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Shepherd, A, Fricker, HA and Farrell, SL (2018) Trends and connections across the Antarctic cryosphere. Nature, 558 (7709). pp. 223-232. ISSN: 0028-0836

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-018-0171-6

Trends and connections across the Antarctic cryosphere

Andrew Shepherd[1*], Helen Amanda Fricker[2], Sinead Louise Farrell[3]

[1]Centre for Polar Observation and Modelling, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

[2]Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla CA 92093-0225.

[3]Earth System Science Interdisciplinary Center, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, 20740, USA

*Corresponding author, a.shepherd@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

After a century of polar exploration, recent satellite observations have painted an altogether new picture of how Antarctica is changing.

Satellite observations have transformed our understanding of the Antarctic cryosphere. The continent holds the vast majority of Earth's freshwater, and blankets huge swathes of the Southern Hemisphere in ice. Reductions in the thickness and extent of floating ice shelves have disturbed inland ice, triggering retreat, acceleration, and drawdown of marine terminating glaciers. The waxing and waning of Antarctic sea ice is one of Earth's greatest seasonal habitat changes, and although its

extent has increased modestly since the 1970s, variability is high, and there is evidence of longer-term decline.

Introduction

At the height of austral winter, Antarctica and the surrounding ocean are covered in a 31.6 million km^2 cap of ice (Fig. 1). Of this, ~18.5 million km^2 is formed as sea ice when the ocean freezes [1], 11.9 million km^2 is a near-permanent ice sheet resting on land or the sea floor [2], and 1.6 million km^2 is contained within long-lived ice shelves that are the floating extensions of the continental ice [3]. All of Antarctica's ice is mobile, driven by gravity and, where it is afloat, by the atmosphere and the ocean (Fig. 1). Each element plays a unique role in the climate system, for example the grounded ice is Earth's primary freshwater reservoir [4], the ice shelves are a major source of ocean fresh water [5], and the sea ice is an important factor in the planetary albedo [6].

The greatest fluctuation in the extent of ice cover in the Southern Hemisphere is due to the seasonal cycle of sea ice formation which is less than a metre thick on average [7], and reduces to one sixth of its peak area in summer [8]. The decadal trend in Antarctic sea ice extent has, nevertheless, been modest [9], and the most striking contemporary changes have occurred in other elements of the regional cryosphere. For example, the grounded ice sheet is estimated to have lost 2720 ± 1390 Gt of its mass between 1992 and 2017 [10], and its peripheral ice shelves are thinning in numerous sectors [3,11-13] and collapsing [14,15] at the Antarctic Peninsula. These trends reflect global and regional environmental forcing and are related through a variety of processes, each of which is now better understood thanks to the array of satellite observations that have been acquired over recent decades.

Here, we analyse the satellite record to examine continental and regional scale trends in the Antarctic cryosphere, including fluctuations in the extent, thickness, and movement of sea ice, ice shelves, and the grounded ice sheet. We show that spaceborne measurements have allowed key events in Earth's recent climate history to be charted in remarkable detail - including the collapse of ice shelves at the Antarctic Peninsula and the drawdown of glacier ice from West Antarctica - and have illuminated the key processes that are driving contemporary change.

Grounded ice

Fluctuations in the mass of the Antarctic ice sheet arise due to differences between the net snow accumulation and ice discharge. In recent decades, a variety of techniques have been developed to measure changes in the speed, elevation, and weight of the grounded ice. Airborne radar measurements show that the Antarctic ice sheet is up to 4897 m thick, and has the potential to raise global sea level by 58 metres were it to be rapidly discharged [4]. It overlies terrain of variable geology and relief, and this has influenced both its formation and its contemporary dynamics. The continental-scale pattern of ice flow was first inferred from cartographic [16] and, more recently, satellite altimeter [17] records of the ice sheet surface elevation. On this basis, it has been determined that most of Antarctica's ice is routed into the Southern Ocean through around 30 glaciers and ice streams (Fig. 1), each draining a substantial inland catchment [2].

Grounded Ice Imbalance

The stability of Antarctica's ice can be assessed by tracking the movement of its principal glaciers and ice streams. Although few in number, this task is nevertheless beyond the scope of ground surveys because they are vast. The first remote measurements of ice motion were made possible by repeat satellite optical imagery [18] and, subsequently, by synthetic aperture radar interferometry [19]. Thanks to step increases in the quantity of satellite image acquisitions over time, systematic surveys of ice flow across and around the continent have now been completed [20], revealing anomalous behaviour in much of Marie Byrd Land [21,22] and also at isolated sites at the Siple Coast [23], at the Antarctic Peninsula [24-26], and in East Antarctica [27,28]. In most of these places, the pace of ice flow has increased during the satellite era, and, when considered as a whole, the rate of ice discharge from Antarctica exceeds inland snow accumulation [29].

In addition to changes in ice discharge, fluctuations in ice sheet mass can be detected through satellite measurements of their volume [30-32] and gravitational attraction [33,34]. Although all three methods lead to similar results at the continental scale, each approach has its merits, and they are now viewed as being complementary. To date, there have been over 150 individual assessments of ice loss from Antarctica based on these approaches [35] and, when collated [10,36], these studies show that the continent has contributed 7.6 ± 3.9 mm to global sea levels since 1992. Almost half (3.0 ± 0.6 mm) of this loss occurred during the last 5 years [10]. While the rate of ice loss from the entire Antarctic ice sheet has changed little during the satellite record, the speedup of glaciers in the Amundsen Sea sector has led to accelerated losses from this region [37,38].

Satellite radar altimetry is an especially powerful tool for ice sheet glaciology, because the technique can be used to resolve the detailed pattern of imbalance across individual glacier catchments (e.g. [39]), around the much of the continent, with monthly sampling, and over multi-decadal periods (Fig. 2). This allows signals of short-term variability to be separated from longer-term trends. Although most of Antarctica has remained stable over the past 25 years, there are clear patterns of imbalance in many coastal sectors - for example thickening of the Kamb Ice Stream and thinning of glaciers flowing into the Amundsen Sea and at the Antarctic Peninsula. These changes reflect imbalance between ice flow and snow accumulation within the surrounding catchments. While the pace of ice flow at the Kamb Ice Stream is unusually low [40] and has not altered in recent decades, analysis of ice penetrating radar measurements [41] shows that it stagnated over a century ago. Elsewhere, inland glacier thinning is almost exclusively coincident with contemporaneous ice speedup [21,42,43], indicating that it is dynamic in nature, and with perturbations at their marine termini [44], indicating that it has resulted from ocean forcing.

Active subglacial Lakes

A surprising application of satellite observations has been monitoring the movement of water beneath the Antarctic Ice Sheet. Over three hundred subglacial lakes - bodies of liquid water at the ice sheet base - have been discovered in Antarctica (Fig. 1) using ice penetrating radar [45], and these were at first considered to be isolated and stable reservoirs. However, localised and episodic rises and falls of the ice sheet surface were then spotted in satellite interferometric [46] and altimetric records [47,48], suggesting otherwise. These fluctuations, amounting to 1 to 10 m height-changes over sub-decadal timescales, are interpreted to be the surface expressions of water transferring between active subglacial lake networks. More than a hundred active lakes have now been identified using this approach [49], and monitoring of their evolution has led to improved understanding of how Antarctic subglacial water systems evolve, and the consequences of this variability [50]. At the Whillans, Mercer, and Recovery ice streams, the Crane and Byrd Glaciers, and in eastern Wilkes Land, for example, more than a decade of satellite measurements have been acquired [51]. Thanks to these data, we now know that in addition to periodically flushing subglacial cavities, the presence of [52] and fluctuations in [27] subglacial lake water can lubricate ice flow in parts of the continent.

Ice Shelves

When Antarctic glacier ice reaches the ocean it often remains intact, forming floating ice shelves in sheltered embayments. Altogether there are more than 300 Antarctic ice shelves, fringing three quarters of the continent and extending the grounded ice area by some 13 % [4]. Their average thicknesses range from 300 m to 2500 m [53], and peak at the grounding line where they are fed by inland glaciers. Ice shelves can provide mechanical support for the grounded ice sheet upstream, through contact with confining side walls or sea mounts [54]. Downstream, they thin as the ice spreads, and they gain and lose additional mass primarily through snow accumulation, iceberg calving, and basal ice melting. Basal melting is driven by several processes [5] including the formation of high-salinity water during winter sea ice growth, tidal mixing of seasonally warm water, and the intrusion of warm ocean currents into sub-shelf cavities. Meteorological and oceanographic conditions can also lead to surface melting and basal ice freezing. In some cases, it can take more than a thousand years for ice to travel through Antarctic ice shelves from the grounding line to the calving front [55], and geological records show that they have been a persistent element of the climate system throughout the Holocene period (e.g. [56]). Their dependence on a wide range of factors makes ice shelves a sensitive indicator of environmental change [57].

Ice Shelf Imbalance

Trends in ice shelf area, thickness, and flow can be detected using a wide range of satellite sensors, and a host of other properties can be inferred from these measurements. Ice shelf area can be measured using optical and radar satellite imagery, and this has been used, for example, to chart long-term changes in their extent [14]. A series of satellite radar and laser altimeter missions have provided near-continuous observations of ice shelf surface elevation for several decades, and these have formed the basis of ice shelf thickness [58] and thickness change [3,11,59] estimates on the assumption that the ice is buoyant within the surrounding ocean. These estimates require careful treatment of fluctuations in ocean tide [13] and of changes in the firn column thickness [60]. When combined, measurements of ice shelf area and thickness change allow their volume and mass trends to be derived. Ice shelf flow can be monitored with repeat pass satellite optical [61] and radar [62] imagery and, if contemporaneous changes in both the flow and thickness of ice shelves are available, the rate of steady state [63] and net [12,64,65] basal ice melting can be determined.

Analysis of ice-shelf surface elevation measurements derived from multi-mission satellite altimetry (Fig. 2) has allowed their decadal mass change and principal environmental forcing mechanisms to be identified [3,11,59,66]. While the major Ross, Filchner-Ronne, and Amery ice shelves have remained stable since the 1990s, many ice shelves in West Antarctica have experienced long-term thinning during the same period. In the locations where retreat or thinning have occurred, the grounded ice inland has also been destabilised. The dominant control on this pattern is believed to be the presence (or absence) of warm ocean currents offshore [59]. Altogether, the volume of Antarctic ice shelves has declined through net overall thinning (166 ± 48 km^3 yr^{-1} between 1994 and 2012; [11]) and through progressive calving-front retreat of those at the Antarctic Peninsula (210 ± 27 km^3 yr^{-1} between 1994 and 2008; [3]). Combined, these losses amount to less than 1 % of their volume. However, the highest ice shelf thinning rates have occurred in the Amundsen and Bellingshausen Seas [12], where five have lost between 10 to 18 % of their thickness [11] due to ocean-driven melting at their bases [67]. The effects of the wider El Niño-Southern Oscillation have also been detected alongside these longer-term trends [66].

Ice shelf collapse

Ice shelves at the Antarctic Peninsula (Fig. 3) are especially vulnerable, because they are situated at the most northerly latitude on the continent, where temperatures are relatively high and summertime melting is common. In recent decades, a number of these ice shelves have disintegrated in part or entirely [14]. Notable examples include the substantial (>70 %) retreat of the Larsen B [15,68]) and Wilkins [69] ice shelves, and the effective collapse (>90 %) of the Prince Gustav Channel [70], Larsen-A [71], and Wordie [72] ice shelves. Since the 1950s, the combined area of Antarctic ice shelves lost through retreat and collapse has been 33,917 km^2 [14,73], or 22 % of their original extent. Analysis of the geological record [56,74] has confirmed that the collapse events are unique during the Holocene period.

The retreat and collapse of Antarctic Peninsula ice shelves has occurred in tandem with a rapid regional atmospheric warming happening at several times the global trend [57]. These events have been linked; warmer air temperatures lead to intensified surface melting [75] which is believed to cause hydraulic fracture of surface crevasses followed by ice shelf collapse [76]. Several Antarctic Peninsula ice shelves have also thinned in the decades leading up to their collapse [11,13,59], primarily through ocean driven melting at their base. This thinning may contribute to instability by weakening ice shelf lateral margins prior to fracture [77], and by enhancing rates of iceberg calving [78]. The relationship is, however, not universal; for example, although the Wilkins ice shelf collapsed in 2009, it did not thin in the preceding five years [79]. Indeed, recent satellite altimetry [80] shows that the surface elevation of Larsen C increased in the preceding decade, in response to cooler and not warmer summertime temperatures. And allthough the observational evidence suggests that stability of Antarctic ice shelves depends on both their thickness, geographical location or setting, the extent to which those that are partially or wholly intact will continue to resist collapse remains uncertain.

The collapse of ice shelves does not contribute directly to sea level rise, because they are afloat. However, there is an indirect effect: observations show that the grounded tributaries to the Larsen A [81] and B [15,68] ice shelves did speed in response to the removal of the floating ice, which is presumed to have offered resistance. To date, ice shelf retreat and collapse has been restricted to those situated at the Antarctic Peninsula, in relatively warm climates, and has not threatened those farther South which fringe the East and West Antarctic Ice Sheets. The largest recorded reduction in ice shelf area at the Antarctic Peninsula to date was the calving of the 11,095 km^2 A-68 tabular iceberg (Fig. 3) from the Larsen-C in 2016 [73]. However, this berg represented just 7 % of the ice shelf area, and was similar in size to one (A-20) that broke free in 1986 [82]. It is, therefore, not without precedent - even during the relatively short satellite era - and there is as yet no evidence that either breakaway disturbed the remaining ice shelf, or was anything other than routine iceberg production.

Buttressing of Grounded Ice

The term “buttressing” is used to describe the resistive forces imparted to a grounded ice sheet by its peripheral ice shelves. In its absence, rates of ice sheet discharge increase non-linearly with ice thickness, making the grounding lines of marine-based ice sheets difficult to stabilise because their bedrock tends to deepen inland [83]. Floating ice shelves can, however, exert drag as they flow over and around seamounts (pinning points) or as a result of their lateral confinement, and the extent to which this drag can mitigate unstable retreat has long been the subject of glaciological debate (e.g.

[54]). In recent years, the rapid response of Antarctic glaciers to the collapse and thinning of ice shelves at their termini has led to a reassessment of their resistive properties. At the Antarctic Peninsula, for example, glaciers flowing into the former Larsen-A, Larsen-B, and Wordie ice shelves have surged [24,68,84] after their collapse [14], as too have ice streams flowing into the Amundsen and Bellingshausen Seas [21,43] in the wake of ice shelf thinning [3,12,79] and grounding line retreat [85,86]. While the former events have been attributed to the destabilising effect of increased melting at the surface of ice shelves, following regional atmospheric warming [15,68], the latter are now firmly linked to enhanced ocean-driven melting at their base, due to the intrusion of warm circumpolar deep water into the cavities beneath them [67,87].

Although the reservoir of grounded ice at the Antarctic Peninsula is relatively modest [13], destabilisation of Amundsen Sea sector glaciers is a matter of considerable concern, because the pace of ice drawdown during the satellite era has been swift [88], and because they contain enough ice to raise global sea levels by more than a metre [4]. Over the past two decades, for example, surface lowering has spread inland across the drainage basins of the Pine Island and Thwaites Glaciers at speeds of between 5 and 15 km yr^{-1}, and the majority of their catchments are now in a state of dynamical imbalance (thinning due to accelerated flow). This rapid spreading is a consequence of several connected processes [89] (Box 1); ice shelf thinning leads to initial reductions in sidewall and basal traction at glacier termini, which then causes increased strain rates (flow) within the glacier ice upstream, followed by further grounding line retreat due to the associated ice thinning – especially in marine-based sectors of the continent. Glacier speedup may also lead to further reductions in sidewall traction through rifting and fracture, and grounding line retreat can expose more ice to the ocean melting responsible for the initial imbalance.

Glaciers flowing into the Amundsen Sea sector of West Antarctica are particularly susceptible to climate forcing, due to their geometrical configuration and the absence of any significant ice shelf barrier [90], and today the pace of ice sheet retreat along parts of this coastline dwarfs that during the

Holocene period. The region's ice shelves have thinned by 3 to 6 m/yr [11,12], and its glacier grounding lines have retreated by 10 to 35 km since 1992 [85,86] – 20 to 30 times the rate since the last glacial maximum according to analysis of the marine geological record [91]. In response to these perturbations, the grounded glaciers inland have sped up [21,43] and thinned [32,37] at accelerating rates. For example, since the early 1990s, rates of ice flow at the Pine Island Glacier terminus have increased by ~1.5 km/yr [43] and rates of ice thinning have risen to over 5 m/yr [88], and the sector overall contributed 4.5 mm to global sea level rise between 1992 and 2013 [38].

The forcing for these events is now widely regarded to lie in the surrounding ocean, because ice drawdown has originated at and evolved from the terminus of neighbouring but distinct ice flow units [42], and because warm [67] and warming [44] water is present within the cavities beneath their peripheral ice shelves. According to numerical simulations, the Pine Island and Thwaites Glaciers [92,93] may contribute a further ~4 mm to global sea levels over the 21st century in response to continued forcing, and it has been concluded [94] that the region is now undergoing marine ice sheet instability, with no geometrical obstacles to prevent irreversible decline. However, satellite observations have revealed that retreat of the Pine Island Glacier halted around 2011 [95,96], and that ice thinning inland abated in the following years [88]. This suggests that the situation is more complicated than a consideration of the glacier geometry alone, and may involve changes in the degree of ocean forcing, as has occurred in the recent past [87,97].

Sea ice

Antarctic sea ice forms as the Southern Ocean surface freezes, and interacts with the neighbouring ice shelves and grounded ice in many ways (e.g. Box 1). Satellite observations (e.g. Fig. 1) have allowed us to map its extent [8,98], thickness [99,100] and drift [101,102], providing insight into the role it plays in climate [6] and how it impacts on ecosystems [103]. In winter, Antarctic sea ice extends from an inner zone of consolidated pack ice surrounding the continent, to the marginal ice zone near to the powerful Antarctic Circumpolar Current, where floes are less concentrated (Fig.1 and Fig. 4). In summer, the sea ice pack retreats to isolated pockets fringing the continent. As it forms, Antarctic sea ice produces high-salinity shelf water when brine is rejected, which then sinks to the seabed. This water drives buoyant plumes within the cavities beneath floating ice shelves, which melt glacier ice at the grounding line, before returning to the open ocean along their base. Antarctic sea ice is also characterized by local polynyas – persistent gaps in the ice cover (e.g. Fig. 4) that are sustained by upwelling warm water, winds, tides, and ocean currents. These polynyas are a source of bottom water (dense water occupying depths typically below 4000 m), and provide a link between the ocean and atmosphere that affects weather and wildlife [103]. Land-fast sea ice can also act to stabilise ice shelves and glacier tongues [104], and to suppress [105] or – upon its breakup - enable [106] iceberg calving.

Sea ice extent and drift

Fluctuations in the area of Antarctic sea ice have been routinely charted since the late 1970s using passive microwave satellite imagery [8]. Annually, its average extent ranges from 3.1 x 10^6 km^2 in February to 18.5 x 10^6 km^2 in September [1] (e.g. Fig. 1). In contrast to the Arctic, where the area of sea ice has declined progressively [1], there has been a small, positive increase (1.6 $\pm$ 0.4 % per decade between 1979-2016) in the hemispheric sea ice extent of the Southern Ocean [9]. This trend runs counter to the projections of most climate models [107], and has occurred alongside a slow warming (0.02 ^{o}C per decade since the 1950s) of the Southern Ocean [108]. Despite the trend, there is some evidence of longer-term decline; reanalysis of early satellite records [109,110] and historical whale catch positions [111] suggest there may have been more ice cover in the 1960s and early 1970s than there is today. In recent years, however, extreme changes have occurred - the extent of Antarctic sea ice reached record maxima in three successive winters (2012, 2013, and 2014; [112]), followed by a record summertime minimum in March 2017 [113,114].

Changes in both atmospheric and oceanic forcing affect the extent of Antarctic sea ice [115,116], and although total hemispheric extent has shown little overall change, there have been considerable regional variations [117,118]. While the Weddell Sea, Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Ocean have all seen modest trends (1.7 $\pm$ 0.8 %, 1.7 $\pm$ 0.99 % and 1.8 $\pm$ 1.2 % decade^{-1}, respectively) in sea ice extent during the satellite era (1979-2016), there have been more substantial trends (3.3 $\pm$ 0.9 % and -2.9 $\pm$ 1.4 % decade^{-1}, respectively) in the Ross Sea and Amundsen and Bellingshausen Seas [9]. The periods during which the Western Ross and Bellingshausen Seas are ice free in summer have also changed, decreasing and increasing by two and three months, respectively, between 1979 and 2011 [118]. Seasonal and decadal trends in the Weddell and Ross Seas (positive) and the Amundsen-Bellingshausen Sea and Western Pacific Oceans (negative) reflect the influence of atmospheric forcing [119]. Although these fluctuations in sea ice extent are strongly correlated with the dominant modes of Southern Hemisphere climate variability [117,119], other factors are involved [120]. A range of mechanisms have been explored, including changes in oceanic variability [121], atmospheric circulation [122,123], stratospheric ozone depletion [124], meridional wind forcing [102], and freshwater input from ice-shelf melt [125,126].

Understanding the role sea ice plays in the Antarctic climate system also requires a consideration of its dynamics [127]. In the Southern Ocean, sea ice drifts northwards and diverges under the influence of winds and ocean currents (Fig. 1), and the fraction of open water is higher than in the Arctic [128]. Satellite observations have illuminated both local-scale [129,130] and hemisphere-wide [101,102,131] Antarctic sea ice dynamics. Strong, circumpolar, westerly winds drive sea ice eastwards in the outer zonal band, while a nearly-continuous westward circumpolar flow exists along the coastal boundary [101]. Persistent atmospheric lows centered at the boundaries of major ocean basins are the dominant drivers of sea ice motion, and these sustain large-scale gyres in the Weddell and Ross Seas [132]. The speed of sea ice drift in the eastern Weddell and Ross Seas has increased, in contrast to the western Weddell Sea where it has decreased [102,132], though these signals are still small compared to the interannual variability [101]. The general northward trajectory of the Antarctic sea ice pack also impacts on its age and thickness; rarely does it survive for more than two years, and the average thickness of floes (typically in the range 0.6 to 1.2 m) and pressure ridges are smaller than in the Arctic Ocean [7]. Locally, katabatic winds, tides, and ocean currents sustain coastal polynyas through sea ice drift around the continent (e.g. Fig. 4), providing a link between the sea ice pack and the ice sheet through their initiation of plumes beneath floating ice shelves [133].

Summary and Outlook

In just three decades, satellites have transformed our appreciation of the extent and pace of change in the Antarctic cryosphere. Despite being remote, fluctuations in its ice cover have a global impact. The continent holds Earth's primary freshwater reservoir [4] and, together with its surrounding ice shelves [3] and sea ice [1], blankets 6 % of the planet in ice during austral winter. Although persistent ice shelves have fringed Antarctica for thousands of years [56], there is now widespread evidence of changes in their extent [14] and thickness [3,11]. Altogether, their volume has decreased by more than 300 km^3 yr^{-1} since 1994 [3,11], notably due to collapse and calving at the Antarctic Peninsula and rapid thinning of those in the Amundsen and Bellingshausen Seas. These events have triggered retreat [85,86] and acceleration [21,43] of marine terminating glaciers and ice streams around the continent, leading to the drawdown of ice from their inland catchments [39,42]. Since 1992, the grounded ice sheet has lost 1350 ± 1010 Gt of ice, causing a net 3.8 ± 2.8 mm contribution to global sea level rise [36]. The waxing and waning of Antarctic sea ice influences the planetary albedo, oceanic circulation, marine productivity, and ecosystems [6,103]. Although its extent has increased by 1.6 ± 0.4 % per decade since 1979 [9], there are significant regional variations [9,117,118], and there is evidence from historical records [109-111] of a longer-term decline. These discoveries, and many more, have transformed our understanding of the state of Antarctic ice.

Even though considerable progress has been made during the satellite era, key questions remain unanswered. For example, the detailed pattern of glacier change at the Antarctic Peninsula is not well known, because the rugged terrain poses a challenge for traditional remote sensing methods. Though modest, the mass balance of the East Antarctic Ice Sheet nevertheless remains uncertain, because its detection is complicated by uncertainties in rates of snowfall and glacial isostatic adjustment. And the evolution and impacts of abrupt subglacial lake drainage events is poorly defined, because frequent measurements of ice elevation and flow changes are often lacking at the local scale. But understanding the thickness of sea ice across the Southern Hemisphere and the nature of ice shelf collapse and retreat are pressing concerns. While the range of parameters that can now be measured on grounded ice and on ice shelves may be considered comprehensive, available satellite observations are insufficient to fully understand the nature and evolution of the processes that are driving contemporary imbalance. Although the satellite altimeter record has been used to resolve Southern Ocean dynamics, determining sea ice thickness - a key measure of its volume and longevity - from measurements of its freeboard (the portion protruding above the ocean surface) are hampered by poor knowledge of snow loading and its impact on the satellite retrieval.

In the case of Antarctic sea ice, uncertainties in the degree of radar penetration into the snowpack [134,135] has so far limited the use of the 25-year radar altimeter record for measuring its thickness. Some advances have been made using laser altimetry [99,100], which scatters from the surface of the overlying snow, but continental-scale trends in Antarctic sea ice thickness and volume nevertheless remain elusive due to the paucity of in situ measurements. One way to tackle this problem is to exploit the relationship between the amount and roughness of snow on sea ice and its total thickness [136], an approach that may be realised with the launch of ICESat-2 which has a laser capable of detecting surface roughness and thickness [137,138]. Another possibility is to combine freeboard measurements retrieved from different scattering horizons to estimate the snow load directly, for example using observations acquired by the CryoSat-2 Ku-band and ALtiKa Ka-band radar altimeters

[139,140], and, in the future, ICESat-2. New techniques are also emerging to map the extent, type, age, drift, and roughness of sea ice with fine resolution using synthetic aperture radar imagery.

Over land ice, the record of ice sheet motion data is too sparse to determine whether changes in flow have occurred on sub-annual timescales across much of the continent. For example, the record of ice sheet motion data is too sparse to determine whether changes in flow have occurred on sub-annual timescales across much of the continent. On this point, the outlook is promising thanks to the systematic acquisition plans of the Sentinel-1 synthetic aperture radar and Landsat-8 optical imager missions. A key unanswered science question is how long it will take for the ice shelves that are currently thinning to reach a point whereby they are no longer providing effective buttressing for the grounded ice inland. To address this, observations are required with sufficient frequency to track the events themselves which, in the case of ice shelf collapses, have taken place over months or even days [14]. Although it is possible to monitor grounding line migration with high precision using synthetic aperture radar interferometry [85,86], the revisit period of satellite missions is currently too long for the technique to be effective over rapidly deforming ice, and so other methods - such as repeat satellite altimetry [141] - will need to be exploited to track this precursor to ice sheet dynamical imbalance.

The past decade has been a golden era for satellite glaciology, with a host of different sensors in orbit, simultaneously. However, measuring ice loss from Antarctica at the continental scale is today heavily reliant upon a single ageing mission - CryoSat-2 - which, at 8 years old, is now more than double its planned lifetime, and the continuity of passive microwave observations of sea ice concentration and extent remains uncertain. Given the societal importance of changes in ice cover and global sea level, this situation carries considerable risk, and the next generation of satellite sensors are eagerly awaited.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the UK Natural Environment Research Council's Centre for Polar Observation and Modelling (cpom300001) and the European Space Agency's Climate Change Initiative. AS was supported by a Royal Society Wolfson Research Merit award. SLF was supported under NASA grant 80NSSC17K0006 and NOAA grant NA14NES4320003. We thank T. Slater, A. Ridout, and L. Gilbert for their help in preparing Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, and K. Duncan for help in preparing Fig. 4.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Figures and tables

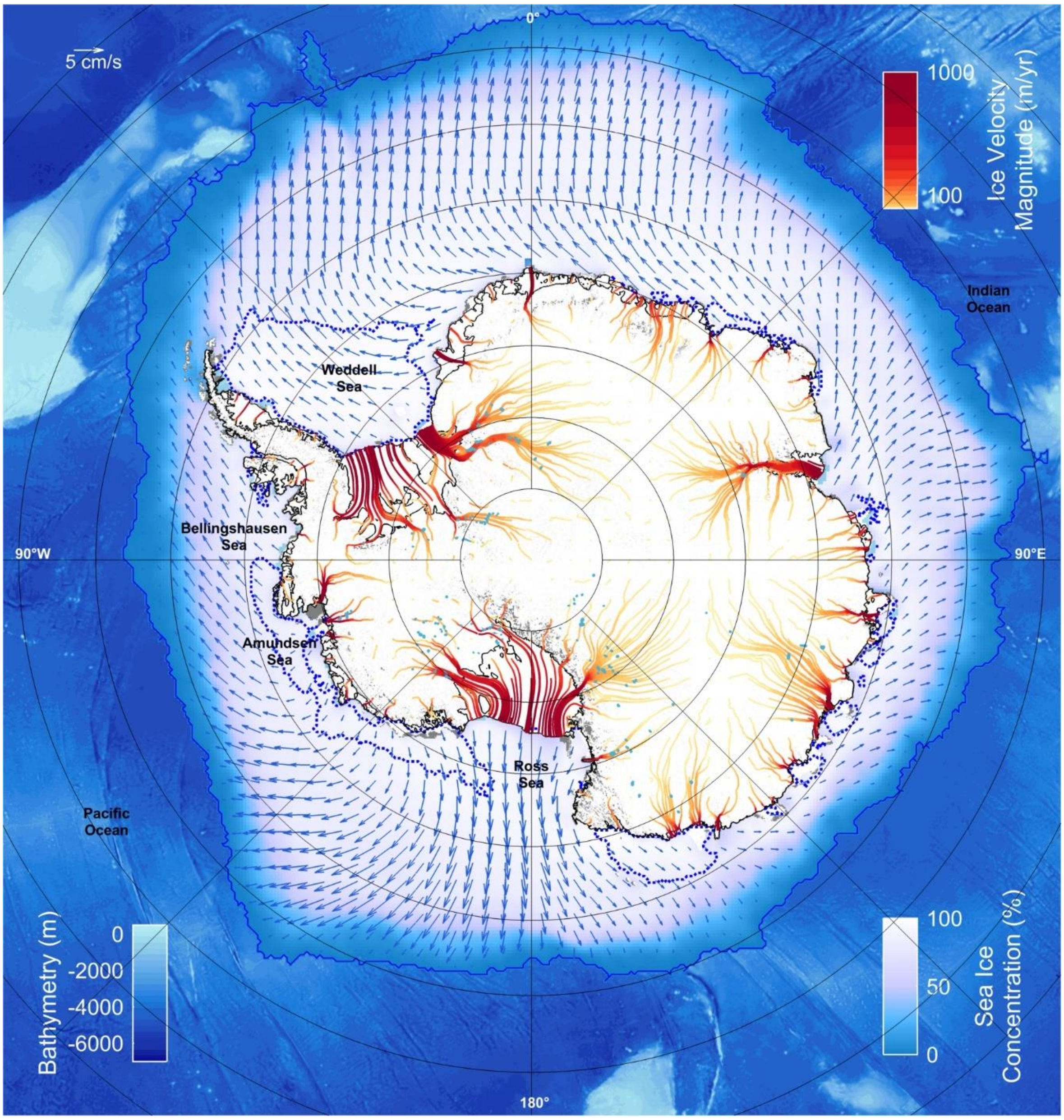


Figure 1. Average annual motion of the Antarctic ice sheet and ice shelves, and of the surrounding sea ice in winter. The ice sheet is drained by around 30 principle flow units and the sea ice transport is generally northwards, with gyres in the Ross and Weddell Seas. Grounded ice and ice

shelf motion are derived from multiple satellite interferometric synthetic-aperture radar data acquired between 2007 and 2009 [20]. Ice sheet motion flowlines are superimposed on the MODIS mosaic of Antarctica [142]. Sea ice motion is the mean of daily gridded Polar Pathfinder radiometry obtained during peak winter (September) of each year in the period 1990 to 2016 [143]. Sea ice motion vectors are superimposed on a map of mean sea ice concentration derived from passive microwave brightness temperatures in September between 1990 to 2016 [144]. Also shown (blue dashed boundaries) are the average minimum extent of sea ice recorded between 1990 to 2016 [144], the grounded ice sheet and the floating ice shelves (black boundaries), and the bathymetry of the surrounding ocean [145]. Active subglacial lakes (light blue) were mapped using satellite radar and laser altimetry [51].

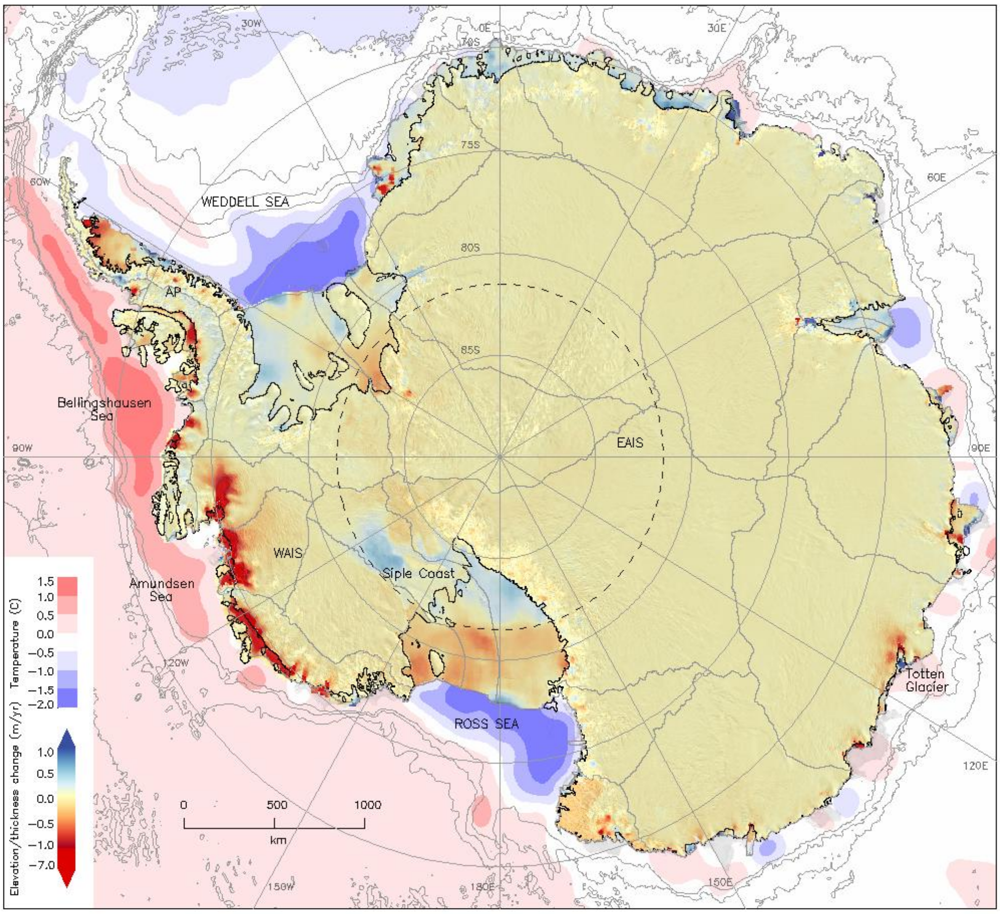


Figure 2. Average trend in the elevation and thickness of Antarctic grounded ice and ice shelves, respectively, determined between 1992 and 2017 North of 81.5°S (dashed grey circle), and between 2010 and 2017 elsewhere. Also shown is the depth of [146] and estimated ocean temperature at [147] the sea floor around the continent. Changes in grounded ice and ice shelf thickness were estimated using repeat satellite altimetry following the methods of [36], [148], and [3]. Thickness trends are superimposed on an optical image mosaic of the floating and grounded ice [142], and is divided (grey lines) into the principle ice drainage catchments [2]. Since 1992, the grounded ice sheet and its peripheral ice shelves have thinned in locations adjacent to warm ocean currents. Although the East Antarctic ice sheet is mostly stable, there have been marked

changes in West Antarctica, including accelerated thinning of glaciers draining the Amundsen Sea sector and constant thickening in southerly catchments of the Siple Coast. While the former is a response to ocean-driven melting of ice shelves at glacier termini [12], the latter is associated with stagnation of ice flow due to a loss of basal lubrication [149]. At the Antarctic Peninsula, ice shelf collapse (Cook and Vaughan, 2010) has triggered inland glacier acceleration [25,68] and thinning [15].

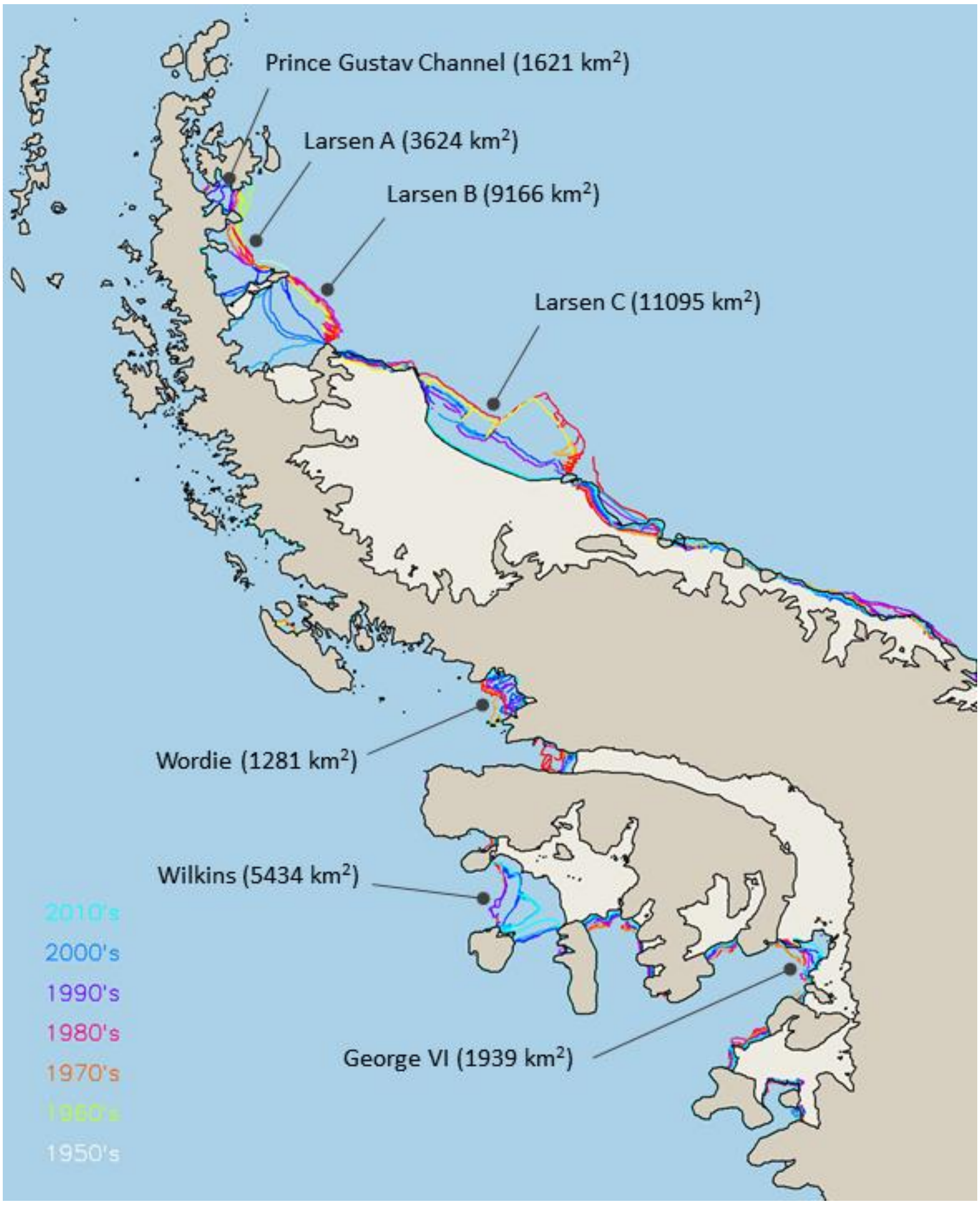


Figure 3. Temporal changes in the location of ice shelf barriers at the Antarctic Peninsula (coloured lines) as determined from satellite imagery since the 1950s, and their net reduction in area over the same period (numbers in brackets) [14,73]. The reduction in area at Larsen-C includes the recent calving of the A-68 tabular iceberg. In the 1950s, the total area of Antarctic Peninsula ice shelves was estimated to be 152,246 km^2. Since then, an area of 33,917 km^2 has been lost during episodic calving events.

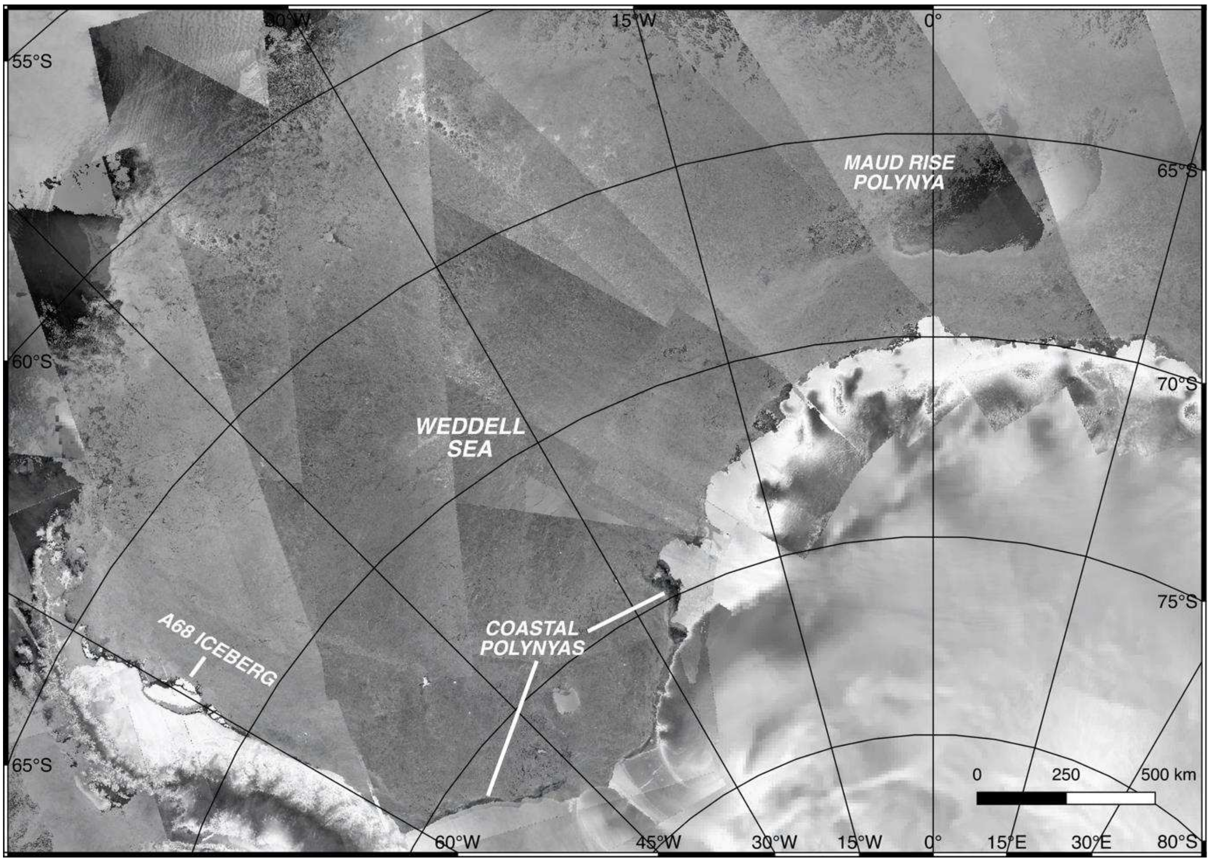


Figure 4. Sea ice in the Weddell Sea in early November 2017, based on a composite of Sentinel-1

synthetic aperture radar imagery, MODIS optical satellite imagery, and ASCAT scatterometer data. The satellite data were acquired during Austral winter when the ice cover is close to its maximum extent, stretching beyond the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula into Drake Passage. The composite reveals details of the diffuse ice cover in the marginal ice zone along the boundary with the open ocean, and the more compact, consolidated ice cover farther south. A large, ~35,000 km^2 ice-free area is visible near Maud Rise (66S, 5E); this polynya is formed by thermally-driven convection in the water column, due to the interaction of ocean currents and sea floor topography. Coastal polynyas are visible along the edges of the Filchner-Ronne, Brunt and Stancombe-Willis Ice Shelves, where openings in the ice cover are driven by katabatic wind, tides, and ocean currents. New sea ice, which rejects brine during formation, is continually produced in these polynyas, making polynyas a source of dense, high salinity deep water which plays an important role in the global thermohaline circulation. Also visible is the large, tabular A68 iceberg (located ~68S, 60.5W) which calved from Larsen C Ice Shelf on 12 July 2017, and is now adrift in the western Weddell Sea.

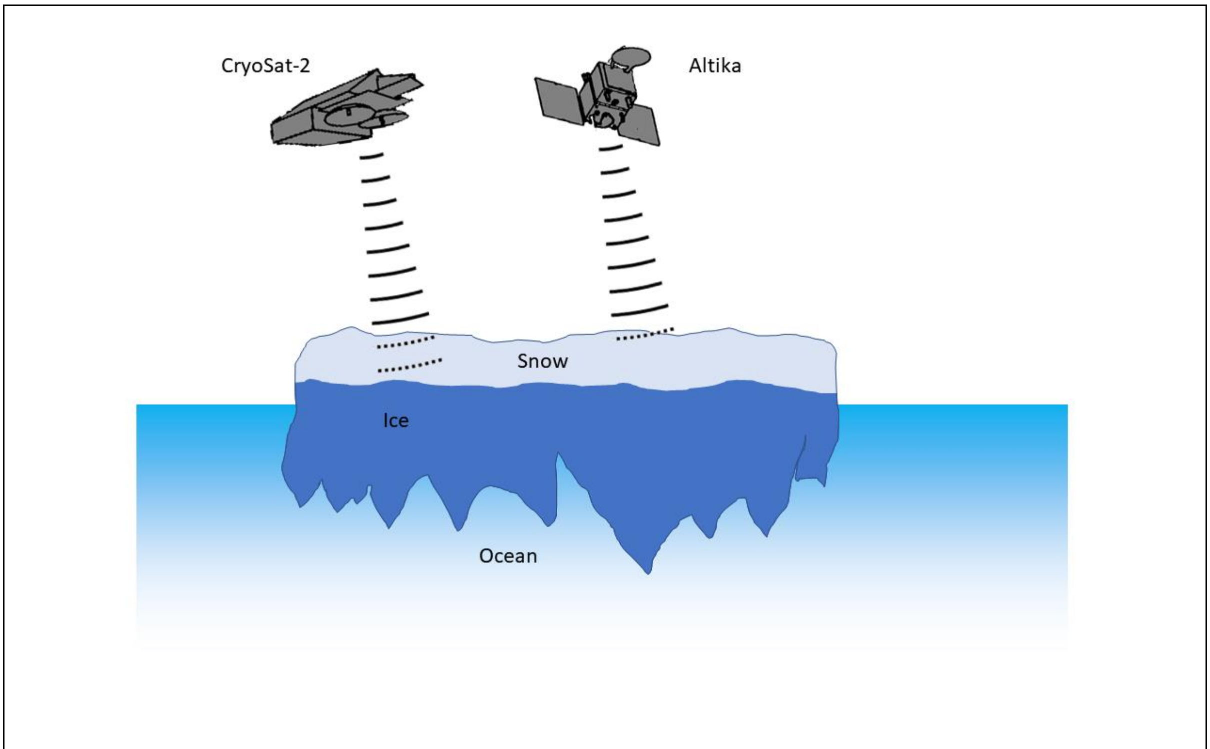
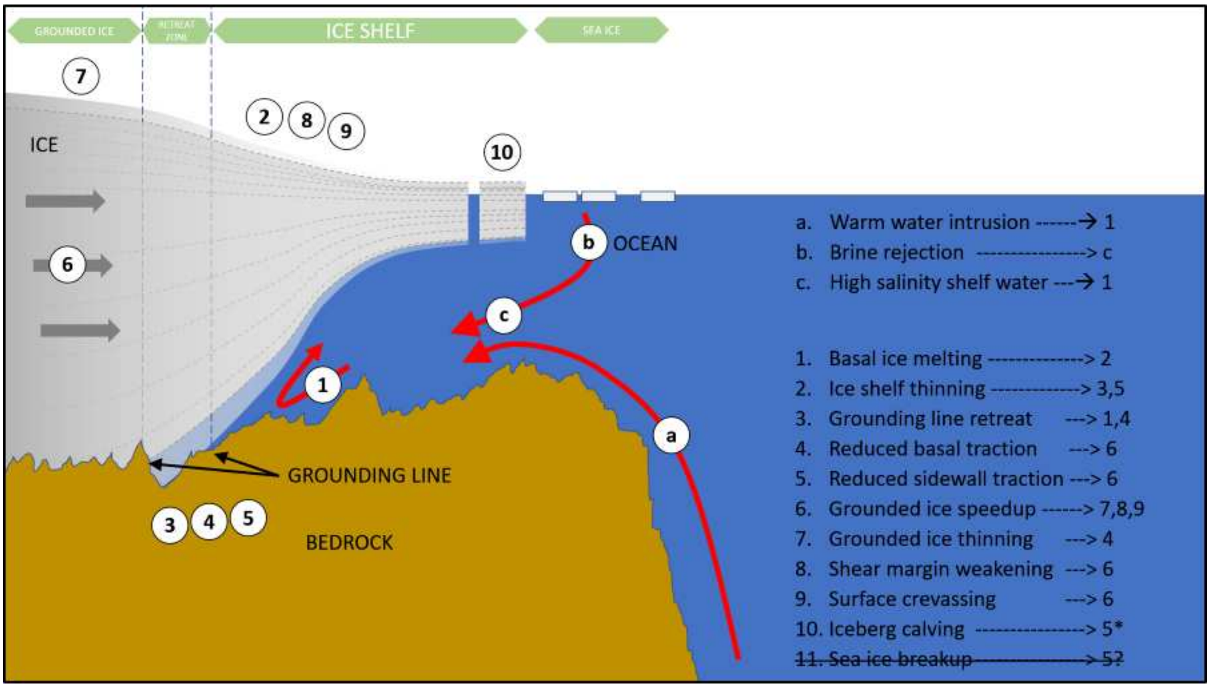


Figure 5. Schematic of a sea ice floe as observed by CryoSat-2 and AltiKa. Floe thicknesses are typically derived from measurements of their freeboard (the portion protruding above the ocean surface), an estimate of the snow loading, and the principal of buoyancy [99]. CryoSat-2 and AltiKa operate at different radar frequencies, and their echoes scatter from locations near to the lower and upper boundaries of the snow layer, respectively [139,140]. Measurements acquired at both frequencies could provide a direct measurement of the snow loading, improving the certainty of sea ice floe thickness estimates.

Box 1



Box 1. Ice shelf buttressing processes (points 1-10) associated with external forcing (points a-c), and their connectivity. Ice shelves are floating sheets of ice that form as glaciers spread out into the ocean, typically within confined embayments. They are permanently attached to the grounded ice sheet resting on land, and accumulate snow at their surface and, occasionally, frozen ocean water at their base. If warm water enters the ocean cavity beneath an ice shelf (a) it can drive increased basal

ice melting (1) and ice shelf thinning (2), which in turn leads to retreat of the grounding line (3) – the junction between grounded and floating ice on the seafloor. Ice shelf thinning reduces sidewall (lateral) traction (4) and grounding line retreat reduces basal traction (5). Both processes lead to speedup of the grounded ice (6), which causes grounded ice thinning (7). Glacier speedup can also lead to weakening of lateral shear margins (8) and increased crevassing (9). Iceberg calving (10) can also lead to reduced sidewall traction. Sea ice (frozen sea water) can play a role, through brine rejection (b) which drives the production of warm high salinity shelf water (c), and by effectively reducing traction on ice-shelf breakup (1).

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