

# **Kinematics and Heat Budget of the Leeuwin Current**

by

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The Flinders University of South Australia

June, 2006

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## Abstract

This study investigates the upper ocean circulation along the west Australian coast, based on recent observations (WOCE ICM6, 1994/96) and numerical output from the  $\frac{1}{6}^\circ$  Parallel Ocean Program model (POP11B 1993/97). Particularly, we identify the source regions of the Leeuwin Current, quantify its mean and seasonal variability in terms of volume, heat and salt transports, and examine its heat balance (cooling mechanism). This also leads to further understanding of the regional circulation associated with the Leeuwin Undercurrent, the Eastern Gyral Current and the southeast Indian Subtropical Gyre.

The tropical and subtropical sources of the Leeuwin Current are understood from an online numerical particle tracking. Some of the new findings are the Tropical Indian Ocean source of the Leeuwin Current (in addition to the Indonesian Throughflow/Pacific); the Eastern Gyral Current as a recirculation of the South Equatorial Current; the subtropical source of the Leeuwin Current fed by relatively narrow subsurface-intensified eastward jets in the Subtropical Gyre, which are also a major source for the Subtropical Water (salinity maximum) as observed in the Leeuwin Undercurrent along the ICM6 section at 22°S.

The ICM6 current meter array reveals a rich vertical current structure near North West Cape (22°S). The coastal part of the Leeuwin Current has dominant synoptic variability and occasionally contains large spikes in its transport time series arising from the passage of tropical cyclones. On the mean, it is weaker and shallower compared to further downstream, and it only transports Tropical Water, of a variable content. The Leeuwin Undercurrent carries Subtropical Water, South Indian Central Water and Antarctic Intermediate Water equatorward between 150/250 to 500/750 m. There is a poleward flow just below the undercurrent which advects a mixed Intermediate Water, partially associated with outflows from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Narrow bottom-intensified currents are also observed.

The 5-year mean model Leeuwin Current is a year-round poleward flow between 22°S and 34°S. It progressively deepens, from 150 to 300 m depth. Latitudinal variations in its volume transport are a response to lateral inflows/outflows. It has double the transport at 34°S (-2.2 Sv) compared to at 22°S (-1.2 Sv). These model estimates, however, may underestimate the transport of the Leeuwin Current by 50%. Along its path, the current becomes cooler (6°C), saltier (0.6 psu) and denser ( $2 \text{ kg m}^{-3}$ ). At seasonal scales, a stronger poleward flow in May-June advects the warmest and freshest waters along the west Australian coast. This advection is apparently spun up by the arrival of a poleward Kelvin wave in April, and reinforced by a minimum in the equatorward wind stress during July.

In the model heat balance, the Leeuwin Current is significantly cooled by the eddy heat flux divergence (4°C out of 6°C), associated with mechanisms operating at submonthly time scales. However, exactly which mechanisms it is not yet clear. Air-sea fluxes only account for ~30% of the cooling and seasonal rectification is negligible. The eddy heat divergence, originating over a narrow region along the outer edge of the Leeuwin Current, is responsible for a considerable warming of a vast area of the adjacent ocean interior, which is then associated with strong heat losses to the atmosphere. The model westward eddy heat flux estimates are considerably larger than those associated with long lived warm core eddies detaching from the Leeuwin Current and moving offshore. This suggests that these mesoscale features are not the main mechanism responsible for the cooling of the Leeuwin Current. We suspect instead that short lived warm core eddies might play an important role.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

*Catia Motta Domingues*

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## Acknowledgements

To my supervisors Matthias Tomczak, Susan Wijffels and John Church and our teammate Mathew Maltrud for their extensive guidance and much appreciated support.

From Adelaide: Prof. Geof Lennon for his huge patience and English guidance when I started writing the thesis; the Flinders Staff Development Group for the learning courses; Rino Calaycay and David French for the friendly IT support; Gail Jackson for the helping hand and big smiles; my friends and colleagues: Marga and Mauricio Mata, Paul Barker, Duncan Tippins, Heidi Leffanue, Wei Wu, Du Tao, Anna and Ivan Lebedev, Charles James, Jochem Kaempf.

From Hobart: Ming Feng, David Griffin, George Cresswell, Peter Craig, Stuart Godfrey, Gary Meyers for oceanographic conversations; Jeff Dunn, Neil White, Jim Mansbridge, Ian Barton and Chris Rathbone for providing complementary data sets; Peter Campbell, Jerry Coppleman, Sean McInnes, Klaus Dengel for the great IT support; Russ Fiedler, Jason Roberts, Andreas Schiller, Trevor McDougall and Steve Griffies for model related chats; Louise Bell for preparing the schematic current diagrams; Paulette Midgley and Bronwyn Marshall for the helping hand; Jaci/Pete, Marta/Andrew, Thomas, Tilla, Simon, Helen/Leigh, Galina, Lidia, Ann and Tseviet for their friendship and care.

From overseas: Bob Malone and Julie McClean for POP model output and model conversations; SEAMAT contributors; AVISO and WOCE data centres.

I have also to acknowledge financial support/scholarship from the Brazilian National Research Council to pursue a PhD in Australia (CNPq, 200412/97-3) and CSIRO Marine for its data centre, library facilities, additional financial support and, particularly, for the nice and warm working environment.

Closer to the heart, I am very grateful to my family, my family in-law, my devoted friends Cris, Dhesi, Pati and Meyre, and of course to my husband Claudio who has gone through lots for me to finish this very long PhD. The good news is that he knows how to cook dinner... and the food is good ! ... The bad news is that the PhD is finished but he is still cooking and putting up with the same grumpy old lady !

To everyone that has not been explicitly mentioned here but has made a difference and has contributed to make this thesis happen.

For the support/patience during the  
“low tides” and the laughs during  
the “high tides” ...

:o) THANK YOU !

## List of supporting publications

- Domingues, C. M., M. Tomczak, S. Wijffels, H. Beggs, and J. Church, 1999a: Direct observations of the Leeuwin Current at 22°S (August 1994 – June 1996). *Joint CSIRO (no. 235) and FIAMS/Flinders University (no.17) report*, 52 pp.
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