

A century of observed temperature change in the Indian Ocean

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Key Points:

- Historical observations of subsurface Indian Ocean temperature are recovered from expeditions in the late 19th and early 20th century
- Indian Ocean warming over the 20th century extends to 750 m depth
- Pattern of temperature change is consistent with surface warming and a poleward shift of the gyres over the last half of the 20th century

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean has warmed rapidly over the last half of the 20th century, with widespread effects on regional weather, and global climate. Determining the causes of the observed warming is challenging due to the lack of a long instrumental record of interior ocean temperature, leaving uncertainty around the active physical mechanisms and the role of decadal variability. Here we utilize unique temperature observations from three historical German oceanographic expeditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: SMS *Gazelle* (1874–1876), *Valdivia* (1898–1899), and SMS *Planet* (1906–1907). These observations reveal a mean 20th century ocean warming that extends over the upper 750 m, and a spatial pattern of subsurface warming and cooling consistent with a 1°–2° southward shift of the ocean gyres. These interior changes occurred largely over the last half of the 20th century, providing observational evidence for the acceleration of a multidecadal trend in subsurface Indian Ocean temperature.

Plain Language Summary

The Indian Ocean has warmed rapidly over the last 50 years, with far reaching effects on global weather and climate. Sea-surface temperature records suggest this warming has accelerated over the last half of the 20th century, however similar long records of subsurface temperatures have not been available. Here we extend the observational record back more than a century using data from 3 historical oceanographic expeditions. These observations reveal a mean 20th century Indian Ocean warming that extends down to 750 m depth, as well as deep cooling in the subtropics. This provides evidence for the existence of a multidecadal trend in subsurface Indian Ocean temperatures that has accelerated over the last half of the 20th century.

1 Introduction

Sea-surface temperature (SST) in the Indian Ocean has warmed over the last 50 years at a rate that is approximately 50% faster than the global average (Roxy et al., 2014, 2020). This warming strongly affects regional weather and climate—including monsoon variability and the Madden-Julian oscillation (Han et al., 2014)—generating a variety of climate extremes such as floods, droughts, and heat waves. This is of particular consequence in this region as approximately 1/3 of the world’s population lives in the countries surrounding the Indian Ocean basin, many of which are vulnerable to sea-level

44 rise and have high reliance on rain-fed agriculture for food-security. Globally, the warm-
45 ing Indian Ocean SST has been implicated in the evolution and variability of the El-Niño-
46 Southern Oscillation (McPhaden, 1999; Xie et al., 2009; Luo et al., 2012), the Atlantic
47 meridional-overturning circulation (Hu & Fedorov, 2019), and global weather patterns
48 including rainfall and hurricane activity (McPhaden et al., 2009; Han et al., 2014; Mal-
49 oney & Hartmann, 2000).

50 A challenge for understanding the physical processes driving the observed surface
51 warming in the Indian Ocean is the lack of a long instrumental record that resolves sub-
52 surface ocean temperatures. The modern observational record, over the period spanning
53 approximately 1960 to the present, reveals that the rapid surface warming overlies a more
54 heterogeneous pattern of warming and cooling below the thermocline (Alory et al., 2007).
55 Thus, despite the rapid increase in SST, the heat content of the Indian Ocean has in-
56 creased at a rate of approximately 1×10^{22} Joules per decade, far below the global av-
57 erage (Han et al., 2014; Roxy et al., 2020). This trend however obscures a more recent
58 increase in heat content such that over the last two decades the Indian Ocean is believed
59 to be responsible for 30%–70% of the total global ocean heat uptake—despite it being
60 the smallest of the major oceans—modulating the rate at which global surface air tem-
61 peratures increase (Lee et al., 2015; Beal et al., 2019). Disentangling long-term temper-
62 ature trends using modern observations is made more challenging by strong interannual
63 and decadal variability, which is affected both by internal modes of variability such as
64 the Indian Ocean Dipole, and remotely forced variability transmitted through both at-
65 mospheric teleconnections and heat transport through the Indonesian Throughflow (Han
66 et al., 2014; Ummenhofer et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018; Ummenhofer et al., 2021).

67 A unique opportunity for extending the instrumental record in time is revisiting
68 the observations of early oceanographic expeditions of the 19th century, some of which
69 took extensive subsurface temperature measurements. Comparison of the historical cruise
70 data with modern observations can then be used to constrain changes in the interior ocean
71 temperature over the last century. This approach has been used successfully for the At-
72 lantic and Pacific oceans, where temperature records from the circumnavigation of the
73 HMS *Challenger* (1872–1875) reveal warming that extends to below 1000 m depth (Roemmich
74 et al., 2012), and mid-depth cooling in the Pacific attributable to the ongoing slow abyssal
75 adjustment to the Little Ice Age (Gebbie & Huybers, 2019). The *Challenger* however
76 did not sample extensively in the Indian Ocean during its circumnavigation, taking in-

77 stead a southerly route crossing the Antarctic circle, leaving open the question of how
78 the interior temperature in the Indian Ocean has changed over the 20th century.

79 Here we identify three German deep-sea expeditions of the late 19th and early 20th
80 century that recorded temperature profiles in the Indian Ocean. These temperature mea-
81 surements are digitized from the original cruise reports (Hydrographischen Amt des Reichs-
82 Marine-Amts., 1889; Schott, 1902; Brennecke, 1909), and compared to modern temper-
83 ature observations to provide a view into how the interior temperature structure of the
84 Indian Ocean has changed over the last century. The earliest of the three cruises is the
85 SMS *Gazelle*, a German corvette which undertook an eastabout scientific circumnavi-
86 gation from 1874-1876, overlapping in time with the *Challenger* expedition, but with a
87 route that transited the southern Indian Ocean (figure 1). This cruise was followed in
88 1898-1899 by the research vessel *Valdivia* which went deep into the Southern Ocean be-
89 fore returning north through the tropical Indian Ocean. The final cruise we consider is
90 that of the SMS *Planet*, a survey ship which transited from Germany to Hong Kong in
91 1906-1907, with a route from the Cape of Good Hope to Madagascar and on to Indone-
92 sia. Together these cruises provide reasonable spatial coverage of the Indian Ocean south
93 of 10°N—with more than 500 temperature observations at depths spanning from the sur-
94 face to the bottom (figure 1e)—extending the available observational record back more
95 than a century.

96 **2 Data and Methods**

97 **2.1 Historical data**

98 Historical observations from the *Gazelle*, *Valdivia*, and *Planet* were digitized from
99 the original cruise reports (Hydrographischen Amt des Reichs-Marine-Amts., 1889; Schott,
100 1902; Brennecke, 1909). Data were double-entered independently and then checked for
101 consistency. The historical data has a variety of unique quality control concerns relevant
102 to calculating temperature changes, including issues related both to the accuracy of the
103 temperature measurements themselves, and the positions at which they are reported. We
104 document these below.

105 The *Gazelle* used mercury-column Miller-Casella thermometers for subsurface ob-
106 servations, as were used by the *Challenger* (Roemmich et al., 2012). These thermome-
107 ters were of the ‘min-max’ type, using a sliding index to record the minimum and max-

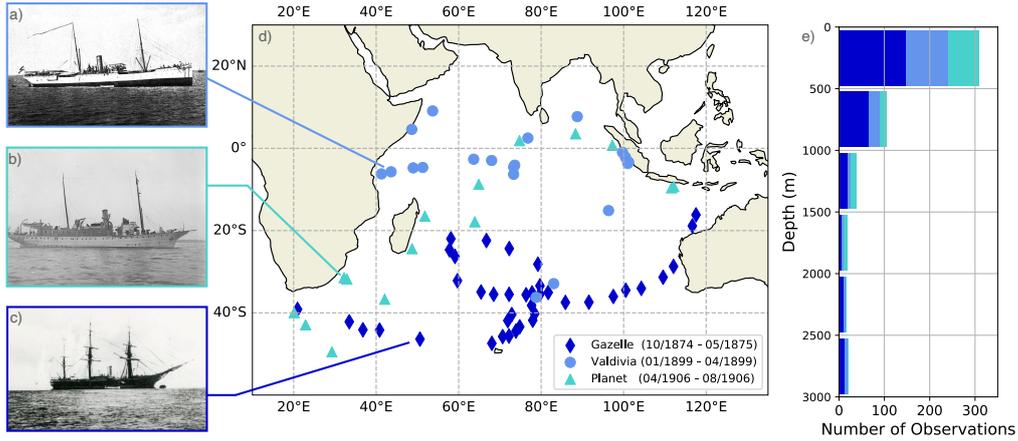


Figure 1. Overview of the Indian Ocean portion of the *Valdivia* (panel a, Chun, 1903), *Planet* (panel b, photo: *SLUB/Deutsche Fotothek, F. Stoedtner*), and *Gazelle* (panel c, photo: *Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum Fotoarchiv 94-2*) cruises. Stations used in this analysis are shown in panel d. A histogram of temperature observations as a function of depth is shown in panel e with color indicating the originating cruise following the color convention shown in the legend of panel d.

108 inum water temperature encountered, and hence are inappropriate for use in regions with
 109 temperature inversions. Three stations with temperature inversions in the modern cli-
 110 matology, and several historical measurements with apparent spurious reported temper-
 111 ature inversions, were removed from the analysis. The *Valdivia* and *Planet* also used min-
 112 max thermometers, however these were supplemented by Umkip and Negretti-Zambra
 113 reversing thermometers (Wüst & Olson, 1933), and early Siemens deep-sea electric thermometers—
 114 which can all properly resolve non-monotonic temperature profiles. The reported tem-
 115 perature measurements do not clearly indicate which thermometer types were used for
 116 each observation, however visual inspection of the *Valdivia* and *Planet* observations, along
 117 with collocated modern data, did not indicate errors due to temperature inversions.

118 Mercury thermometers of both the min-max and reversing type are subject to er-
 119 rors from compression of the mercury at depth, which will tend to introduce a cold bias
 120 in the calculated difference between modern and historical records. G. Schott suggested
 121 a calibration formula for the *Valdivia* observations of $T(z) = T_m(z) - 0.011(T_m(0) -$
 122 $T_m(z))$, where $T(z)$ is the corrected temperature at a depth z , and T_m is the instrument

123 measured temperature, such that the actual temperature at depth is adjusted to be colder
124 depending on the difference between the measured temperature and the surface temper-
125 ature (Wüst & Olson, 1933). This correction is however unlikely to be general, as the
126 temperature-pressure relationship will vary across different temperature stratification pro-
127 files. An alternate, simpler, correction of $0.04\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C km}^{-1}$ was suggested by P. Tait for the
128 *Challenger* instruments (Tait, 1882), which were similar in design to those used on the
129 *Gazelle* and *Valdivia*. For the analysis here, which is generally limited to the upper 2 km,
130 these corrections lead to only minor quantitative differences, and hence are not applied
131 unless noted.

132 An additional source of uncertainty in the historical records—which cannot gen-
133 erally be quantified from the available cruise information—is the accuracy of the reported
134 measurement positions, both in terms of the latitude and longitude of the station, and
135 the depth of measurement. Positions estimated from celestial navigation and dead reck-
136 oning may include both systematic and random error of uncertain magnitude, but which
137 are most likely to be important in regions of strong horizontal temperature gradients.
138 Prior global analyses of high-temporal resolution (2-hour) historical surface data sug-
139 gest the combined effect of uncertainty due to celestial navigation and dead-reckoning
140 may introduce uncertainty in SST of order $0.1\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$, increasing to $0.3\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ in frontal regions
141 (Dai et al., 2021). Systematic errors are estimated to be an order of magnitude smaller.
142 It is unclear whether these estimates apply here as: (i) horizontal gradients of temper-
143 ature are generally enhanced at the surface, suggesting SST-based estimates will over-
144 estimate the interior uncertainty, and (ii) estimated uncertainties depend on the time-
145 elapsed between the observations and the last position fix by celestial navigation—information
146 not clearly available for the stations used here. Given these uncertainties, we do not at-
147 tempt to explicitly account for errors in horizontal position.

148 Errors can also be introduced from the reported depths of the measurements, which
149 were inferred based on the amount of line-out at the time of observation, rather than the
150 modern approach of calculating measurement depth from the observed pressure at the
151 instrument. This can lead to several, possibly competing, sources of bias. First, in the
152 presence of strong currents the line can be deflected from the vertical, such that the ac-
153 tual measurement depth is shallower than reported (Wüst, 1933). This is most likely to
154 be significant in regions of strong currents—we exclude one station from the *Valdivia* in
155 the Agulhas where line deflections of 30° were noted—and will tend to introduce a warm

156 bias in the historical observations, such that there will be a cold bias in the modern mi-
157 nus historical temperature differences. Secondly, although the *Valdivia* and *Planet* used
158 wire for their measurements, the *Gazelle* used hemp line, which can stretch under the
159 weight of the instruments and bottom weight. This might lead to shallow biases in the
160 reported *Gazelle* measurement depths, possibly introducing a warm bias in the modern
161 minus *Gazelle* temperature differences. The errors in the basinwide mean temperature
162 change due to line stretch are identically zero at the surface, and are estimated to in-
163 crease approximately linearly to a maximum of 0.17°C at 750 m depth (supplementary
164 information), below which they again decrease due to the weak interior temperature gra-
165 dients. Errors of this magnitude are similar to the measurement uncertainty of the ther-
166 mometers (Roemmich et al., 2012), and do not qualitatively affect our findings.

167 **2.2 Comparison with modern data**

168 We compare the historical observations to modern climatological values from the
169 World Ocean Atlas (WOA) 2018 (Boyer et al., 2018). WOA incorporates extensive ship-
170 board and profiling float measurements in a quality controlled and objectively analyzed
171 climatology spanning the period of 2005–2017 at 0.25° horizontal resolution. The monthly
172 1° climatology for the period 1955–1964 is also used to isolate changes over the first half
173 of the 20th century (section 3). In both cases, monthly temperature values are interpo-
174 lated to the depth and horizontal position of the historical observations, and the differ-
175 ence between the modern and historical data is calculated. Below 1500 m depth monthly
176 climatologies are unavailable and we instead use WOA seasonal climatologies. This ap-
177 proach limits the effect of seasonal variability on our calculated temperature differences,
178 however clearly other timescales of variability may still be aliased into the *Gazelle*, *Val-*
179 *divia*, and *Planet* observations, as discussed further below and in the supplementary in-
180 formation.

181 The mean historical-to-WOA temperature change is computed by a least squares
182 method that accounts for measurement error and signals that are not representative of
183 the decadal-mean, basinwide average temperature. Full details of the method are pro-
184 vided in the supplementary information (and Gebbie & Huybers, 2019). Briefly, the con-
185 tamination of the temperature observations is assumed to have three parts: (1) transient
186 effects such as isopycnal heave due to internal waves or mesoscale eddies, (2) irregular
187 spatial sampling of the basin, and (3) measurement or calibration error of the thermome-

188 ters. The expected size of (1) varies spatially, with estimates taken from the WOCE Global
189 Hydrographic Climatology (Gouretski & Koltermann, 2004), and corrected for the ap-
190 proximately 30 year time-interval of the historical observations. Following Gebbie and
191 Huybers (2019) the variance due to (2) is assumed to be 20% that of transient motions
192 (R. X. Huang, 2015), and the standard error due to (3) is assumed equal to 0.14°C (Roemmich
193 et al., 2012). Results were tested and found to be qualitatively robust to parameter choices
194 for the least-squares method, and similar to results using a simple arithmetic mean.

195 **3 Results**

196 Temperature differences between modern and historical data are calculated and a
197 profile of the mean observed change over the last century in the Indian Ocean is shown
198 in figure 2. SST has warmed by $0.87 (\pm 0.22)^{\circ}\text{C}$ between the modern and historical ob-
199 servations (all uncertainties in this manuscript are reported as 2 standard deviations).
200 This estimate is consistent with basin-averaged estimates from SST reanalyses. Near-
201 surface warming decays away from the surface until a zero crossing near 750 m depth,
202 somewhat shallower than what is observed from the *Challenger* observations in the Pa-
203 cific where the warming signal reaches depths greater than a kilometer (Gebbie & Huy-
204 bers, 2019). This implies Ocean Heat Content over the upper 700 m increased at a rate
205 of $0.40 (\pm 0.18) \times 10^{22}$ J/decade over the 20th century (see supplementary informa-
206 tion). This is roughly consistent with estimates over the last half of the century, which
207 suggest an accelerated change following the year 2000 (Lee et al., 2015; Roxy et al., 2020),
208 and indeed we show below that the increase of heat content occurred largely post-1955.
209 Weak cooling near 1500 m depth is also apparent in the mean profile, however the mag-
210 nitude of the cooling is reduced if the Tait pressure correction is applied (dash-dot line
211 in figure 2), suggesting this feature is at the detection limit of the observations.

212 The basinwide average profile obscures significant horizontal spatial variability that
213 is evident in depth-averaged maps (figure S1), and a meridional section formed by av-
214 eraging observations in latitude and depth bins (figure 3, and supplementary informa-
215 tion). The strongest warming in the latitude-depth slice is along the ACC subtropical
216 front near 45°S , with an average near-surface value of approximately 1.5°C . Weaker warm-
217 ing of about 0.5°C also extends deeper than 600 m through much of the subtropical gyre,
218 and above the thermocline in the tropics. A strip of near-surface cooling at 10°S extends
219 down immediately below the thermocline, and along the poleward flank of the thermo-

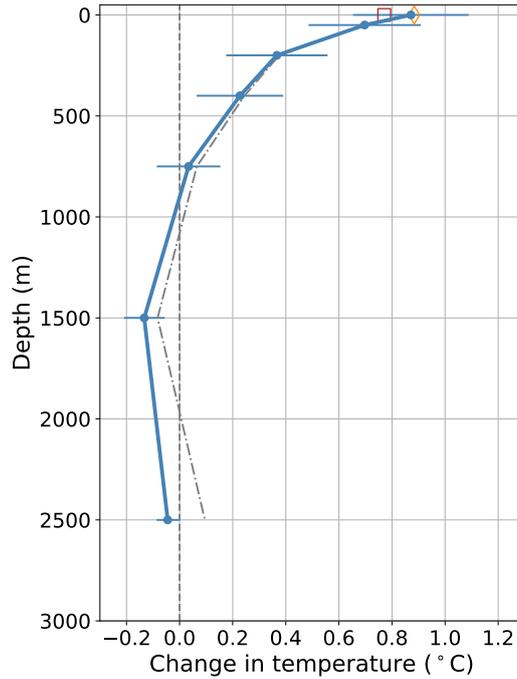


Figure 2. Profile of the observed mean temperature change in the Indian Ocean over the 20th century (blue line), with 95% confidence intervals. The mean profile with the Tait pressure correction (Tait, 1882) applied is shown by the thin dashed-dot line. Basin mean change in SST from the HadSST (orange diamond) and ERSST (red square) reanalyses are indicated at the surface.

220 cline dome, with interior warming on the equatorward flank reaching deeper than 1000
 221 m.

222 This pattern of temperature change over the last century is remarkably similar in
 223 structure to the temperature change noted in the modern observational record of the lat-
 224 ter half of the 20th century (figure 4c, and Alory et al., 2007; L. Yang et al., 2020). It
 225 can largely be interpreted as resulting from a southward shift of the ocean gyres of ap-
 226 proximately 1° – 2° latitude, consistent with the latitudinal displacement of surface isotherms
 227 evident in SST reanalysis (figure 4a). This shift occurs in the second half of the century,
 228 and we note a recent analysis of *Gazelle* data found a similar temporal pattern for the
 229 increase of surface salinity in the Indian Ocean (Gould & Cunningham, 2021). Changes
 230 in surface values conflate both adiabatic and diabatic effects due to surface fluxes, how-
 231 ever the implied shift of isotherms is sufficient in magnitude to explain many of the ob-
 232 served features in the interior temperature change, as is shown in figure 4d where an ex-

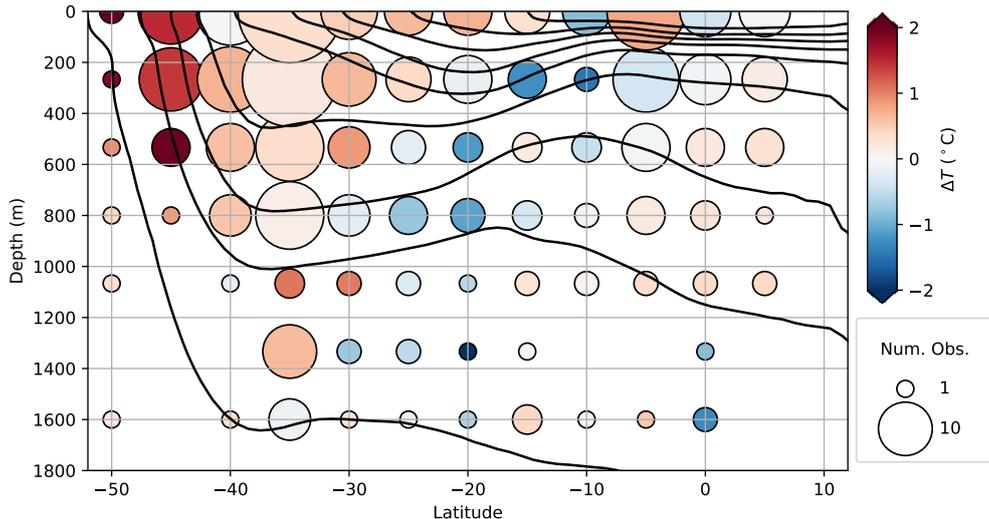


Figure 3. A latitude-depth slice indicates heterogeneous temperature change (colorscale) in the interior. Observations are binned into latitude-depth bins and averaged, with the number of observations in each bin indicated by the marker size (legend). Zonally averaged temperature contours from the 2005–2017 climatology are shown in black.

233 ample zonally averaged temperature difference is created by shifting the modern tem-
 234 perature climatology by 1° latitude and differencing. Other features in the observed merid-
 235 ional structure of 20th century temperature change (figure 3), such as near-surface warm-
 236 ing and cooling directly below the thermocline, are not as well explained by shifting of
 237 the gyre position, but are again present in the recent observations (figure 4c), and have
 238 been attributed to changes in heat advection from the Pacific through the Indonesian
 239 Throughflow (Alory et al., 2007; Ummenhofer et al., 2017), or Southern Ocean ventila-
 240 tion (L. Yang et al., 2020).

241 The similarity of the structure of the total 20th century temperature change to that
 242 observed over only the period 1955–2017 suggests that interior temperature changes be-
 243 fore mid-century may have been limited. We show the mean temperature change at 250
 244 m depth from the ECMWF Ensemble of Ocean Reanalyses of the 20th century (ORA-
 245 20C, de Boissésion et al., 2018)—a 10-member ensemble of data assimilating global sim-
 246 ulations that span the period 1900–2009—in figure 4b. Reanalyses can be biased by chang-
 247 ing data availability over time (de Boissésion & Balmaseda, 2016), however comparisons
 248 to the observations are informative. In the reanalyses the first-half of the century is char-

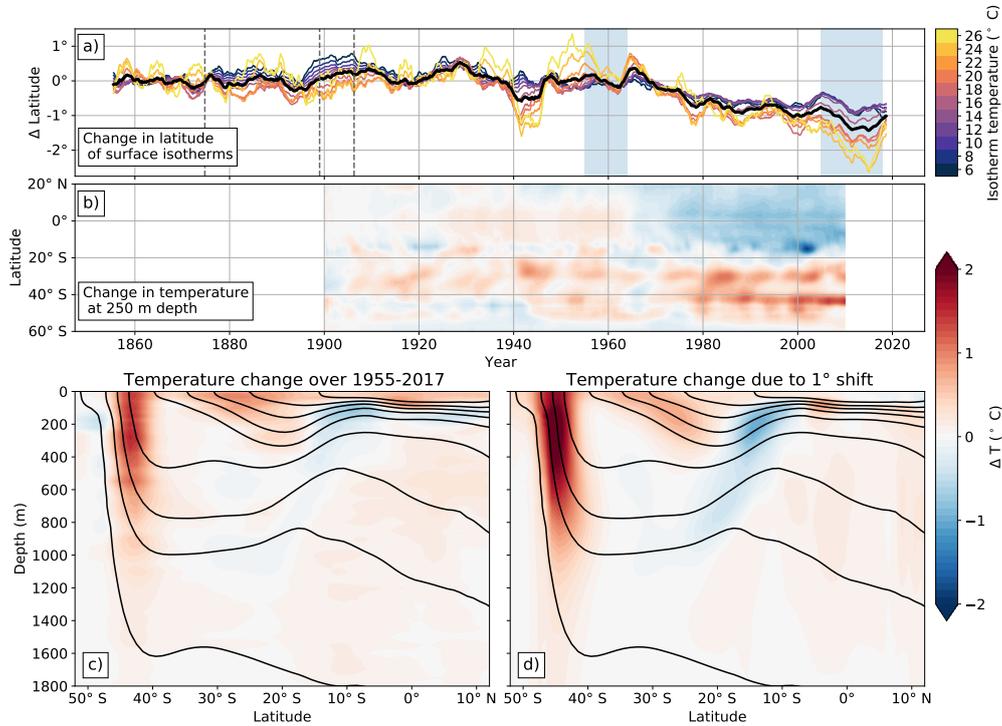


Figure 4. Indian Ocean temperature change has accelerated over the last half of the 20th century. a) Time series of the change in mean latitude of surface isotherms (colored lines) in the ERSST reanalysis (zonally averaged and smoothed with a 3 year running mean), referenced relative to the 1860-1870 average position. Mean surface isotherm displacement is shown by the heavy black line, the thin dashed gray lines indicate the time of the 3 historical cruises, and the climatological periods of 1955-1964 and 2005-2017 are indicated by light blue shading. b) Ensemble mean temperature at 250 m depth from the ORA-20C reanalysis (de Boissésion et al., 2018), referenced relative to the 1900-1910 mean at each latitude. c) Climatological change in temperature between 1955 and 2017 from observations (WOA). d) Temperature change inferred by shifting the modern climatological values by 1°S, consistent with the surface isotherm displacement. In panels b-d the temperature is zonally averaged over 60°E - 100°E, and the black contours indicate the modern average temperature field.

249 acterized by weak interior warming, relative to the 1900-1910 mean. However, beginning
 250 around 1970 there is a rapid transition to a meridional dipole pattern of warming and
 251 cooling, indicating that the mid-century acceleration of surface warming (Roxy et al.,
 252 2014), and the southward shift of surface isotherms, extended into the subsurface ocean.

253 To confirm this interpretation, we calculate the temperature difference over just
 254 the first half of the 20th century by subtracting the historical measurements from the
 255 WOA 1955–1964 observational climatology. This shows limited evidence of interior tem-
 256 perature change over this period (figures 5 and S2), with a near zero change in estimated
 257 ocean heat content over the upper 700 m ($-0.10 [\pm 0.30] \times 10^{22}$ J/decade). This sug-
 258 gests that surface warming beginning around 1900, evident in SST reanalyses and pa-
 259 leoreconstructions (Tierney et al., 2015; Abram et al., 2016), may not have extended into
 260 the interior until after mid-century. Mean subsurface cooling below 500 m depth orig-
 261 inates in these observations from apparent cooling along the ACC and the poleward flank
 262 of the thermocline dome (figure S2), and may contribute to the observed cooling near
 263 1500 m in figure 2. Most of the observed changes in subsurface temperature above the
 264 thermocline between 1874 and 2017 (eg. figure 2) thus appear to have occurred in the
 265 last half of the 20th century.

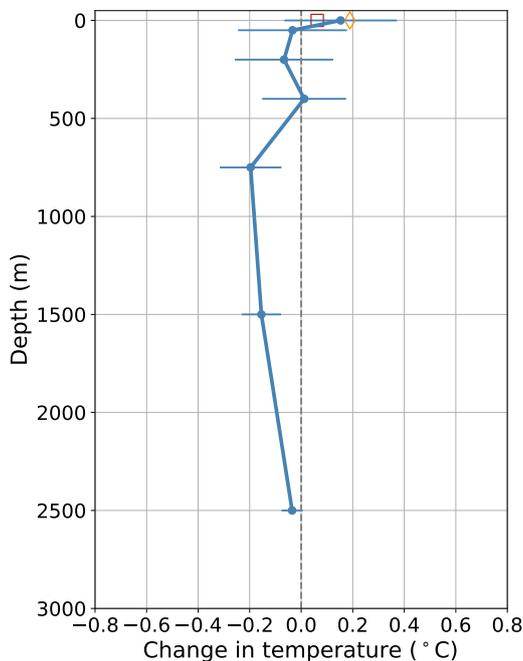


Figure 5. As in figure 2, but for the observed temperature change between the historical cruises and the 1955-1964 climatological values.

4 Discussion

The Indian Ocean is recognized to play a major role in both regional and global climate, with SST and ocean heat content increasing at a rate exceeding most of the other global oceans. Quantifying the patterns and temporal evolution of ocean temperature change in this region is an important step towards ascertaining the relevant physical mechanisms at play, but has been made difficult by the relatively short period (~ 60 years) of available interior ocean temperature measurements. Here we have utilized a unique dataset of late 19th and early 20th century oceanographic expeditions to extend the observational record back to the period spanning 1874–1906. Results of this suggest a pattern of mean 20th century warming in the Indian Ocean that extends to 750 m depth, similar to what was observed from the *Challenger* expedition in the Pacific (Roemmich et al., 2012; Gebbie & Huybers, 2019).

The latitude-depth pattern of temperature change (figure 3) is consistent with the pattern seen in the modern observational record post-1960. The historical dataset is not well suited to an in-depth analysis of mechanisms, however we note that the general pattern is well-explained by a southward shift of the gyre of approximately 1° – 2° . This shift can originate dynamically through changes in the coupled atmosphere-ocean circulation, with expansion of the Hadley-cells, and associated poleward shift of the subtropical ocean gyres, believed to be a consequence of anthropogenic climate change (H. Yang et al., 2020). Other possible mechanisms that have been proposed as candidates for generating the observed temperature changes include heat advection through the Indonesian Throughflow (Alory et al., 2007; Schwarzkopf & Böning, 2011; Ummenhofer et al., 2017) and from the Southern Ocean (Jayasankar et al., 2019; L. Yang et al., 2020), or through surface atmospheric forcing (Dong et al., 2014; Jin et al., 2018). In the Indian Ocean the changing interior temperatures appear to have largely occurred in the last half of the 20th century, with more limited change between the historical measurements and the 1955–1964 climatological values. This provides an independent line of evidence for multidecadal temperature change in the Indian Ocean, that extends into the subsurface interior, and that has largely occurred over the last half of the 20th century.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the effort of many that went into collecting the invaluable data of the *Gazelle*, *Valdivia*, and *Planet*—including many who perished on these voyages. The

298 accessibility of this data, well over a century since it was collected, sets a benchmark for
299 our collective modern efforts. However, we believe it important to acknowledge that these
300 historical expeditions also involved other goals, scientific and political, that were likely
301 harmful to many they encountered, and hence any consideration of their legacy must in-
302 clude a holistic consideration of their impact and historical context. The authors thank
303 Julia Wenegrat for help with digitizing the historical records, the Biodiversity Heritage
304 Library (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/>) for making available online scanned ver-
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308 of this manuscript are gratefully acknowledged.

309 Open Research

310 Archiving of digitized data from the *Gazelle*, *Valdivia*, and *Planet* used in this anal-
311 ysis is in progress, and will be made publicly available in csv and netcdf format through
312 zenodo.org upon manuscript acceptance. Data is made available now as supplementary
313 information for purposes of the review process. All analysis code used in the manuscript
314 will also be made publicly available through zenodo.org. World Ocean Atlas data is avail-
315 able at: <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/products/world-ocean-atlas>. ERSST v5 re-
316 analysis output (B. Huang et al., 2017) from: [https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/products/](https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/products/extended-reconstructed-sst)
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