Global Estimation of the Eddy Kinetic Energy Dissipation from a Diagnostic Energy Balance

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Key Points:

- Global mesoscale eddy kinetic energy dissipation rate estimated to 0.66 ± 0.19 TW from observation-based and statistically analysed datasets
- High dissipation of geostrophic eddies are found in the western boundary currents and the Antarctic Circumpolar Current
- Estimation of the eddy dissipation timescale from observations to inform future parameterization development

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Abstract

Mesoscale eddies regulate the ocean heat and carbon budgets. However, how and where the kinetic energy flows out from the mesoscale reservoir remains uncertain. In this study, a simplified equation of the mesoscale energy budget is used to obtain a global estimation of the eddy dissipation rate. The framework is first validated in a global ocean model and then applied to a density climatology and a global reconstruction of the eddy kinetic energy field. We find a global disipation rate of $0.66 \pm 0.19\,\mathrm{TW}$ for the mesoscale kinetic energy, in agreement with recent independent estimates. The results also show an intense dissipation near western boundary currents and in the Antarctic Circumpolar Current, where both large levels of energy and baroclinic conversion occur. The resulting geographical distribution of the dissipation rate brings new insights for closing the ocean kinetic energy budget, as well as constraining future mesoscale parameterizations and associated mixing processes.

Plain Language Summary

The ocean is home to abundant and large swirls from tens to hundreds of kilometers, called "mesoscale eddies". These eddies contain more momentum than most ocean currents and can thus impact the climate evolution. There are now good reasons to believe the effect of mesoscale eddies are directly related to their strength, and so to their kinetic energy. However, how the energy is removed from these eddies is still unclear mostly due to instrumental and theoretical limitations. In this work, a simplification of the eddy energetic behavior is used to indirectly estimate the dissipation from observations of temperature, salinity and surface currents. Our results confirm intensified dissipation near strong ocean currents and hence constitute a new attempt for the global reconstruction of the eddy kinetic energy dissipation in the world ocean. The work presented here is consistent and complementary to other studies and can help us to understand the ocean energy cycle.

1 Introduction

Oceans play a key role in setting transient climate change (Fox-Kemper et al., 2021), having absorbed the bulk of the excess energy due to anthropogenic emissions (von Schuckmann et al., 2020), redistributing heat across the Earth (Zanna et al., 2019) and affecting sea level rise (Couldrey et al., 2020). The oceans are also a leading component for the anthropogenic carbon uptake (Friedlingstein et al., 2022) and host a diversity of ecosystems and marine resources (Cooley et al., 2022).

Among the many dynamical processes present in the oceans, geostrophic or mesoscale eddies are central in the transport of tracers and can impact on large scale motions. Varying in size from kilometers to hundreds of kilometers, they dominate the oceanic kinetic energy reservoir (Ferrari & Wunsch, 2009) and significantly influence the transport and mixing of water masses in the ocean. While knowledge of the eddy energy field is essential for assessing these properties (Cessi, 2008; Fox-Kemper et al., 2019; Groeskamp et al., 2020), the mesoscale energetics are still not well understood. More precisely, the way the eddy energy dissipates and is transferred toward other scales is complex and poorly constrained by theories and observations. The dissipation of eddy kinetic energy is also associated to the ocean diapycnal mixing through different processes (Naveira Garabato et al., 2004; Saenko et al., 2012; Melet et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2019) and can in turn impact the global overtuning circulation (Saenko et al., 2018).

A variety of processes are able to dissipate or transfer the mesoscale mechanical energy. Among them, interactions of geostrophic flow with bottom topography either by direct dissipation drag (Sen et al., 2008; Arbic et al., 2009) and non-propagating form drag (Klymak, 2018; Klymak et al., 2021) or by scattering into lee waves (Nikurashin & Ferrari, 2011) appear to be an important sink of eddy energy. Other candidates include the forward cascade due to instabilities of unbalanced motions (Molemaker et al., 2010; Barkan et al., 2015), direct interactions with the internal wave field (Polzin, 2010) and suppression by wind work (Renault et al., 2019; Rai et al., 2021). The reader can refer to the review of McWilliams (2016) for a more comprehensive description of involved processes.

Observational estimates of energy dissipation in the ocean are extremely limited. If some global quantification exists, large uncertainties remain. The work of Sen et al. (2008) estimates from different observations a global dissipation rate by quadratic bottom boundary layer drag in the range of 0.2-0.8 TW. The large spread in the estimation is due to hypotheses in the calculation of the bottom geostrophic velocities. Regarding other processes, the lee waves generation rate from geostrophic motion is estimated between 0.2 TW and 0.49 TW (Nikurashin & Ferrari, 2011; Scott et al., 2011) while in a recent study, Rai et al. (2021) compute a global "eddy killing" rate from the wind of 0.05 TW at scales smaller than 260 km. Recently, sufficient amount of satellite altimeter data and efficient tracking algorithms have allowed oceanographers to characterize more systematically eddy properties (e.g. diameters, direction and lifetimes) both globally (Chelton et al., 2011) and regionally (Braby et al., 2016; Ji et al., 2018). However, only a few studies derive an overall map of eddy sinks from these Lagrangian analyses (Zhai et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2017).

The aim of this paper is to estimate a global dissipation rate of the mesoscale kinetic energy from observation-based climatology datasets. To do so, a simple diagnostic energy balance is used, leading to a relation where the eddy dissipation is directly related to the mean ocean stratification and proportional to the eddy kinetic energy. This relation is first introduced in section 2. Section 3 proposes a global reconstruction of the mesoscale eddy dissipation rate using satellite observations and available climatology of temperature and salinity. We finally discuss the hypotheses of this work in section 4, while section 5 summarizes the implications and the main conclusions.

2 A Simplified Mesoscale Energy Budget

We first derive a simplified mesoscale energy balance to retrieve an estimate of the eddy dissipation. Here we term "dissipation" the energy flux going out to the mesoscale reservoir although the energy is transferred to other scales, which in turn can provide a route to dissipation. We use the depth-integral energy budget introduced by the GEOMETRIC parameterization (Mak et al., 2018) applied to the eddy kinetic energy (EKE):

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t}\int \mathrm{EKE}\,dz + \underbrace{\nabla_H \cdot \left(\widetilde{\mathbf{u}}^z \int \mathrm{EKE}\,dz\right)}_{\text{advection}} = \underbrace{\int \kappa_{gm}\frac{M^4}{N^2}\,dz}_{\text{production}} - \underbrace{\lambda\int \mathrm{EKE}\,dz}_{\text{dissipation}} + \underbrace{\eta_E \nabla_H^2 \int \mathrm{EKE}\,dz}_{\text{diffusion}}, \tag{1}$$

where the vertical integration is applied from the bottom to the surface. The depth-integrated eddy kinetic energy is here advected by the depth-averaged velocity $\widetilde{\mathbf{u}}^z$. The production term is assumed to be dominated by the baroclinic instability (Robinson & McWilliams, 1974) and represents the eddy growth resulting from isopycnal flattening. Consistent with the so-called Gent and McWilliams parameterization (Gent & McWilliams, 1990; Gent et al., 1995), it involves an eddy diffusivity coefficient κ_{gm} related to the horizontal and vertical buoyancy stratification, respectively M^2 and N^2, defined later in Equation 4. For simplicity, all the dissipative processes are approximated as a linear damping at a rate λ. Finally the eddy energy field is diffused horizontally with the last right hand side term modulated by a diffusivity η_E. In its original form, GEOMETRIC is a budget for the total (potential plus kinetic) eddy energy, but in the present study only the kinetic energy is considered since the baroclinic instability is the main source for the EKE reservoir (von Storch et al., 2012).

Marshall et al. (2012) have proposed a scaling for κ_{gm} where the coefficient is proportional to the total eddy energy. Again we adapt this framework by using the eddy kinetic energy only, consistent with the results from Bachman et al. (2017) who find modest differences when changing the type of energy in the scaling of κ_{gm}. Following the work of Mak et al. (2018), a two-dimensional formulation is used:

$$\kappa_{gm} = \alpha \, \frac{\int \mathrm{EKE} \, dz}{\int \left(M^2/N\right) dz}, \tag{2}$$

where α is a non-dimensional constant which represents the eddy efficiency to convert mean available potential energy into mesoscale kinetic energy.

We finally simplify the energy budget by assuming a diagnostic balance on decadal time scales between the baroclinic production and the linear dissipation terms (Marshall et al., 2017). Then, injecting the scaling of Equation 2 into the production term, both the source and dissipation terms are now proportional to the depth-integrated EKE. This leads to a diagnostic relation between the linear eddy dissipation coefficient λ and the ocean stratification:

$$\lambda = \alpha \, \frac{\int \left(M^4/N^2\right) dz}{\int \left(M^2/N\right) \, dz}. \tag{3}$$

Within this simple energy balance, the eddy dissipation coefficient is a function of the ocean large scale stratification and the eddy efficiency α only. In this study, we focus on the simple case where α has no time and spatial dependence and we choose $\alpha = 0.1$ deduced from previous studies (Marshall et al., 2012; Bachman et al., 2017; Mak et al., 2018; Poulsen et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2022; Mak, Marshall, et al., 2022). See section 4 for a discussion on the value of α.

In the work of Marshall et al. (2017) and Mak et al. (2017), a similar energy balance is considered (their Equations 6 and 20 respectively) but used for a different purpose in order to diagnose the emergent eddy saturation in idealized configurations. They employed circumpolar domains where the advection and the diffusion of EKE naturally vanish. In the following, a more local approach is used and the eddy energy balance in Equation 3 is considered regionally, at a typical scale of $\mathcal{O}(1000)\,\mathrm{km}$.

The eddy energy balance is first validated within a global ocean model (see Text S1 of the Supporting Information for details of the numerical configuration). To summarize, the stand-alone ocean simulation includes the GEOMETRIC parameterization (Mak, Marshall, et al., 2022) which discretizes the Equation 1. Monthly means of model outputs, including each EKE trends, are stored and used to evaluate the validity of the eddy energy balance. In accordance with the climatology used in section 3, the simulation outputs are analysed over the 23-year period from 1995 to 2017. We find a slight dominance of the dissipation term over the production, leading to a modest underestimation of the eddy dissipation coefficient λ. However, the proposed diagnostic eddy energy balance is overall valid when analysing the remaining terms of Equation 1 (see Figures S1 and S2 of the Supporting Information), allowing the use of a time-averaged stratification to compute the coefficient λ. Finally, we estimate a mean relative error of 35% on the coefficient λ, a figure used to compute the uncertainty range in our results (see error and uncertainty quantification in Text S1 of the Supporting Information).

3 Eddy Dissipation from global Observations

3.1 Datasets

Retrieving the eddy dissipation rate from Equation 3 only requires an averaged large-scale density field from which the ocean stratification can be computed. For that, we use the in-situ temperature and practical salinity reconstructions from the World Ocean Atlas 2018 (WOA18) climatology (Garcia et al., 2019) to compute the conservative temperature Θ, the absolute salinity S_A and the in-situ density ρ using the TEOS-10 equation of state (IOC et al., 2010) from the GSW python toolbox (Firing et al., 2021). Then, both horizontal and vertical stratifications M^2 and N^2 are computed as:

$$M^2 = \frac{g}{\rho_0}|\nabla_h \rho| \,, \quad N^2 = \frac{g}{\rho_0}\left(\alpha_\Theta \frac{\partial \Theta}{\partial z} - \beta_S \frac{\partial S_A}{\partial z}\right), \tag{4}$$

with g the gravity acceleration, $\rho_0 = 1026$ kg/m^3 a reference density, and α_Θ and β_S the seawater thermal expansion and saline contraction coefficients respectively. A relatively large time span climatological mean is needed as the balance Equation 3 is valid typically at the large-scale and over decadal timescales. We therefore use a merge of two WOA18 datasets covering a 23-year period from 1995 to 2017, which incorporates the global Argo float measurements from 2005.

An estimation of the EKE is required to deduce the final dissipation rate defined by the second right hand side term in Equation 1. Similar to the work of Groeskamp et al. (2020), we compute the surface eddy kinetic energy from sea surface geostrophic velocity anomalies (u'_0, v'_0) with respect to the 1995-2017 period and collected at 1/4° resolution from the European Union-Copernicus Marine Service (2021). The resulting EKE map is then regridded onto the WOA18 grid while ensuring energy conservation. Since a three-dimensional energy field is needed, we apply a vertical structure function assumed to be separable so that the eddy velocity components can be formulated as $(u',\, v') = \phi(z)(u'_0,\, v'_0)$. The structure function $\phi(z)$ assumes a rough bottom topography (LaCasce & Groeskamp, 2020) and is found by solving a differential equation throughout the water column (see calculation details in Text S2 of the Supporting Information). The function $\phi(z)$ represents the variation of the eddy velocity with depth and is used to compute the depth-integrated EKE:

$$\int \mathrm{EKE}\, dz = \int \frac{\left(u_0'^2 + v_0'^2\right)}{2}\phi(z)^2\, dz. \tag{5}$$

3.2 The Eddy Dissipation Timescale

From the WOA18 dataset, both the horizontal and vertical stratifications are computed. The integral of these metrics over the whole depth is mapped in Figure 1a,b. The horizontal stratification turns out to be a good proxy for the shear found in strong oceanic baroclinic currents, notably western boundary currents and the Antarctic Circumpolar Current (ACC). To a lesser extent, it also shows the subtropical gyre signatures and their western intensification. We also note extreme and noisy values at high latitudes, especially in the Arctic Ocean, likely due to a lack of observations during winter in the WOA18 dataset. On the other hand, the vertical stratification map shows a general equatorward increase, with regionally reduced stratification over eastern boundary upwelling systems and increased stratification in the vicinity of major river mouths. On top of that, both parameters show a strong bathymetric dependence, as they are defined as vertical integrals.

These maps help to understand the horizontal distribution of the eddy dissipation timescale λ^{-1} (units in days) obtained from Equation 3 and shown in Figure 1c. Very short eddy timescales are found near the Gulf stream, the Kuroshio and the Agulhas regions as well as along the ACC. These geographical patterns were expected since they are also regions of strong baroclinic currents. The same is also true along the north Atlantic subpolar gyre. As already pointed out in the horizontal stratification map, the short dissipation timescales found at high latitudes in the Arctic ocean and off Antarctica are doubtful. This result, although partly explained by the extremely weak vertical stratification in these regions, lacks of in-situ measurement and should be used with caution. Conversely, the dissipation timescale is large at low latitudes, in the equatorial regions and in the interior of subtropical gyres. Both the reduced horizontal shear and the high vertical stratification can explain the long eddy timescales found at those locations. To a lesser extent, a similar pattern is found in the north Pacific subpolar gyre.

This estimate can be compared to the work of Mak, Avdis, et al. (2022) who constrain the same eddy dissipation timescale using a kinematic inverse calculation inferred from an eddy permitting ocean circulation model. Similarly, short timescales are found near the western boundary currents and the ACC while subtropical gyre signatures are absent from their spatial distribution. Nevertheless, they find long dissipation timescales in eastern boundary regions, a feature less marked in our global estimation. In addition, within our eddy energy balance the eddy dissipation timescale is comparable with (although not equivalent to) the baroclinic growth rate. For instance, the eddy growth rate computed through a linear analysis by Tulloch et al. (2011) retreives similar spatial patterns, even if the present work shows higher values at mid and low latitudes.

3.3 Eddy Kinetic Energy Reconstruction

From altimetry records, the surface eddy kinetic energy is computed and averaged between 1995 and 2017. The resulting map is shown in Figure 2a. The western boundary currents, their extension, the ACC as well as the equatorial band show strong signatures with high levels of energy. The Indian Ocean also displays significant surface EKE while very weak levels are found at high latitudes, in the Arctic and next to the Antarctic, but also in the interior of subtropical gyres. The map is comparable to previous estimates of eddy kinetic energy also based on altimetry (Martinez-Moreno et al., 2020; Groeskamp et al., 2020).

Figure 2b shows the vertically-integrated EKE deduced from Equation 5. The use of the baroclinic surface mode vertical function clearly intensifies the eddy activity in the Southern Ocean while weakening the energy patterns in the tropics and subtropics. The North Atlantic Current and the Labrador Sea also display deep vertical structures which in turn reinforce the integrated EKE near the Gulf Stream extension (see Figure S4 in the Supporting Information). In addition, the bathymetry affects the final map and more particularly, almost no energy is found near the coasts nor in shallow waters.

Integrated over the whole domain, the total EKE reservoir accounts for 4.42 EJ (10^{18}J). For comparison with other studies based on high resolution models, von Storch et al. (2012) found 3.55 EJ while the work of Yu and Metzger (2019) estimated a smaller EKE reservoir of 1.76 EJ. These results therefore give credit to our method and the use of the surface mode vertical structure in the reconstruction of the geostrophic eddy field.

3.4 Global Estimate of the Eddy Kinetic Energy Dissipation

By combining the estimated eddy dissipation timescale and the vertical integral EKE, the dissipation rate of mesoscale kinetic energy is obtained and mapped in Figure 3. To some extent, the map retains the horizontal patterns of the integrated EKE (Figure 2b), although intensified. Indeed, boundary currents and the ACC are found to be highly dissipative regions of mesoscale eddies since they hold large levels of energy while also presenting short eddy dissipation timescales (Figure 1c). In the northern hemisphere, intense EKE dissipation is found in the Kuroshio as well as the Gulf Stream region and its extension. In the southern hemisphere, the Agulhas Current and its retroflection, the Zapiola gyre and the ACC signatures are striking with an eddy dissipation rate often exceeding 25 mW/m^2.

Table 1: Domain-integrated dissipation rate of the eddy kinetic energy over oceanic basins displayed in Figure 3. The longitude and latitude bounds for each box are also indicated as well as the associated ocean area. The ACC basin is defined following the mask created by Martinez-Moreno et al. (2020) but modified to include a part of the Agulhas retroflection between 52–100°E and southward to 42°S, while removing the boxes used for the southern boundary current. The surface average represents the ratio between the integrated dissipation rate and the basin area.

	Global	Gulf Stream	Kuroshio	Agulhas	Brazil-Malvinas	ACC
Longitude	-	73°-39°W	140°-175°E	14°-52°E	59.5°-32°W	-
Latitude	-	33°-44°N	30°-42°N	30°-44°S	34.5°-50.5°S	-
Surface area (10^6 km^2)	344.3	3.5	4.1	4.7	4.1	66.6
% of total	(100 %)	(1.0 %)	(1.2 %)	(1.4 %)	(1.2 %)	(19.4 %)
Dissipation rate (TW)	0.66 ± 0.19	0.05 ± 0.01	0.03 ± 0.01	0.07 ± 0.02	0.03 ± 0.01	0.25 ± 0.04
% of total	(100 %)	(7.8 ± 2.7 %)	(4.5 ± 1.8 %)	(10.6 ± 3.9 %)	(5.0 ± 2.2 %)	(37.5 ± 12.8%)
Surface average (mW/m^2)	1.93 ± 0.56	14.82 ± 2.85	7.26 ± 2.02	14.97 ± 3.42	8.06 ± 2.64	3.34 ± 0.60

The map also reveals both the East Australian Current and the West Australian Current as places of mesoscale EKE dissipation. The latter is the only ocean eastern boundary upwelling region present on this global map.

Intermediate levels of EKE dissipation are found in the equatorial and subtropical bands, mostly in the Pacific Ocean. Even if these regions are theoretically less prone to baroclinic instability (Tulloch et al., 2011), the amount of computed EKE and the simple balance of Equation 3 produce a relatively large eddy dissipation. This pattern is not often observed in previous studies (Sen et al., 2008; Xu et al., 2011) but reflects the large number of attendent eddies in these regions (Chelton et al., 2011). Finally, the dissipation rate shows strong variations zonally with very weak EKE removal in the Eastern part of ocean basins. In particular the North and South Pacific subtropical gyres have a pronounced signature with a minimum of EKE dissipation found in the vicinity of the Alaska, the California and the Humboldt Currents. Both the horizontal distribution of EKE and of the dissipation timescale explain these patterns.

Since most of the mesoscale dissipation occurs in strong and deep-reaching currents, domain-integrated EKE dissipation rates are computed over the most energetic ocean regions and summarized in Table 1. Covering only a small part of the global ocean area, the four main western boundary current systems are responsible here for more than 25% of the total EKE sinks. It is particularly true in the Agulhas and the Gulf Stream regions with an average dissipation rate of 15 mW/m^2, one order of magnitude larger than the global average. The southern hemisphere clearly dominates the EKE dissipation with numerous dissipation hotspots, notably in the ACC which cumulates more than a third of the global dissipation.

In total, we find a global EKE dissipation rate of 0.66 ± 0.19 TW. This figure represents a substantial fraction of the ~1 TW wind power input to the geostrophic field (Wunsch, 1998) and is close to the expected eddy potential to kinetic energy conversion rate (von Storch et al., 2012), confirming the key role of mesoscale eddies in the ocean energy cycle. Our results are also in the range of previous global estimations. Sen et al. (2008) computed an observed dissipation of geostrophic motion by bottom drag between 0.2 TW and 0.8 TW while Arbic et al. (2009) obtained a reduced range of 0.14-0.65 TW from different simulations. This finding suggests the bottom drag is a leading-order mechanism of mesoscale dissipation even if regional and cross-comparison studies are needed to better quantify the EKE dissipation processes.

4 Discussion

4.1 Validition of the Eddy Energy Balance

In section 2, a diagnostic eddy energy balance is presented where the energy sources by baroclinic instability are offset by a linear EKE dissipation. In this study, we use a coarse and global low-resolution model to verify this eddy energy balance. The simulation outputs tend to validate the framework but still indicate errors evaluated at 35%. These figures should be carefully interpreted since the model and the chosen parameterized energy budget necessarily present some biases. More precisely, the barotropic instability is neglected in Equation 1 although it could be a significant mechanism for the generation of mesoscale eddies (e.g. Gula et al., 2015; Maillard et al., 2022). However, at the global scale, model-based Lorenz energy cycle estimates suggest that baroclinic production by far exceeds its barotropic counterpart (von Storch et al., 2012). In addition, satellite observations have shown that eddies could efficiently propagate westward (Chelton et al., 2007, 2011; Zhai et al., 2010), indicating that advection may play a role in the EKE budget. Finally, recent studies indicate strong observed EKE variability (Ding et al., 2017; Martinez-Moreno et al., 2020) and possible long-term trends (Beech et al., 2022). Nonetheless, on the decadal time scale relatively small trends of EKE are found, supporting the hypothesis of a steady eddy kinetic energy reservoir. In order to account for all the aforementioned processes, eddy-rich and high-resolution models could be used to validate the eddy energy balance.

4.2 Sensitivity of the Eddy Dissipation to the Eddy Efficiency α

Another assumption in our method remains in the choice of the eddy efficiency α, and to our knowledge, there is no method to get an accurate estimation of this parameter in the global ocean. Bachman et al. (2017) use a suite of idealized channel simulations to compare several parameterizations of eddy transfer coefficients. They recommend the equilibrated long-term value of 0.2, even if the eddy efficiency takes different values during the eddy lifetime. Poulsen et al. (2019) diagnose the spatial structure of the eddy efficiency in the Southern Ocean with an eddy-resolving ocean circulation model. They recommend an average value as low as 0.043, consistent with the default value of 0.04 used in the GEOMETRIC parameterization (Mak et al., 2018; Mak, Marshall, et al., 2022). More recently, Wei et al. (2022) set the eddy efficiency to 0.07 in order to optimize their diagnostics of the eddy buoyancy fluxes in shelf and open ocean regions of eddy resolving simulations.

We also note that the eddy efficiency α in Equations 2 and 3 is different from the one introduced by Marshall et al. (2012) which use the total eddy energy instead of the EKE. However, the work of Bachman et al. (2017) suggests that switching the total to eddy kinetic energy in the scaling of κ_{gm} is physically consistent even if the coefficient should be increased by a given factor. Therefore, the above-mentioned values of the eddy efficiency should be increased when considering the EKE. Therefore we chose $\alpha = 0.1$ which is around twice the mean value diagnosed by Poulsen et al. (2019) in a realistic high-resolution model. Even if this value seems reasonable, we acknowledge the large uncertainties in our results due to the linear dependences of the EKE dissipation rate to α in the Equations 1 and 3. Indeed, taking extreme values of $\alpha = 0.04$ and $\alpha = 0.4$ would lead to a central estimate of 0.27 TW and 2.66 TW respectively, for the global EKE dissipation rate.

5 Conclusion

Dominating the ocean kinetic energy reservoir, mesoscale eddies are central to the Earth energy balance and transient climate response (Greatbatch et al., 2007; Chelton, 2013). Regarding the dissipation of this eddy kinetic energy (EKE), spatial distributions are still not well quantified in the global ocean. Indeed, direct and global measurements present serious instrumental difficulties making the problem of estimating the global eddy dissipation unsolved.

This present work proposes a global reconstruction of the EKE dissipation indirectly from observations. A simplified model for the ocean mesoscale energetics is employed, where baroclinic instability sources are perfectly balanced by sinks of EKE. In this model, the dissipative mechanisms are interpreted by means of eddy dissipation timescales and are directly related to the ocean stratification. The model and the energy balance were tested with an oceanic global circulation simulation using a parameterized eddy energy prognostic equation. In the whole ocean domain, the dissipation of EKE tends to approach its production by baroclinic instability, thereby confirming the adopted eddy energy balance. However, the dissipation also dominates some part of the ocean where other processes impact the EKE budget, illustrating the need for more realistic diagnostics of this eddy energy balance.

The framework is applied to available observations of temperature and salinity to compute a global map of the eddy dissipation timescale. The shortest timescales (higher dissipation) are found in the Southern Ocean and near strong western boundary currents coinciding with the regions prone to high baroclinic instability and large eddy growth rates (Tulloch et al., 2011). By projecting the eddy energy into depth using baroclinic surface modes (LaCasce & Groeskamp, 2020), a three-dimensional EKE field is also computed where the mean EKE reservoir is estimated to 4.42 EJ. Our work finally combines the two previous ingredients and provides a new global map for the EKE dissipation rate. Integrated over the whole ocean, the energy flux going out of the mesoscale reaches 0.66 ± 0.19 TW. Our study also confirms that most of the energy dissipation takes place in the southern hemisphere and more particularly in the Antarctic Circumpolar Current which accounts for 38% of the total dissipation. In addition, the main western boundary currents are found to be dissipation hotspots of EKE, accounting for more than 25% of the global dissipation.

Given the simplicity of the relation in Equation 3, the adopted framework allows an easy computation of the global EKE dissipation rate from indirect observations. Indeed, the method only requires a climatological mean field of density and surface geostrophic velocity anomalies, both of these being widely available observational data. Our results show important spatial patterns which if combined with other independent estimates, can help to understand the dissipation mechanisms. Since the dissipation of geostrophic kinetic energy remains one of the largest uncertainties in the ocean energy budget (Wunsch, 2004), it is thus crucial to quantify how and where the energy is removed from the EKE reservoir. Our results contribute to this goal and provide a new spatial distribution of the EKE dissipation rate in the world ocean.

Another important finding of this work is the estimation of the linear eddy dissipation coefficient λ employed in several ocean models (Cessi, 2008; Marshall & Adcroft, 2010; Mak et al., 2017, 2018). Recently, Mak, Marshall, et al. (2022) have demonstrated the sensitivity of global ocean circulation models using energy constrained mesoscale eddy parameterization to the eddy dissipation timescale λ^{-1}. In this study, we present the first estimate of the eddy timescale from global observation-based datasets. The resulting map can thus be used in eddy-parameterized ocean models to constrain the eddy energy dissipation and modulate the ocean stratification.

Open Research

This study has been conducted using E.U. Copernicus Marine Service Information: `https://doi.org/10.48670/moi-00148` for the altimetry dataset. Both climatology of temperature (Locarnini et al., 2018) and salinity (Zweng et al., 2018) from the World Ocean Atlas 2018 were downloaded through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration website: `https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/archive/accession/NCEI-WOA18`, on 9 September

2022. Datas and Python scripts used to generate the results presented in this work are available on Zenodo : `https://sandbox.zenodo.org/record/1206326`.

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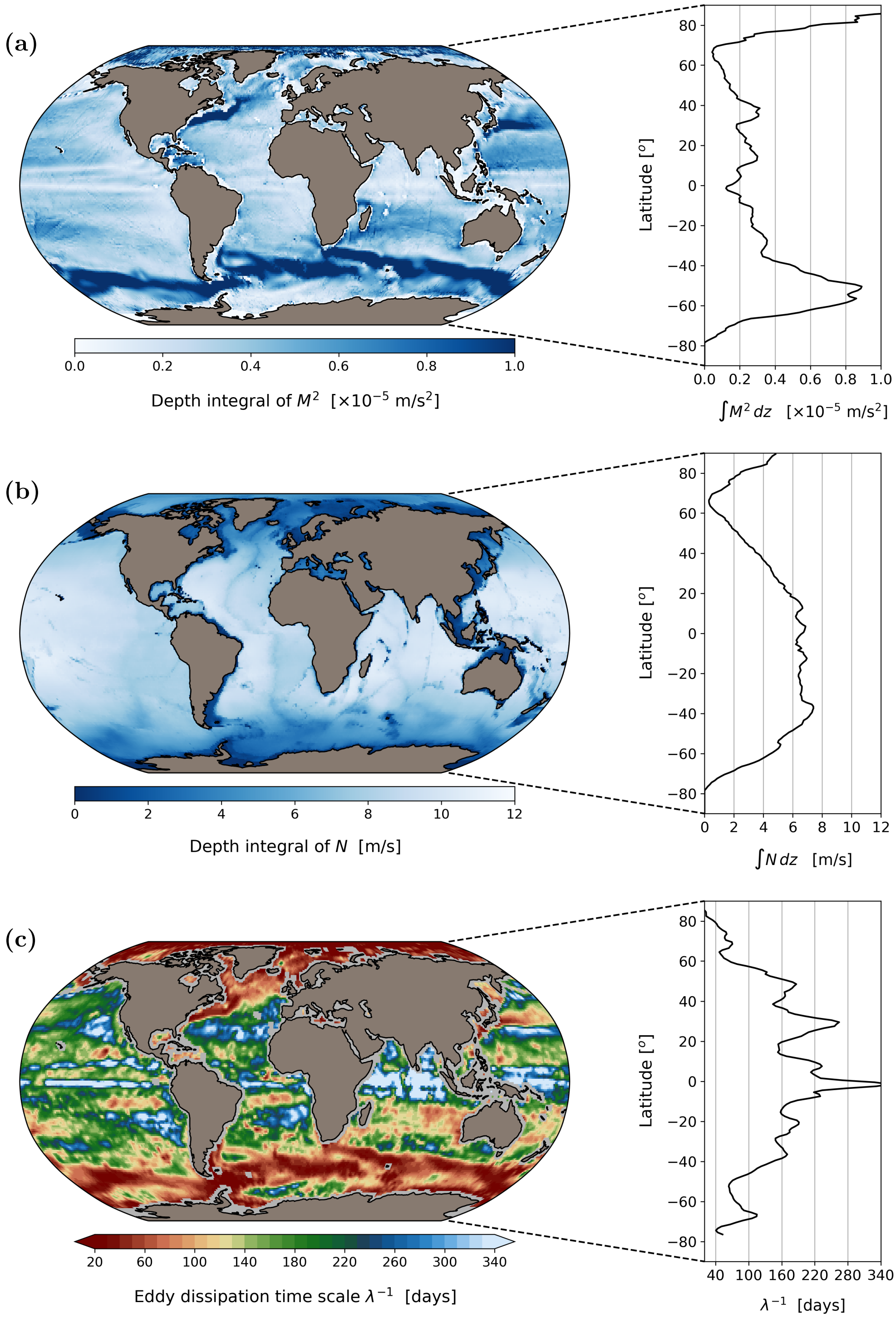

Figure 1: Depth integrals of (a) the horizontal buoyancy stratification M^2 (m/s^2) and (b) the Brunt-Väisälä frequency N (m/s) from the WOA18 climatology (Garcia et al., 2019). Equation 3 is used to compute (c) the global map of the eddy dissipation timescale λ^{-1} involving the ratio M^2/N while zonal averages are plotted on the right. In (a, b), the colormap is chosen so that dark blue leads to an increase of the eddy dissipation coefficient λ and conversely for light blue. In (c), we use a two-dimensional shapiro filter to reduce spatial noise.

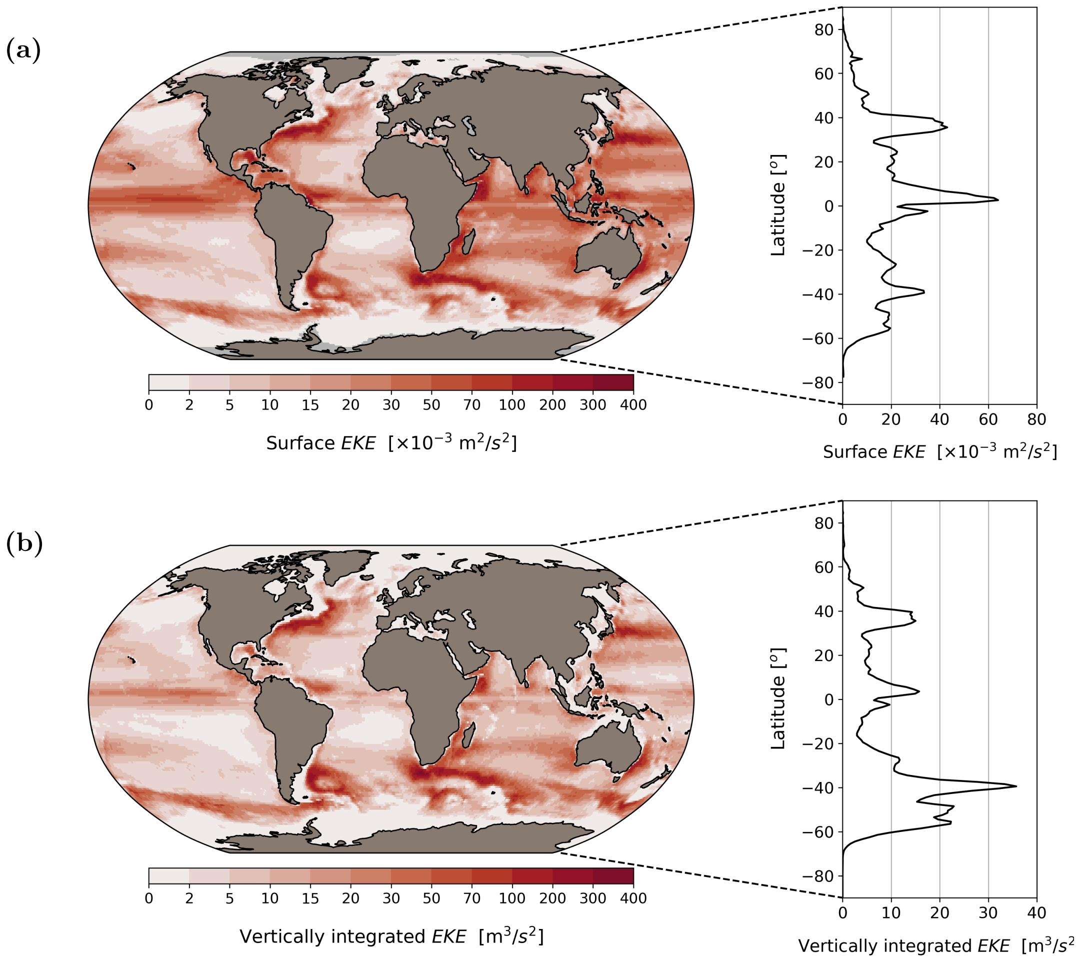

Figure 2: (a) Surface eddy kinetic energy (EKE) in m^2/s^2 deduced from the gridded altimetry (European Union-Copernicus Marine Service, 2021) and averaged over the period 1995–2017. (b) Vertically integrated EKE in m^3/s^2 deduced from the vertical structure function $\phi(z)$ in Equation 5. Both colorbars are chosen to illustrate the impact of $\phi(z)$ when computing the depth integral of EKE.

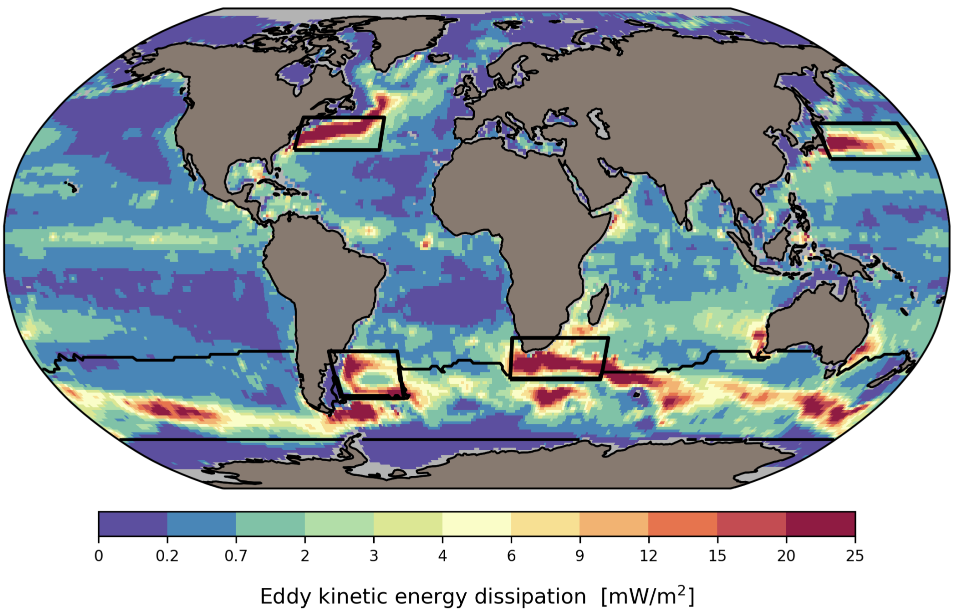

Figure 3: Vertically-integrated eddy dissipation rate in mW/m^2 estimated from the WOA18 climatology (Garcia et al., 2019) and the gridded altimetry (European Union-Copernicus Marine Service, 2021) over the period 1995–2017, with the use of the diagnostic relation in Equation 3. A reference density $\rho_0 = 1026$ kg/m^3 is used and the black boxes refer to the ocean basins defined in Table 1.