

Ocean heat uptake and its consequences for the magnitude of sea level rise and climate change

Article

Accepted Version

Kuhlbrodt, T. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2328-6729> and Gregory, J. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1296-8644> (2012) Ocean heat uptake and its consequences for the magnitude of sea level rise and climate change. *Geophysical Research Letters*, 39 (18). L18608. ISSN 1944-8007 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1029/2012GL052952> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/28951/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1029/2012GL052952>

Publisher: American Geophysical Union

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

¹ Ocean heat uptake and its consequences for the magnitude of ² sea level rise and climate change

T. Kuhlbrodt¹ and J. M. Gregory^{1,2}

T. Kuhlbrodt and J. M. Gregory, NCAS-Climate, University of Reading, Earley Gate, PO Box 243,
Reading RG6 6BB, UK. (t.kuhlbrodt@reading.ac.uk)

¹NCAS-Climate, Department of
Meteorology, University of Reading, Reading,
UK.

²MetOffice Hadley Centre, Exeter, UK.

3 Under increasing greenhouse gas concentrations, ocean heat uptake moderates
4 the rate of climate change, and thermal expansion makes a substantial contribu-
5 tion to sea level rise. In this paper we quantify the differences in projections
6 among atmosphere-ocean general circulation models of the Coupled Model In-
7 tercomparison Project in terms of transient climate response, ocean heat uptake
8 efficiency and expansion efficiency of heat. The CMIP3 and CMIP5 ensembles
9 have statistically indistinguishable distributions in these parameters. The ocean
10 heat uptake efficiency varies by a factor of two across the models, explaining
11 about 50% of the spread in ocean heat uptake in CMIP5 models with CO₂ in-
12 creasing at 1%/year. It correlates with the ocean global-mean vertical profiles
13 both of temperature and of temperature change, and comparison with obser-
14 vations suggests the models may overestimate ocean heat uptake and underes-
15 timate surface warming, because their stratification is too weak. The models
16 agree on the location of maxima of shallow ocean heat uptake (above 700 m) in
17 the Southern Ocean and the North Atlantic, and on deep ocean heat uptake (be-
18 low 2000 m) in areas of the Southern Ocean, in some places amounting to 40%
19 of the top-to-bottom integral in the CMIP3 SRES A1B scenario. The South-
20 ern Ocean dominates global ocean heat uptake; consequently the eddy-induced
21 thickness diffusivity parameter, which is particularly influential in the Southern
22 Ocean, correlates with the ocean heat uptake efficiency. The thermal expansion
23 produced by ocean heat uptake is 0.12 m YJ^{-1} , with an uncertainty of about
24 10% ($1 \text{ YJ} = 10^{24} \text{ J}$).

1. Introduction

25 Ocean heat uptake moderates the rate of time-dependent climate change. Thermal expansion
26 of sea-water is a consequence of ocean heat uptake and one of the major contributors to
27 global-mean sea level rise [Church *et al.*, 2011]. Our general aim in this paper is to quantify
28 the differences in predictions of the magnitude and distribution of ocean heat uptake, and its
29 consequences for global-mean surface air temperature change and thermal expansion, among
30 atmosphere–ocean general circulation models (which we henceforth refer to simply as “mod-
31 els”, for convenience) used for projections of anthropogenic climate change.

32 We analyse results from 22 models that participated in the Coupled Model Intercomparison
33 Project Phase 3 (CMIP3), and from the 20 models in the CMIP5 project whose data were avail-
34 able at the time of writing this paper (Spring 2012). See Fig. 1, and Table S1 in the online
35 auxiliary material (AUX), for a list. We mainly use the control experiments and experiments
36 with atmospheric CO₂ concentration increasing at 1%/year (details in AUX).

2. Ocean heat uptake efficiency and transient climate response

37 *Gregory and Forster* [2008] showed that there is an approximately linear relationship between
38 the global mean surface air temperature change ΔT_a and the radiative forcing F (due to green-
39 house gases etc.): $\Delta T_a = F/\rho$, with the climate resistance ρ in $\text{W m}^{-2} \text{K}^{-1}$. This relationship
40 holds well for observations and model simulations of recent decades, and for projections of cli-
41 mate change under a continuously increasing forcing, which is a characteristic of most scenarios
42 considered for the 21st century. The basis of this relationship is that the difference between the
43 radiative forcing and the radiative feedback yields the net heat flux N into the climate system:
44 $N = F - \alpha \Delta T_a$, and N can be approximated by $N \simeq \kappa \Delta T_a$. The climate resistance ρ is thus

45 the sum of α , the climate feedback parameter, and κ , which is identified as the ocean heat uptake
46 efficiency because nearly all the added heat is stored in the ocean [e.g. *Church et al.*, 2011].

47 Following *Gregory and Forster*, the ocean heat uptake efficiency κ , the climate feedback pa-
48 rameter α and the climate resistance ρ were calculated for CMIP5 by ordinary least squares
49 regression (OLS) of decadal-mean N , $F - N$ and F respectively against ΔT_a under the stan-
50 dard idealized scenario of CO₂ increasing at 1% per year, giving a forcing $F(t) = F_{2\times}t/70$
51 which is linear with time t in years, where $F_{2\times}$ is obtained from experiments in which CO₂ is
52 instantaneously increased and then held constant (*Andrews et al.*, 2012; Table S1). The tran-
53 sient climate response (TCR) was calculated, following its definition, as ΔT_a for the time-mean
54 of years 61–80 in this scenario (Figure 1 and Table S1). The coefficient of variation (ratio of
55 ensemble standard deviation to ensemble mean) of TCR is about 20% in CMIP5.

56 We see that α obtained by this method agrees closely with α obtained from the CO₂ step-
57 increase experiments [*Andrews et al.*, 2012]. $F_{2\times}$ is not correlated with α or κ . Whereas *Gre-*
58 *gory and Forster* [2008] found α and κ to be independent in CMIP3, they have a correlation of
59 0.56 in CMIP5, significant at the 5% level (one-tailed). This is due principally to the models
60 GFDL-ESM2G and GFDL-ESM2M, which have α and κ that are both larger than in any other
61 model. Without these models, the correlation is insignificant (0.32). Further investigation of
62 these models is needed to establish whether there is a link between their large α and large κ .

63 The definition of ρ implies that $\text{TCR} = F_{2\times}/\rho = F_{2\times}/(\alpha + \kappa)$. Thus, a larger κ gives
64 a smaller TCR (correlation of κ and TCR is -0.76). Excluding GFDL-ESM2G and GFDL-
65 ESM2M, so that κ is uncorrelated with α , we can compute the fraction of the across-model
66 variance of TCR explained by κ by comparing $\text{var}(F_{2\times}/(\alpha + \kappa))$ with $\text{var}(\langle F_{2\times} \rangle / (\langle \alpha \rangle + \kappa))$,

67 where the angle brackets denote the model mean (see AUX for further comment on the method).

68 The fraction explained is about 10%.

69 *Boé et al.* [2009] and *Boé et al.* [2010] present evidence from CMIP3 suggesting that ocean
70 heat uptake has a much stronger influence than this on surface warming. Their strong relation-
71 ship, however, depends particularly on a cluster of five models [Figure 3b of *Boé et al.*, 2009].
72 In the high-latitude Southern Ocean region which was analysed for that Figure, three of these
73 models (csiro_mk3_0, giss_e_h and giss_e_r) have an extremely weak ocean temperature strati-
74 fication. Another model (ncar_pcm1) has the lowest climate sensitivity of any CMIP3 model.
75 We therefore suspect that the correlation could be strong by chance rather than from a common
76 physical behaviour exhibited by these models.

77 The time-integrated heat uptake in the 1%/year CO₂ scenario up to year 70 is $H_{2\times} =$
78 $\int_0^{70} N(t) dt \simeq 35F_{2\times}\kappa/(\kappa + \alpha)$ (in W year m⁻²). Across the CMIP5 1%/year CO₂ scenar-
79 ios, it has a coefficient of variation of about 10%. Using the same CMIP5 models and method
80 as for TCR (see also AUX), we find that $H_{2\times}$ has a correlation of 0.92 with $F_{2\times}\kappa/(\kappa + \alpha)$, and
81 the fraction of variance of $H_{2\times}$ explained by κ is $\sim 50\%$. Thus κ influences heat uptake more
82 than it influences surface warming because of its appearance in the numerator of $H_{2\times}$. (In AUX,
83 we derive a formula for $\text{var}(H_{2\times})$ in terms of $\text{var}(\kappa)$ and $\text{var}(\text{TCR})$.)

84 The distributions of κ , α , ρ and TCR are not significantly different for the CMIP3 and CMIP5
85 ensembles according to Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests. In both ensembles, κ varies by about a
86 factor of 2. Investigating the reasons for this substantial spread motivates the next section.

3. Vertical distribution of temperature and temperature change

87 Ocean heat uptake efficiency depends on how fast the heat can be transported downwards. We
88 put forward the hypothesis that a model with a weak vertical temperature gradient in the control
89 state has a larger capacity for downward heat transport (e.g. because a large diapycnal mixing
90 coefficient erodes the stratification, which in turn favours convection) and therefore should have
91 a larger κ . The hypothesis applies to net global-mean vertical heat transport, including but not
92 limited to the two mentioned processes.

93 Fig. 2a shows the global-mean vertical temperature profile from the control runs of the CMIP3
94 and CMIP5 models (the average over the first 20 years that are parallel to the 1%/year CO₂
95 runs) and from observations [WOA05; Locarnini *et al.*, 2006], each profile being expressed as
96 a difference from its surface temperature. This confirms that in the top 2000 m most models
97 are less stratified than the real ocean. To elucidate the relationship between κ and the global
98 temperature profiles, we use a simple measure of the vertical temperature gradient, namely the
99 vertical temperature difference T_z between two layers, 0–100 m and 1500–2000 m [similar to
100 Boé *et al.*, 2009]. The relationship of κ to T_z is shown in Fig. 3a and is negative, as expected
101 ($r = -0.35$ with $p = 0.07$ [one-sided]). HadGEM2-ES (model J) has a very small κ and is
102 strongly stratified in the uppermost layers, being closer to the observed profile than most other
103 models, particularly in the top 500 m. The κ – T_z relationship therefore suggests that κ tends to
104 be too large in AOGCMs.

105 The change of the global vertical temperature profile averaged over the years 61-80 of the
106 1%/year CO₂ runs is shown in Fig. 2b. The profiles were scaled with (i.e. divided by) their
107 vertical integral between 0 m and 2000 m in order to compare their shapes rather than the total
108 warming. The amount of warming in the top 100 m, as compared to the deeper layers, varies

109 considerably across the models. As Fig. 3b shows, the variation of κ across models is strongly
110 related to ΔT_z , defined as the change of (the scaled) T_z in the 1%/year CO_2 runs. The correlation
111 ($r = -0.66$) is significant at the 99% level ($p < 0.01$). If ΔT_z is large, then the temperature
112 increase at the surface is larger than at depth, indicating that most heat has been taken up at the
113 surface. This goes along with a small κ . Conversely, models that distribute the additional heat
114 further down have a smaller ΔT_z and a larger κ .

115 The κ - T_z relationship suggests most models will probably transport heat too deeply. Con-
116 sistent with this, Fig. 2c shows that the observed warming over recent decades [*Levitus et al.*,
117 2012] is more strongly surface-intensified than in the CMIP3 simulations of the same period.

4. Geographical distribution of ocean heat uptake

118 The projected ocean heat uptake (OHU, i.e. the increase in ocean heat content) in model
119 simulations with an increasing CO_2 content has a distinct regional structure. We analyse this
120 for the CMIP3 SRES A1B scenario, for which we have the largest number of models available.
121 For comparison, the same analysis for the 1% CO_2 runs of CMIP3 and CMIP5 can be found
122 in AUX. They show generally less heat uptake because $\int F dt$ is smaller, but the geographical
123 features are similar.

124 The ensemble-mean top-to-bottom integrated OHU is shown in Fig. 4a. It was calculated
125 as the difference between the 20-year averages 2080-2099 and 1980-1999. It is largest in the
126 Southern Ocean, in a band around 40°S , with maxima in the Argentine Basin and south of
127 Africa. This leads to a clear signal in steric sea level rise [cf. *Pardaens et al.*, 2011, their Fig. 2],
128 which is predominantly thermosteric in the Southern Ocean. The models agree on these features

129 ($R > 1$, thin black contours), and they are also visible in the top 700 m alone (Fig. 4b), which
130 accounts for up to 50% of the heat uptake in the full depth.

131 OHU below 2000 m is substantial in several large areas of the Southern Ocean (Fig. 4c),
132 including the Argentine basin and the area west of the Drake Passage, where there are maxima
133 of top-to-bottom OHU. The pattern bears resemblance to observations [Purkey and Johnson,
134 2010]. In these areas, the deep OHU can amount to up to 40% of the total. In the deep-water
135 formation areas in the Southern Ocean and in the North Atlantic the ensemble mean OHU
136 displays minima above 700 m. The models show a large spread in these areas ($R < 1$).

137 The zonal total heat uptake (thick black line in the left hand side of the panel, dotted: one
138 standard deviation) confirms that the global maximum of OHU per degree latitude is in the
139 mid-latitude Southern Ocean [Stouffer *et al.*, 2006]. Therefore, the stratification in that region
140 could have a particularly large influence on κ . In the large majority of the models, the Southern
141 Ocean stratification is strongly influenced by the parameterization of the eddy-induced tracer
142 transports. Consistent with this, we find that the quasi-Stokes diffusivity parameter κ_{GM} (often
143 called the eddy-induced thickness diffusivity) has a significant influence on κ (Fig. 3c). When
144 κ_{GM} is small, the isopycnal layers are steep, leading to a strong horizontal density gradient
145 [Kuhlbrodt *et al.*, 2012, Fig. 1c] but a weak stratification and thus a large κ .

5. Expansion efficiency of heat

146 The expansion efficiency of heat [Russell *et al.*, 2000], as a property of a model in m YJ^{-1}
147 ($1 \text{ YJ} \equiv 10^{24} \text{ J}$), is defined as $\epsilon = h_x/H$, where h_x is the global mean sea level rise due to
148 thermal expansion and H the global-integral OHU. We calculate ϵ by OLS regression of h_x
149 against H , using results from 1%/year CO_2 and all available 21st-century scenarios.

150 In all models, there is an excellent scenario-independent linear relationship, but ϵ varies across
151 models (Fig. 1, Table S1) because the thermal expansivity of sea water $(1/\rho) \partial\rho/\partial T$ increases
152 with pressure and temperature. Therefore, the magnitude of thermal expansion depends on the
153 latitudes and depths at which the heat is actually stored; this pattern depends on the model, but
154 not on the scenario for a given model.

155 The ranges of ϵ in the CMIP3 and CMIP5 ensembles are similar: 0.12 ± 0.01 m YJ⁻¹
156 in CMIP3 and 0.11 ± 0.01 m YJ⁻¹ in CMIP5. This is consistent with the observational
157 estimates for 0 m to 2000 m, 1955–2010 [Levitus *et al.*, 2012], from which we infer $\epsilon =$
158 0.12 ± 0.01 m YJ⁻¹. The observational estimates by Church *et al.* [2011] for 1972–2008 for the
159 full ocean depth indicate $\epsilon = 0.15 \pm 0.03$ m YJ⁻¹, which is slightly higher but not significantly
160 different. We did not find any correlation of ϵ with κ , T_z or ΔT_z , although such relationships
161 would be plausible. It might well be that the stratification in the individual regions which are
162 particularly important to OHU (sec. 4) influences ϵ more than global-mean properties do.

6. Concluding remarks

163 Our analysis of CMIP3 and CMIP5 model results indicates that model spread in ocean ver-
164 tical heat transport processes is responsible for a substantial part of the spread in predictions
165 of global-mean ocean heat uptake (about 50% in the CMIP5 1%CO₂/year experiments), and
166 for some of the spread in predictions of surface warming. Since most AOGCMs have weaker
167 global-mean stratification than observed, it is possible that they generally overestimate ocean
168 heat uptake and underestimate surface warming [Forest *et al.*, 2008]. The ocean heat uptake in
169 CMIP5 1%CO₂/year experiments has a spread of about 10%, and there is also a spread of about
170 10% in the expansion efficiency of heat ϵ , due to the different spatial distribution of the warming

171 in the models. These factors contribute roughly equally to the spread of thermal expansion pro-
172 jection in response to CO₂. Comparison, analysis and evaluation of model processes of ocean
173 interior heat transport is essential to make progress in reducing uncertainties in projections of
174 the magnitude and distribution of ocean heat uptake and the consequent sea-level rise.

175 **Acknowledgments.** We are grateful to Tim Andrews for comparison with his results. We
176 acknowledge the World Climate Research Programme’s Working Group on Coupled Modelling,
177 which is responsible for CMIP, and we thank the climate modeling groups (see Table S1 in
178 AUX) for producing and making available their model output, and ETHZ for access to their data
179 archive. The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research
180 Council under the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013),
181 ERC grant agreement number 247220, project “Seachange”.

References

- 182 Andrews, T., J. M. Gregory, M. J. Webb, and K. E. Taylor (2012), Forcing, feedbacks and
183 climate sensitivity in CMIP5 coupled atmosphere-ocean climate models., *Geophys. Res. Lett.*,
184 39(7), L09712
- 185 Boé, J., A. Hall, and X. Qu (2009), Deep ocean heat uptake as a major source of spread in
186 transient climate change simulations, *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 36, L22701
- 187 Boé, J., A. Hall, and X. Qu (2010), Correction to ”Deep ocean heat uptake as a major source of
188 spread in transient climate change simulations”, *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 37, L17701
- 189 Church, J. A., et al. (2011), Revisiting the Earth’s sea-level and energy budgets from 1961 to
190 2008, *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 38, L18601

191 Forest, C. E., P. H. Stone, and A. P. Sokolov (2008), Constraining climate model param-
192 eters from observed 20th century changes, *Tellus A*, 60, 911–920, doi:10.1111/j.1600-
193 0870.2008.00346.x.

194 Gregory, J. M., and P. M. Forster (2008), Transient climate response estimated from radiative
195 forcing and observed temperature change, *J. Geophys. Res.*, 113, D23105

196 Kuhlbrodt, T., R. S. Smith, Z. Wang, and J. M. Gregory (2012), The influence of eddy parame-
197 terizations on the transport of the Antarctic Circumpolar Current in coupled climate models,
198 *Ocean Modelling*, 52-53, 1–8

199 Levitus, S., et al. (2012), World ocean heat content and thermosteric sea level change (0-2000
200 m), 1955-2010, *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 39, L10603

201 Locarnini, R. A., A. V. Mishonov, J. I. Antonov, T. P. Boyer, and H. E. Garcia (2006), World
202 Ocean Atlas 2005, p. 182, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., US.

203 Pardaens, A. K., J. M. Gregory, and J. A. Lowe (2011), A model study of factors influencing
204 projected changes in regional sea level over the 21st century, *Clim. Dyn.*, 36(9-10), 2015–
205 2033

206 Purkey, S. G., and G. C. Johnson (2010), Warming of global abyssal and deep Southern Ocean
207 waters between the 1990s and 2000s: Contributions to global heat and sea level rise budgets,
208 *J. Clim.*, 23, 6336–6351, doi:10.1175/2010JCLI3682.1.

209 Russell, G. L., V. Gornitz, and J. R. Miller (2000), Regional sea level changes projected by the
210 NASA/GISS atmosphere-ocean model, *Clim. Dyn.*, 16, 789–797.

211 Stouffer, R. J., J. Russell, and M. J. Spelman (2006), Importance of oceanic heat uptake in
212 transient climate change, *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 33, L17704

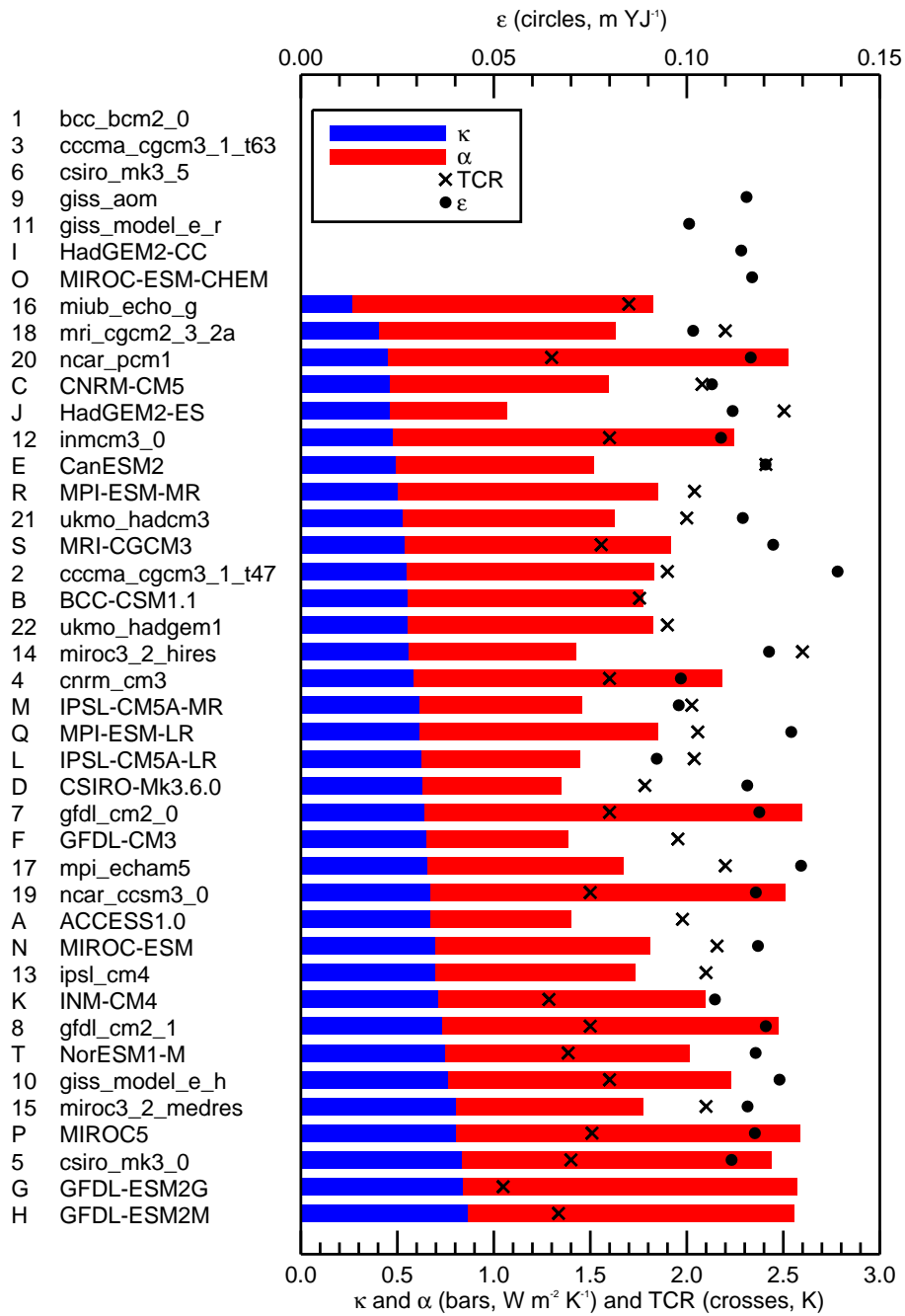


Figure 1: The ocean heat uptake efficiency κ (blue bars), the climate feedback parameter α (red bars), the transient climate response (crosses) and the expansion efficiency of heat ϵ (circles) for the CMIP3 (numbers) and the CMIP5 (letters) models. The total bar length is the climate resistance $\rho = \alpha + \kappa$. The models are arranged in order of κ . See Table S1 in AUX for an alphabetical list of the models. It can be seen from this diagram that TCR and κ are anticorrelated (the crosses are further left towards the bottom), but there is no relationship between κ and α or ϵ (the red bars and the circles do not show any tendency from top to bottom). For several technical reasons, not all parameters could be calculated for every model.

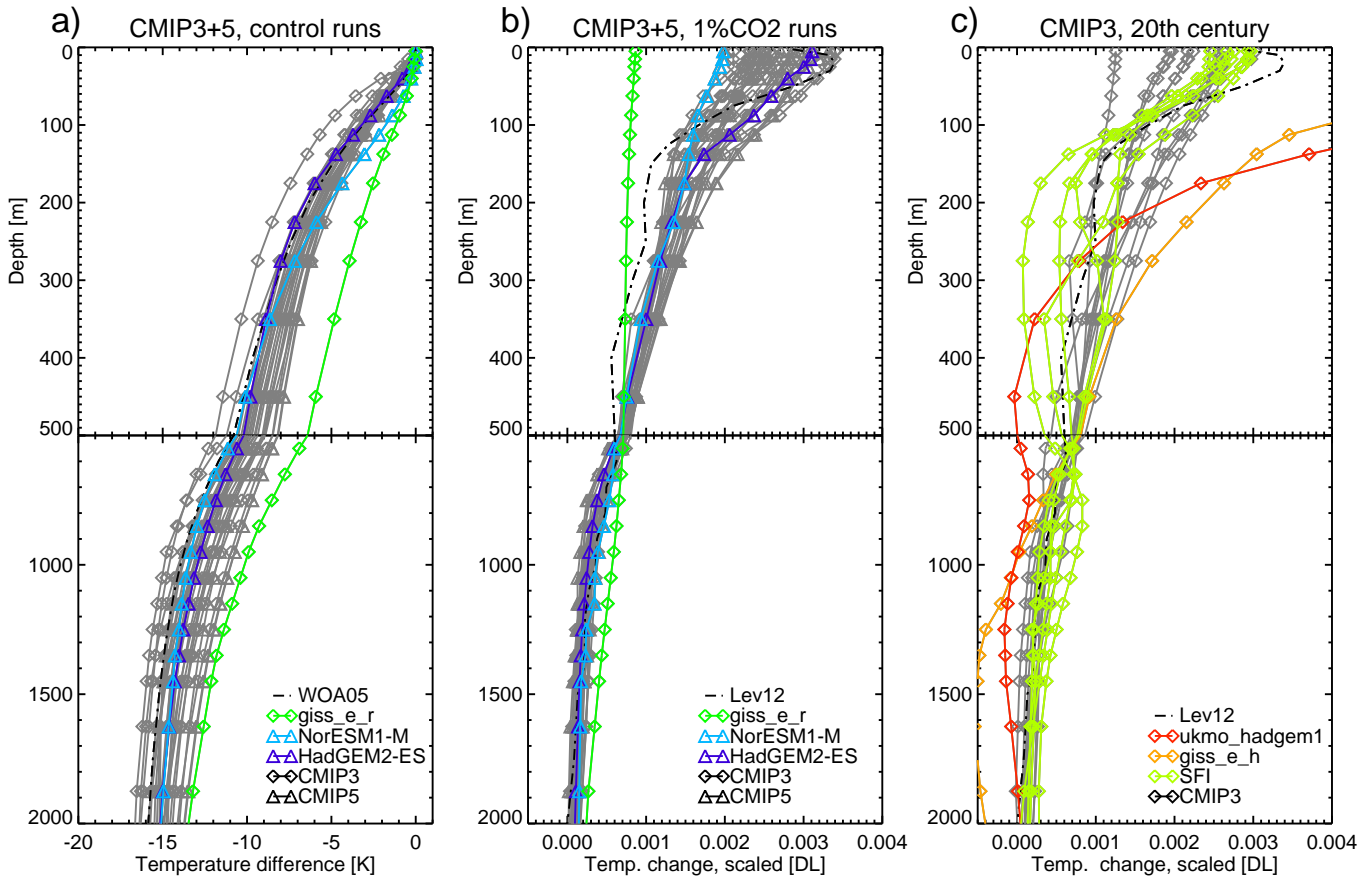


Figure 2: (a) Globally averaged temperature profiles for the control runs of the CMIP3 and CMIP5 models shown as difference from surface temperature, with observations for comparison (dash-dotted; WOA05 [Locarnini *et al.*, 2006]). NorESM1-M is an outlier in that it is unusually weakly stratified in the top 200 m, giving a large κ , but very strongly stratified in the 500 m or so below, giving a large T_z . Another outlier is giss_e_r with an extremely weak stratification. (b) Change of the temperature profiles in the 1%/year CO₂ runs, divided by the vertical integral between 0 m and 2000 m. Units are dimensionless (“DL”). (c) Change of the temperature profiles in the CMIP3 models during the observational record (Levitus *et al.*, 2012, “Lev12”), scaled as in (b). Shown is the difference of a 20-year average (2000 to 2019) from the SRES A1B runs minus a 20-year average from 20C3M (1945-1964). Two models (red, orange) overestimate surface warming because of their too small total heat uptake. To some extent, a few models capture the surface intensification (“SFI” [light green]: bccr_bcm2_0, gfdl_cm2_0, gfdl_cm2_1, miub_echo_g, mri_cgcm2_3_2a) seen in the observations (dash-dotted). Also note the shallow subsurface maximum warming in observations, but not in models, for which we have no explanation.

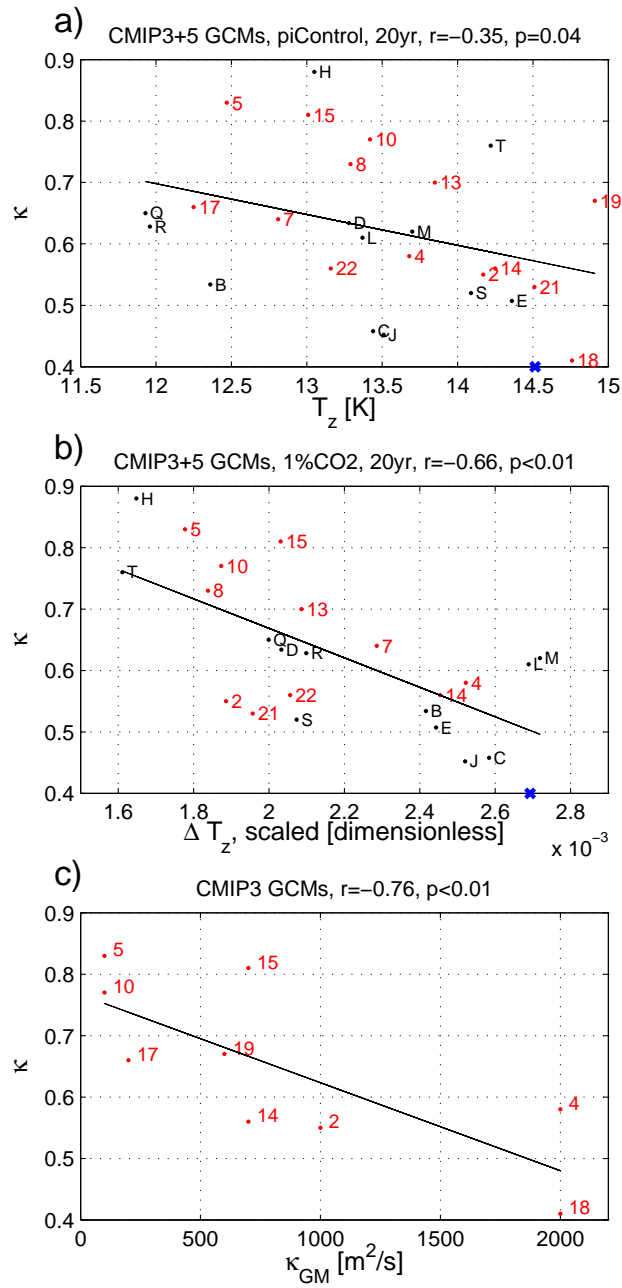


Figure 3: The ocean heat uptake efficiency κ [$\text{W m}^{-2} \text{K}^{-1}$] against (a) the globally averaged vertical temperature difference T_z in the control runs, (b) its change ΔT_z in the 1%/year CO_2 runs, scaled with the total warming, and (c) the quasi-Stokes diffusivity parameter κ_{GM} for those CMIP3 models where it is a constant. The black lines are regression lines. The CMIP3 models have red numbers while the CMIP5 models have black letters (see Table S1 for key). Blue crosses on the horizontal axis denote the values of T_z from WOA05 and of ΔT_z from Levitus *et al.*, 2012.

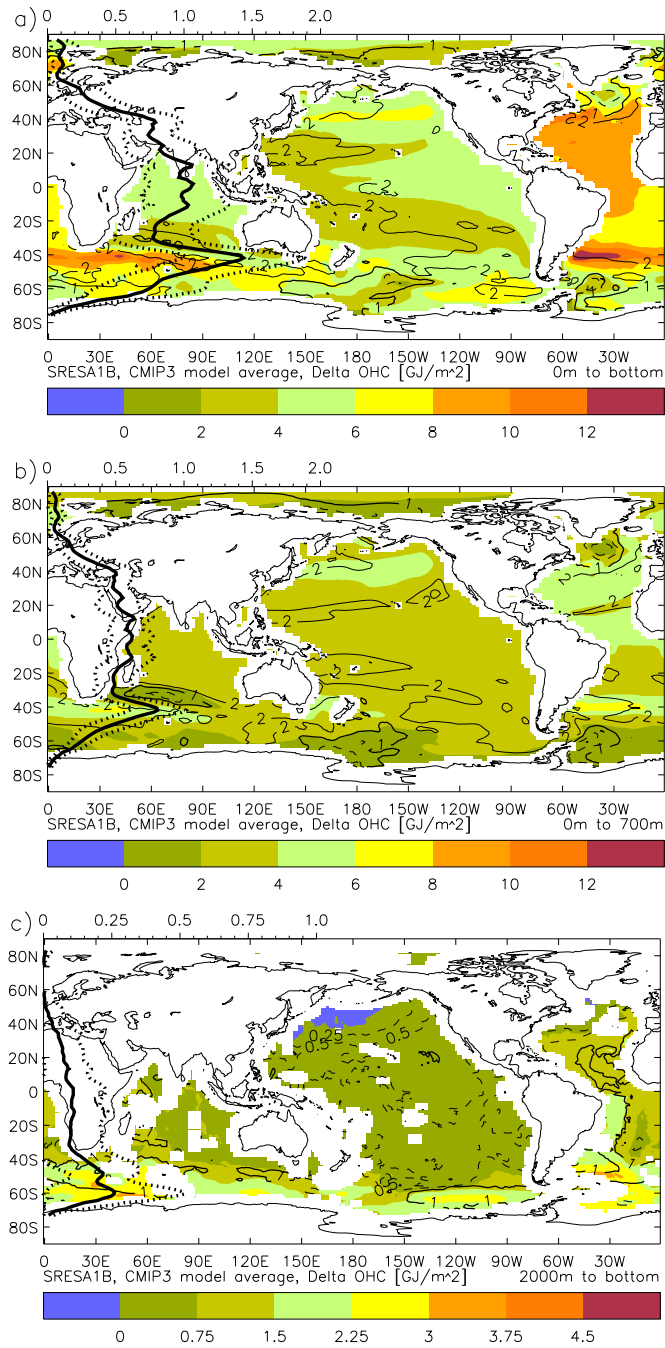


Figure 4: Vertically integrated ocean heat uptake (colour shading; in GJ m^{-2}) in the ensemble average of the SRES A1B scenario of 17 CMIP3 models for (a) the total water column, (b) the upper 700 m and (c) below 2000 m. Thick black line: zonal total in 10^{15} J m^{-1} (scale in the upper left corner), with ± 1 standard deviation (dotted). Note the different scales in (c). Black contours show the ratio R of ensemble mean and ensemble standard deviation (solid: $R > 1$, thick solid: $R = 1$, dashed: $R < 1$). For (a) and (b), $R > 1$ in most areas indicating agreement across models. An exception are the deep-water formation regions in the Southern Ocean and the North Atlantic. In (c) the models mainly show OHU in the Southern Ocean.