

The Agulhas Current

By Johann R.E. Lutjeharms, Springer, 2006, 330 pages, ISBN 103540423923, Hardcover, 129.95 €

REVIEW BY ARNOLD L. GORDON

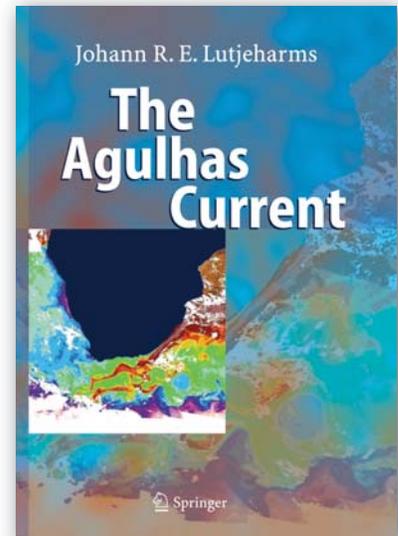
The ocean is composed of interlocking regions, each with their own unique characteristics and advocates. All are special and worthy of study for their own complex attributes, including their impacts upon local environmental conditions. Some ocean regions, in the wider community of oceanographers and climatologists, are viewed as more important than others in that they influence the larger scale, even the global ocean and its function in Earth's climate system. Each region responds to fluctuations in the large-scale wind and buoyancy-forcing fields across a wide range of time scales; a few feedback to these larger-scale fields, with far-a-field ramifications. Regional regimes may be centers of strong sea-air fluxes or conduits between larger ocean-circulation structures, such as between circulation gyres or between ocean basins, affecting the large-scale pattern of ocean temperature and salinity, ecosystems, and more exotic seawater properties. It is speculated that the behavior of a few regions might be enough to flip Earth's climate system into another mode, perhaps one associated with the shifts between glacial/interglacial climate.

Among these strategic regions is one that includes the strongest of the southern hemisphere subtropical western

boundary currents, the Agulhas Current system. Here, the subtropical gyres of the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans can, from time to time, join, linking and blending their properties across the southern rim of Africa. The South Atlantic subtropical gyre, when linked to its Indian cousin, is denied access to the low-salinity subpolar water streaming eastward along the circumpolar belt, thus altering the freshwater budget or salinity of the South Atlantic, a factor that has far-reaching effects on the deep-ocean overturning circulation associated with the northern North Atlantic (Weijer et al., 1999; Gordon, 2001). However, while large-scale consideration might draw one to these key regions, it is important to remember that these regions have their own intrinsic values and complexities (and impacts to the larger scale yet to be discovered).

While books and collections of articles in journals are devoted to specific regions, they often do not garner interest beyond the specialists of those regions. The Agulhas system is different, or at least should be (Gordon, 2003). It is the best example of a retroflection-type circulation, a pattern shared by other regions, such as the Brazil Current and the North Brazil Current. Because of the role of the retroflection pattern in the larger scale, every oceanographer might want to learn more of the Agulhas Current system. Johann R.E. Lutjeharms' book, *The Agulhas Current*, offers such an opportunity.

Lutjeharms does a remarkable job



of presenting the Agulhas to the wider community. His encyclopedic knowledge nicely draws together the many research studies devoted to the Agulhas Current system to produce an excellent, objective, and well-written analysis. While the topics are mainly those associated with the physical oceanography of the Agulhas, issues of climate, biological, and geological topics are included. Most appreciated are the gray, boxed inserts that offer aspects of the rich history of the explorers, ships, expeditions, and institutions contributing to the opening up of the Agulhas system to our consciousness. In these asides, we learn about the origin of the name “Agulhas” and of the term “retroreflection” as well as about Major James Rennell, “the pre-eminent pioneer of research on the Agulhas Current.” Another deals with a very pertinent question of paleo-climate importance: “How old is the Agulhas Current?” Evidently, an “Agulhas Current” following pretty much the path it does today was established five million years ago. Lutjeharms adds that “even though the leakage of Indian Ocean water is variable, over the past 450

kyr [450,000 years] it has always been present,” though bursts in its strength seem to be linked to the termination of glacial ages (Peeters et al., 2004) and to the resumption of a strong Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (Knorr and Lohmann, 2003), a result recently supported by Franzese et al. (2006).

Lutjeharms notes that textbooks as late as the 1970s had just a few paragraphs devoted to the Agulhas Current. The 2001 pdf version of *Regional Oceanography: An Introduction* by Matthias Tomczak and J. Stuart Godfrey (to download a copy, go to <http://www.es.flinders.edu.au/~mattom/regoc/index.html>) has five pages devoted to the Agulhas system, but still nothing like the 238 pages of text and figures of Lutjeharms’s book. The bibliography, arranged in traditional alphabetical order, consists of 24 pages. The listings referenced within the text and figures are identified with a sequential numbering system (826 entries in total), which then are listed in numerical order before the bibliography. There is a complete (34-page) name and subject index. The figures, largely drawn from other publications, many from Lutjeharms, include useful schematics that faithfully bring out the system’s form and complexities. Excellent satellite views of sea-surface temperatures further imprint upon the mind the very active and fascinating oceanography of the Agulhas Current system.

Lutjeharms shows a histogram of the number of Agulhas publications by year. Their explosion in the mid-1970s has been sustained at a more-or-less constant rate of 10 per year since 1980. I’m glad I came of age as an oceanographer in the 1960s when it was possible

to read all of the literature about nearly all oceanographic topics. I then grew up during the explosion of publications, so as to be able to absorb much of the evolving information at a gentle rate. I pity the students of today: How can they possibly catch up and keep pace with the hundreds of oceanographic papers published monthly? For this reason, well-prepared review articles and books are needed, such as Lutjeharms’s magnum opus. Of course, students still need to go to the originals to gather the details and nuances, but at least they can have a construct of the body of knowledge to build upon.

The book is dedicated to the memory of Günther Dietrich (1911–1972), whose Ph.D. thesis in 1935 (and subsequent journal publication) may have rekindled interest in the Agulhas (deferred by World War II—one of the gray boxes deals with pre-World War II German research on the Agulhas Current). It was Dietrich’s work that drew me to the Agulhas in 1983, particularly to investigate the Agulhas Retroflexion and adjacent South Atlantic. This work eventually led me to the consideration of the larger-scale role of the Agulhas through its leakage (of Indian Ocean water) into the Atlantic Ocean.

There are eight chapters in Lutjeharms’ book, which, after a large-scale description of the current’s setting, are discussed and arranged as the Agulhas water flows: from upstream to downstream. Each chapter concludes with a section of a different name (e.g., perspective, conclusions, synopsis, recapitulation). In Chapter 3 we are introduced to the varied streams and eddies feeding the northern Agulhas Current through

the Mozambique Channel and from the East Madagascar Current; then Chapters 4 and 5 take us to the jetlike boundary current pressed up along the southeast and southern margin of South Africa (waving a bit as a Natal Pulse goes by). Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the energetic loop of the Agulhas Retroflexion and the Agulhas Return Current, respectively. As the name suggests, the Agulhas Return Current returns most of the Agulhas water back into the Indian Ocean—“most” but not all. The Agulhas Retroflexion is not complete, as some Agulhas water leaks, mostly within large rings of the Agulhas Current that entrap pools of Indian Ocean water.

Lutjeharms comes to the Agulhas story as an insider, one who has focused his professional life on the pursuit of “knowing” the Agulhas as a regional system. In this way, he presents a story far richer in texture than just that of interocean exchange. In Chapter 8 Lutjeharms takes the well-deserved liberty of covering “The Greater Agulhas Current: Some Reflections,” with a wonderful opening paragraph: “In looking back over this historical development one is invariably tempted to read the past by the agendas of the present. The prevailing interest in inter-ocean exchanges and their effects on global ocean circulation is fundamentally motivated by contemporary concerns about climate change and climate variability. This was not the case when the main momentum in Agulhas Current studies was initiated.” That is, there is much more to a system than just the pieces that happen to be in vogue. Aspects of the Agulhas system will no doubt be rediscovered as our overall appreciation of its complexities evolves,

and as the author says, “This modern incentive has helped in lifting investigations on the Agulhas Current from a sphere of largely localised, parochial interests to one where the Agulhas Current system is instead seen in its more comprehensive role as a conduit for inter-ocean exchange of heat and salt. This wider perspective has had some distinct advantages, but may ultimately also have a few drawbacks.” Interesting.

Professor Johann R.E. Lutjeharms has produced a truly scholarly work, drawing from a multitude of research papers, many from his own pen, and presenting to us with clarity the complex oceanography of the Agulhas Current system, including its rich history of exploration, from the early days to the current research endeavors. There is more to be done, for sure, and it will be built upon the solid foundation of work accomplished by so many and skillfully reviewed within the pages of *The Agulhas Current*. Johann Lutjeharms indeed has met his objectives, as stated in the preface: “...to bring together and synthesise what has been learnt... More than this it should be a user-friendly key to unlocking the wealth of information scattered throughout the primary literature. These are the aims of this book.” Johann: On target and well done!

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