somewhat blocked from the open Atlantic by the Bahamas. Bermuda is the only station with comparably long duration from the interior of the Atlantic Ocean; see Wunsch [1972] for more detailed discussion of its tides. The long (70 year) time series at Wilmington, North Carolina, is not used; Flick et al. [2003] found that its trend in mean tidal range is anomalously high—three times that of any other east coast station—but the station sits well up the Cape Fear River and is presumably reflecting very local tidal changes.

[7] From the hourly data amplitudes and phases of 43 tidal constituents (more at some stations) were estimated for each year having at least 7000 hourly observations. The estimation was done by least-squares harmonic analysis following standard methods, with one exception: In the
Gulf of Maine the 18.6-year nodal modulation of the $M_2$ tide is known to be smaller than its equilibrium value of ±3.7% because of frictional effects [Ku et al., 1985]. For stations Eastport, Portland, and Boston, nodal modulations of ±2.3%, ±2.7%, and ±2.8%, respectively, were used, based on Ray [2006, Table 2]. For the other stations the equilibrium value appears to suffice.

[8] In the Atlantic Ocean diurnal tides are generally small; they never exceed 15 cm amplitude at our thirteen stations. It can be difficult to discern trends in small constituents in the face of estimation noise, so we focus on semidiurnal constituents, which are generally large in the Atlantic.

[9] The most striking results are found for the principal solar tide $S_2$. Figure 2 shows annual estimates of amplitude for each of the thirteen stations. Large secular trends (in both relative and absolute terms) are found to occur in amplitude, and these trends are negative (i.e., decreasing amplitude) at all stations. $S_2$ phase lags (not shown) are changing less markedly and are not completely consistent in sign among the stations (see Table 1). There is a slight tendency toward increasing phase lags.

[10] Although the overall $S_2$ amplitude trends are negative, Figure 2 shows that the periods of greatest change are not consistent among the stations. Many stations appear fairly constant during the early twentieth century, excepting a transient dip around 1920 at Portland, partly echoed at Boston and Halifax. In contrast, Newport shows a consistent drop since its beginning in 1931, while Charleston is fairly constant until 1980 and falls rapidly over the next two decades. Some amplitudes, including those in the Gulf of Maine which prompted this investigation, appear to have reversed direction around 1998 and have been increasing since then, although Newport and New London continue to fall.

[11] The northernmost (St. John's) and southernmost (Key West) stations display the smallest amplitude trends over the examined time period. The trend at St. John’s is only marginally significant. Aside from a curious jump in 1928, Key West is remarkably flat until it begins to decay in 1985. The Bermuda time series appears somewhat confused until one realizes that the tide gauge was relocated several times: in 1939, 1944, and 1992 (see UHSLC documentation), marked by vertical lines in Figure 2. Allowing for these relocations, one sees that the amplitude at Bermuda has been decreasing over the entire timespan.

[12] Table 1 gives estimated linear trends (both absolute and relative to mean amplitude) for all stations over the seventy years 1935–2005, a period which seems to capture the times of greatest change over all stations. The tabulated standard errors on trends account for serial correlation by assuming an AR(1) noise process [Lee and Luna, 2004]. Similar statistics are also given in Table 1 for the principal lunar tide $M_2$. In contrast to $S_2$, $M_2$ shows increasing amplitude at most stations, but not consistently: three stations show a decrease and several show no significant change. ($M_2$ trends at Portland, Boston, and especially...
Eastport are smaller than previously reported [Ray, 2006] owing to a different considered timespan; the previous trends were restricted to pre-1980 data.)

[13] Trends in N2 (not shown) have characteristics similar to M2. Amplitudes in the Gulf of Maine are increasing, Halifax is slightly decreasing, most others are flat or very slightly increasing. Charleston, however, is anomalous with a large relative increase of 7.4 ± 1.4 percent. Note that any analysis of N2 must account for not only nodal modulations but also an 8.85-year oscillation in annual estimates induced by interference from the relatively large degree-3 N2 tide.

[14] Table 1 emphasizes the unusual nature of the changes in S2 amplitudes. Aside from being consistently negative, the magnitudes of these changes are large—the relative changes at all stations save St. John’s exceed even the largest relative change seen in M2. Moreover, the fact that similarly large S2 decreases are occurring at Bermuda suggests that the changes may be basin-wide, throughout the entire western part of the North Atlantic. Unfortunately, no data are readily available to investigate the remainder of the central Atlantic. I have examined a few stations in the eastern Atlantic and found them to be inconsistent with the western Atlantic stations. In particular, S2 at Newlyn, U.K., shows a barely positive trend of +0.50 ± 0.43 percent since 1935 (somewhat larger if 1915–1935 data are included).

[15] It is worth noting that these observed secular trends in amplitudes are unrelated to the much smaller secular changes in the astronomical tidal potential. Owing to the earth’s decreasing obliquity, most semidiurnal equilibrium tides are slowly increasing (K2, being a declinational tide, is an exception). The present-day change in the S2 potential is roughly 0.01% cy⁻¹ [Cartwright and Edden, 1973], insignificant in comparison with our Table 1 changes.

3. Implications for Gulf of Maine

[16] Tides in the Gulf of Maine are driven primarily by the ocean tide at its mouth, not directly by the tidal potential. Thus, to study the Gulf of Maine resonance and its response (or admittance) as a function of frequency, we should form admittances with respect to the observed tide at, say, Halifax [e.g., Garrett, 1972].

[17] Figure 3 shows annual estimates of admittance at Eastport relative to the observed tide at Halifax. Although the N2 and S2 error bars are large, we can nonetheless discern clear trends of increasing admittances at all three tidal frequencies. Similar results are found for other stations in the gulf. Thus, the mystery alluded to in the Introduction is solved: S2 amplitudes are decreasing in the Gulf of Maine only because of decreasing amplitudes at the mouth. In fact, the gulf’s tidal response is increasing at all frequencies across the semidiurnal band. Whatever resonance characteristics are changing within the Gulf of Maine, they result in magnified tides across the whole semidiurnal spectrum, as one would normally expect of an ocean resonance.

4. Causes of Basin-Scale Changes in S2

[18] Yet we have replaced one mystery with another. If the S2 decreases in the Gulf of Maine simply reflect reduced

![Figure 3. Annual estimates of admittance magnitudes of the N2, S2, and M2 tides at Eastport, relative to the observed tides at Halifax. Linear fits to each time series show that the admittance inside the Gulf of Maine system is increasing for all three constituents.](image-url)
S₂ forcing at its opening to the Atlantic, what is the cause of those decreases?

There are, however, several difficulties with an air-tide explanation. Firstly, the mean global radiational component of S₂ is only about 10% [Cartwright and Ray, 1994]. To obtain a 10% change in the ocean S₂ (Table 1) would thus require a very large relative change in the S₂ air tide. On the other hand, many locations exceed the 10% global mean. Zetler [1971] reported values along the U.S. coasts between 6–32% (the highest was at Eastport). Using a well-tuned numerical model, Arbic [2005] found the radiational-to-gravitational ratio along the U.S. east coast to be roughly 20%, larger than almost anywhere else in the Atlantic Ocean. So the northwest Atlantic may be unusually sensitive to changes in radiational forcing.

A second difficulty is that similar amplitude changes evidently occur in K₂. Trends are more difficult to discern for K₂ because of noise levels, but they emerge clearly when extracting tidal estimates from longer, multi-year segments. Figure 4 shows overlapping 18.6-year admittance estimates (now relative to the generating potential) of the four largest semidiurnal tides at Atlantic City. The changes in K₂ are almost lock-step with those in S₂. Yet the radiational component of K₂ is much smaller than that of S₂. For example, from an (unpublished) analysis of air tides at St. Helena (16°S, 6°W) we find the ratio of K₂ to S₂ amplitudes is (0.076 mb)/(1.096 mb), or 0.07, while the ratio of their gravitational potentials is 0.27. It is difficult to see how such a small radiational contribution could have such a large effect on K₂.

In light of these difficulties, attributing observed S₂ changes to a variable radiational component seems premature, and may well be incorrect. But it does suggest that further scrutiny of historical meteorological records would be a timely endeavor.

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References


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