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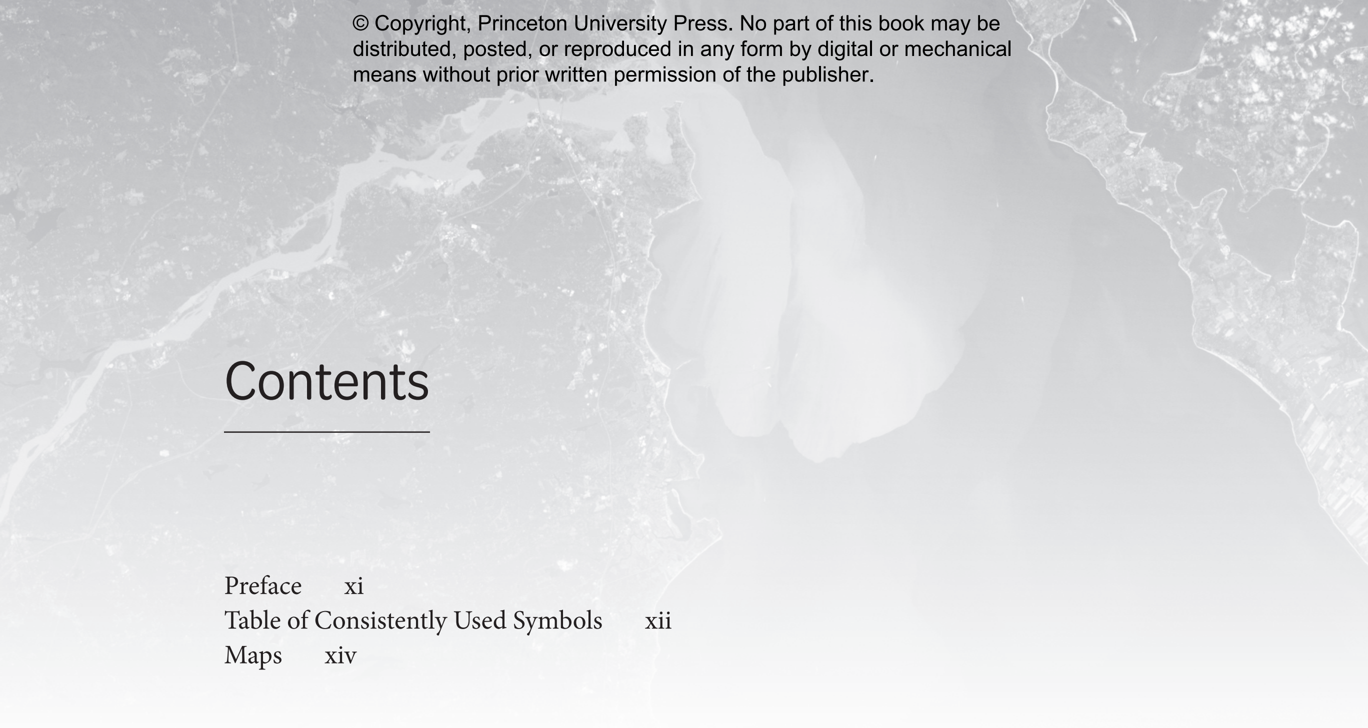

Contents

Preface xi
Table of Consistently Used Symbols xii
Maps xiv

1 Introduction 1

1.1. What Does "Coastal" Mean? 1
1.2. Why Is the Coastal Ocean Important? 1
1.3. What Makes the Coastal Ocean Different? 6
1.4. The Common Theme: Cross-Shelf Exchange 8

2 Some Basic Concepts 9

2.1. Introduction 9
2.2. The Setting 9
2.3. Turbulence 11
2.4. Some Frequently Used Approximations 17
2.5. Evaluating Ocean Observations 20

3 Boundary Layers 24

3.1. Introduction: Where the Ocean Meets the Atmosphere and the Bottom 24
3.2. Some Simple Results: Surface Boundary Layer 26
3.3. Some Simple Results: Bottom Boundary Layer 29
3.4. Ekman Compatibility Condition 30
3.5. The Surface Mixed Layer 32
3.6. The Bottom Boundary Layer with a Flat Bottom 38
3.7. The Bottom Boundary Layer over a Sloping Bottom 43
3.8. Conclusion 48

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4 Two-Dimensional Models of Wind Forcing 50

4.1. Introduction: Coastal Upwelling 50
4.2. Governing Equations for a Barotropic Ocean 53
4.3. Midshelf Response to Wind Forcing 56
4.4. Inclusion of Moderate Density Stratification 58
4.5. An Extreme Idealization 61
4.6. Nonlinear Effects 63
4.7. Conclusion 67

5 Waves in the Coastal Ocean 68

5.1. Introduction: Responses to Distant Forcings 68
5.2. An Unbounded, Rotating, Homogeneous, Flat-Bottom Ocean 69
5.3. A Rotating, Homogeneous, Flat-Bottom Ocean with a Coastal Wall 73
5.4. Including Density Stratification with a Flat Bottom 74
5.5. Barotropic Waves over Shelf-Slope Topography 79
Edge Waves 79
Continental Shelf Waves 82
5.6. Coastal-Trapped Waves with Stratification and Shelf-Slope Topography 84
5.7. The Coastal Long-Wave Approximation and Wind Forcing 90
5.8. Solving for Large-Scale, Wind-Forced Motions 97
5.9. Some Coastal-Trapped Wave Applications 101
Hindcasts 101
Stochastic Models 102
Tides on the Shelf 103
5.10. Circular Geometries 104
5.11. The Steady Barotropic Limit 104
5.12. Superinertial Motions: What the Coastal Long-Wave Approximation Misses 106
5.13. Conclusion 107

6 The Inner Shelf 108

6.1. Introduction: Where Surface and Bottom Conditions Interact 108
6.2. Boundary Layers in Shallow Water 109
6.3. Nonhydrostatic Gravity Waves 116
6.4. Wind and Wave Forcing 121
6.5. Cross-Shelf Transport on the Inner Shelf 123
6.6. Perspective 125

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7 Tides in the Coastal Ocean 127

7.1. Introduction: Continual Forcing and Responses 127
7.2. Background: Forcing and Frequencies 128
7.3. Generation of Tides on the Shelf 135
7.4. Tidal Rectification 139
7.5. Tidal Mixing and Fronts 140
7.6. Internal Tides 143
7.7. Topographic Effects 149
7.8. Conclusion 150

8 Freshwater Outflows 151

8.1. Introduction: Where Runoff from Land Encounters the Ocean 151
8.2. Estuaries 153
8.3. Generating an Alongshore Flow: The Bulge 154
8.4. The Buoyancy Current 156
8.5. Wind Forcing 162
8.6. Turning It Upside Down: Negative Buoyancy 164
8.7. Conclusion 166

9 Instabilities 167

9.1. Introduction: Growth of Disorder over the Shelf 167
9.2. A Framework 167
9.3. Coastal Upwelling Front 172
9.4. Other Wind-Driven Cases 174
9.5. Shelf Break Front 178
9.6. Buoyancy Currents 178
9.7. Western Boundary Currents 179
9.8. Wintertime Cooling 181
9.9. Tidal Mixing Fronts 182
9.10. Surf Zone 184
9.11. Conclusion 184

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10 Relation to the Open Ocean 187

10.1. Introduction: Constraints on Shelf-Ocean Coupling 187
10.2. Time-Dependent Processes 190
  Tides and Higher Frequencies 190
  Equatorial Processes 190
  Midlatitudes 193
10.3. Frictional Effects 194
10.4. Nonlinearities 195
10.5. Sea Level and Climate Change 199
10.6. Conclusion 201

11 Perspective 203

11.1. Introduction 203
11.2. Observational Capabilities 203
11.3. Dynamical Concepts 205
11.4. Numerical Models 206
11.5. Processes 207

Appendix 209

Exercises 211
Glossary 221
References 227
Index 241

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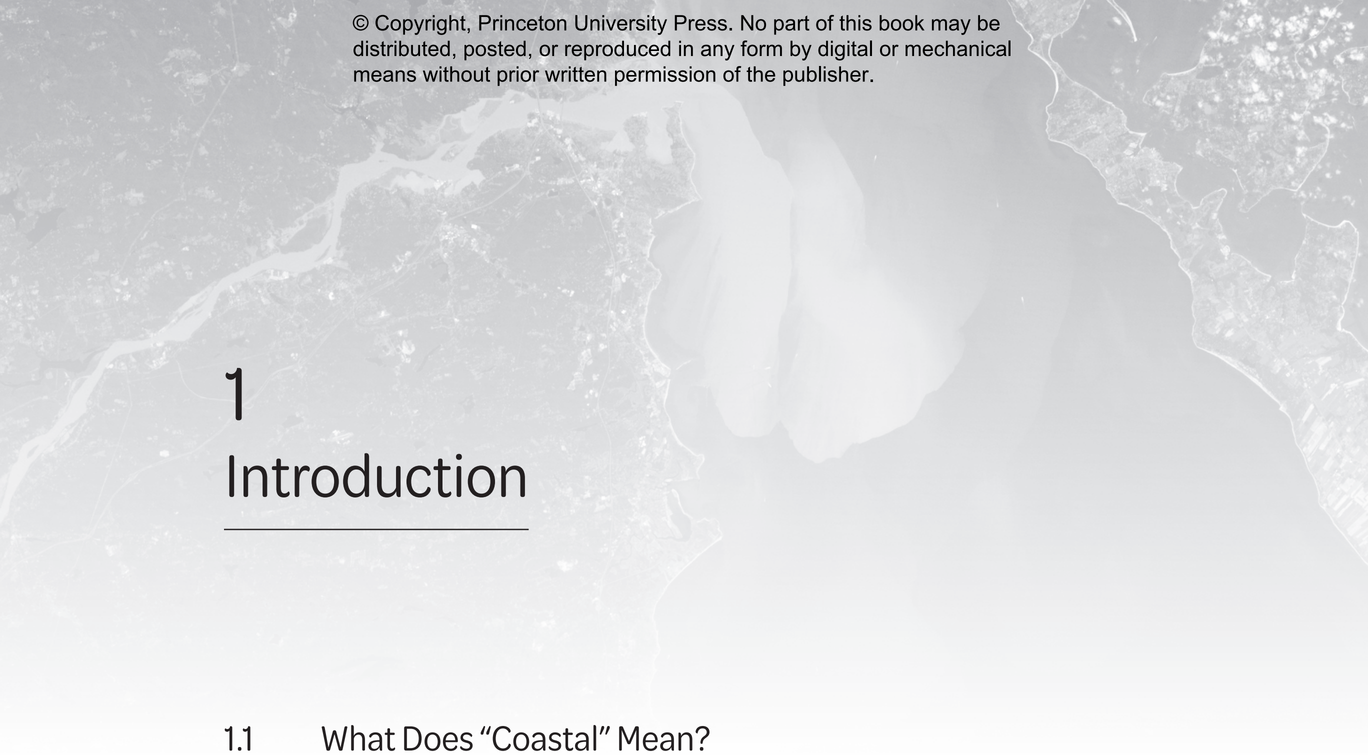

1

Introduction

1.1 What Does "Coastal" Mean?

There are many good definitions of the coastal ocean. An inclusive one might be: all the salty water adjoining continents and islands where the water is shallower than some arbitrary depth, like 1000 m. This definition would include estuaries, the surf zone, continental shelves, and continental slopes, but it needs to be supplemented by the inclusion of large enclosed freshwater bodies, such as the Laurentian Great Lakes, as coastal as well. Chapter 2 provides more detail on terminology, but, for now, the two important threads are proximity to land and the occurrence of large fractional depth changes.

1.2. Why Is the Coastal Ocean Important?

The coastal ocean, because it adjoins land, is the most visible and heavily used part of the world's ocean. Most people may never see the deep open ocean aside from perhaps through an airplane window. Given its proximity to land, the coastal environment is used heavily for recreation (swimming, boating, diving, fishing) and enjoyed aesthetically. People are particularly aware of the coastal environment.

This nearness to land also imposes a good deal of pressure on the coastal ocean. For a range of reasons, human populations concentrate near the coast (Figure 1.1). In the United States, 39% of the population lives in counties that adjoin the ocean, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and the number is substantially higher when land adjoining the Great Lakes is included. Globally, according to NASA, 40% of the population lives within 100 km of the ocean. Thus, settlement patterns concentrate both the observers and stressors of the coastal environment.

The connection to land extends well beyond coastal settlements, however. Rivers drain much of the world's continental surface into the ocean. The outflow waters carry sediments (Figure 1.2), an assortment of dissolved chemicals, and other materials. Humanity, of course, can affect any of these quantities, for example, through agricultural practices, damming, and waste disposal.

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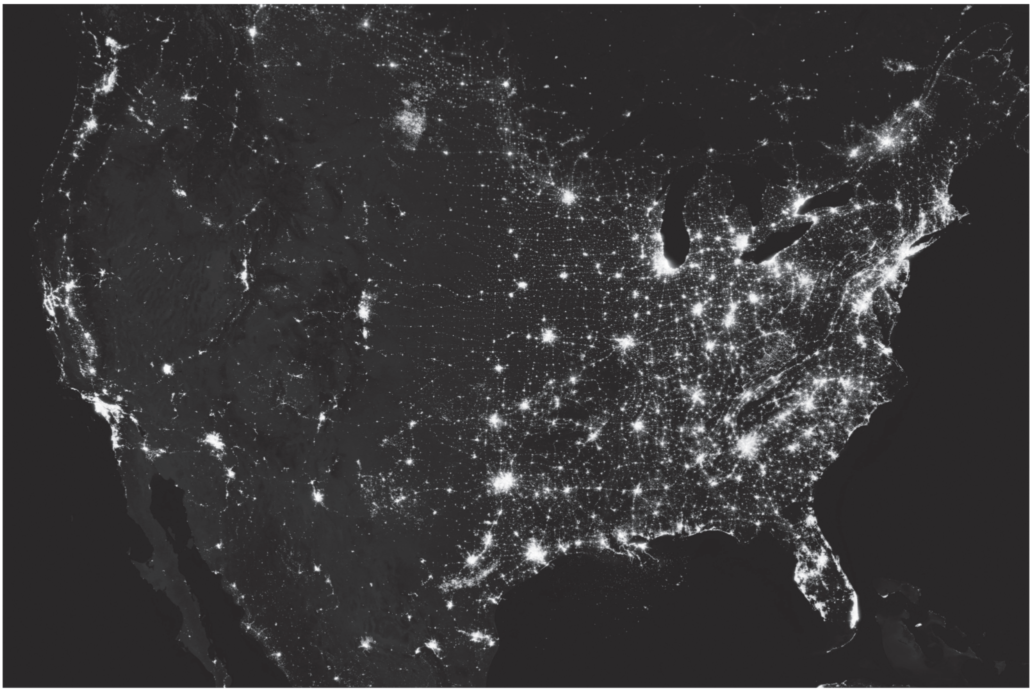

FIGURE 1.1. View of the United States at night: a composite of nighttime images from 2012. The lighting, which reflects population levels, distinctly outlines the coastline around much of the United States. From NASA Earth Observatory/ NOAA NGDC.

Some people call the coastal environment "the dirty little bathtub ring around the world's ocean." There is, in fact, a good deal of truth to this quip. The coastal ocean is very productive biologically for several reasons, some of which will be explained in the following chapters. Figure 1.3 shows a long-term average estimate of chlorophyll concentration in the upper ocean. Chlorophyll is a commonly used proxy for the concentration of the microscopic plants (*phytoplankton*) that are the base of ocean food chains. The important point in this figure is that the highest concentrations (light shades) all occur in the coastal ocean. The pale bands along the equator are an expression of processes analogous to (but more diffuse than) those acting near a coast. Viewed from a ship, the biologically productive waters often look green, brown, or blackish (that dirty bathtub ring), while beautiful Mediterranean-blue waters are actually an expression of the relative absence of life and are more representative of midocean conditions (the darker shades in Figure 1.3) than coastal ones. When phytoplankton are plentiful, the food web is stimulated even up to the level of fish, so it is no surprise that many of the world's most productive fisheries (such as for anchovies off Peru) are in the coastal ocean. Palomares and Pauly (2019), for example, estimated that the coastal ocean accounts for 55% of the global fish catch even though it represents only 3% of the ocean surface.

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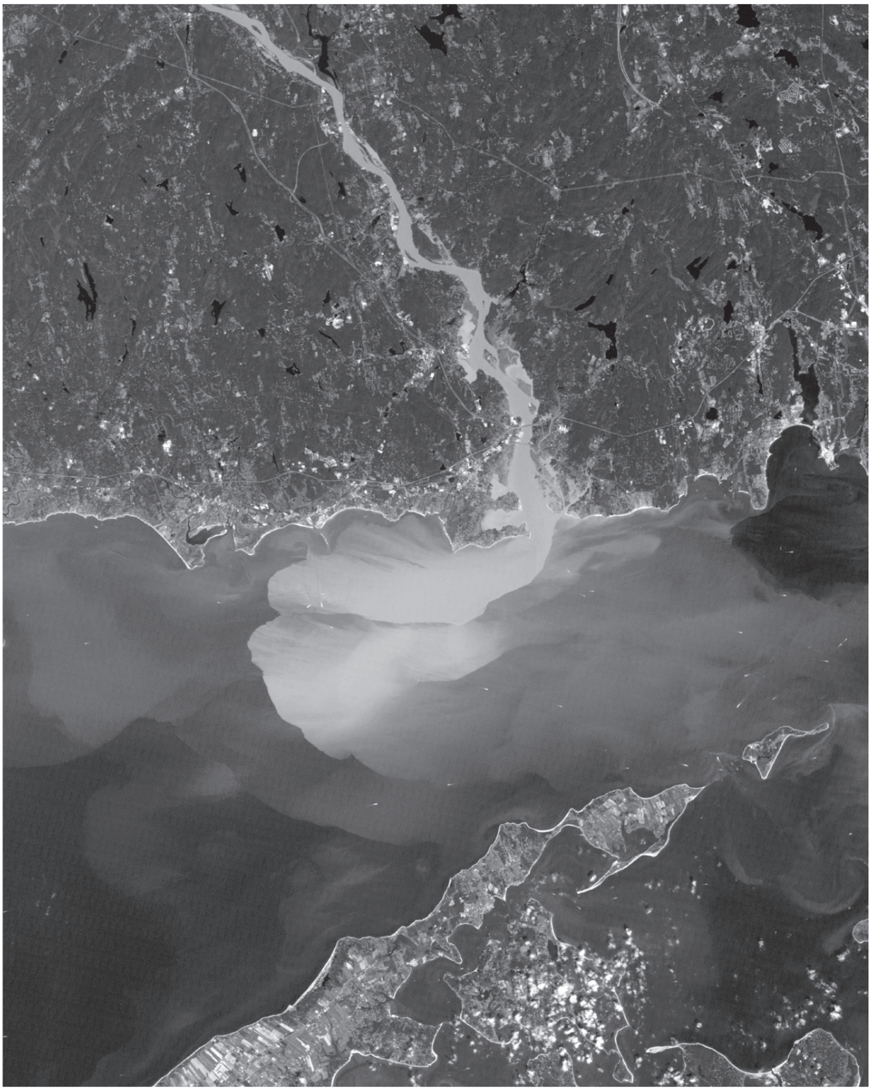

FIGURE 1.2. Daytime visual satellite image of the Connecticut River outflow during a flood stage after a hurricane (September 11, 2011). The river's suspended sediments make the muddy outflow plume quite visible as lighter shades. The outer part of Long Island is in the lower part of the image. NASA Earth Observatory image by Robert Simmon, using *Landsat 5* data from the US Geological Survey.

The abundance of coastal fisheries is not simply a matter of plentiful phytoplankton. Rather, fish need to find their prey (smaller animals), and these need to find their prey, and so on, through the food web. The locations and movements of all the levels of predator and prey are, of course, mitigated by currents and mixing. In the extreme, fish eggs generally drift entirely at the mercy of the physical setting. The success of a species depends

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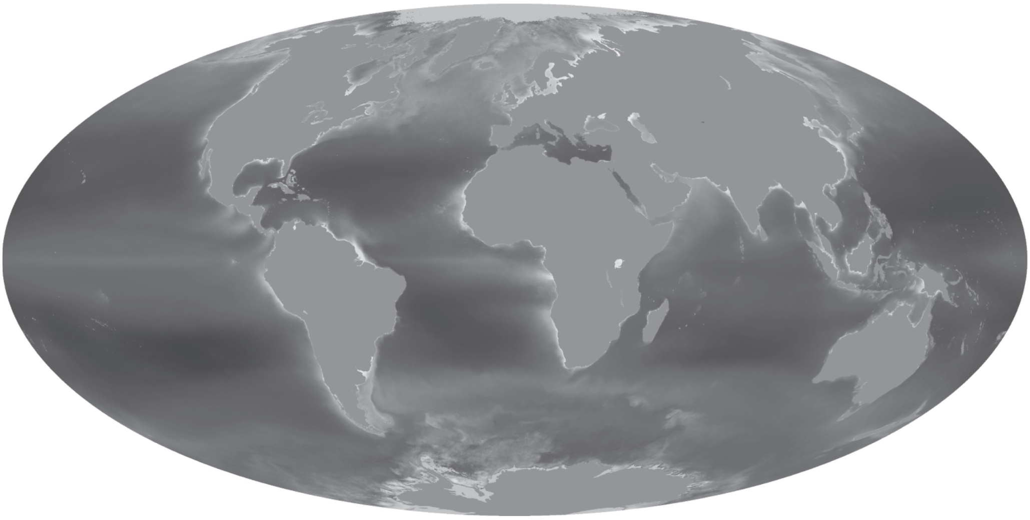

FIGURE 1.3. Global average ocean chlorophyll concentration (1997–2007) estimated from satellite images of ocean color. Lighter shades represent higher concentrations. Chlorophyll is often used as a proxy for phytoplankton biomass. Courtesy of NASA Earth Observatory.

upon how well suited the animal's evolved behavior is to its actual environment. Because the physical system is variable over time and space, it follows that ecosystem structure varies as well, even putting aside strictly biological mechanisms. This array of physical-biological couplings has motivated a good deal of research over the years, one illustrative example being described by Wiebe et al. (2002).

Biological activity in the coastal realm is not always benevolent, however. The rivers that empty into the ocean sometimes carry a heavy content of dissolved nutrients that frequently originate from excessive use of agricultural fertilizers, among other sources. These nutrients stimulate plankton growth, which eventually leads to sinking of organic material over the continental shelf. The sinking material decays, consuming oxygen. The upshot is the seasonal appearance of areas where near-bottom shelf waters are so nearly depleted in dissolved oxygen (*hypoxic*) that fish can no longer survive there. Shelf hypoxia is a growing problem globally (e.g., Rabalais et al., 2009). Another unfortunate biological effect occurs when there are blooms of plankton species that are harmful to humans and coastal animal species. These harmful algal blooms (HABs) (e.g., Anderson et al., 2012), like hypoxia, are strongly affected by aspects of the physical setting such as water column density stratification. HABs are often called "red tides," even though they only occasionally redden the water, and tidal currents are almost irrelevant.

Fishing, of course, is only one of many human activities in the coastal ocean. Shipping has been important since classical times and is increasingly so today. Transportation issues are especially pressing in areas near ports where safe and efficient navigation calls for coordination and a knowledge of the environment. Even small gains in efficiency

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FIGURE 1.4. Oil platforms off the coast of California. Courtesy of the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management.

can represent important savings, given the cost of operating a large vessel. Inevitably, heavy usage leads to occasional calls for search and rescue operations, which clearly benefit from a knowledge of winds and currents. The coastal environment remains important for naval operations, since these often involve shipping (protection or prevention), or various offensive and defensive deployments near land.

There are other valuable resources in the coastal ocean. Oil and gas exploitation (Figure 1.4), which will be important for the foreseeable future, calls for knowledge about currents to enable safe and efficient operations. Petroleum, of course, is not the only coastal energy source: wind energy, as well as other renewables, stand to become increasingly important over the coming years. The continental shelf setting is particularly attractive because "land use" is perhaps not as difficult an issue as ashore and because winds are often stronger over the water than over the nearby land. Further, there are other minerals to be extracted besides fuels: sand and even diamond extraction both lead to disruption of the coastal ocean seafloor.

This cursory listing of practical concerns is far from complete and entirely without detail. The object is to emphasize how the coastal ocean is disproportionately (by area) important to our society, for a diversity of reasons. The following chapters will rarely touch explicitly on practical concerns, but applications are always nearby and will be a strong motivator to many readers.

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1.3. What Makes the Coastal Ocean Different?

As simple as it may sound, probably the most distinctive aspect of the coastal ocean is the presence of a boundary. The blockage inhibits cross-shelf velocity u while having little direct effect on the alongshore current component v. This inhibition contributes heavily to the tendency for u to be much weaker than v over the continental shelf, especially on time scales longer than a few days (e.g., Figure 1.5; Lentz and Fewings, 2012). The resulting anisotropy, in turn, leads to momentum balances strikingly dependent on orientation, hence different from the more nearly isotropic open ocean. Also, the coastal barrier disrupts the cross-shelf upper-ocean transport associated with Earth's rotation and alongshore winds, effectively creating an outsized near-surface flow divergence near shore. (Such a divergence, albeit much more broadly distributed, is a key link in wind driving of the open ocean; e.g., see Gill, 1982, his chapter 12). This large divergence, in turn, means that wind-driven currents are more energetic over the shelf than in the deeper ocean. Consequently, coastal currents vary (on time scales longer than tidal periods) over periods typical of the weather: about 2–15 days. In contrast, subtidal mid-ocean currents typically fluctuate with periods defined by mesoscale eddies: many tens of days.

Another defining aspect of the coastal ocean is the large degree of bathymetric variation. Across the continental margin, bottom-depth changes are comparable to the depth itself. Given the reluctance of slowly varying flows on a rotating planet to cross *isobaths* (contours of constant depth), depth changes reinforce the boundary's tendency to make flow, on time scales longer than tidal, follow isobaths (Figure 1.5). In addition, the depth changes, through a funneling effect, tend to amplify tidal currents as the water gets shallower. Beyond that, there is the possibility of tidal resonances in the presence of a coastal wall. Strong tides, in turn, lead to a range of secondary effects, including enhanced nutrient delivery and thus biological activity. Finally, the very shallowness of the shelf's water column means that a given forcing (such as a wind stress or heat flux) is relatively more effective than in the deep ocean, where the effect might be distributed over a far greater vertical extent.

In most places in the ocean, there are turbulent boundary layers near the surface and bottom. These are typically 10–50 m thick. In the deep (thousands of meters) ocean, these boundary layers do not occupy a very large fraction of the water column. But on the continental shelf, where waters are typically 150 m deep or shallower, the boundary layers occupy a substantial part, and sometimes all, of the water column across the shelf. Consequently, turbulent mixing and dissipative processes play a particularly important role in coastal phenomena.

Finally, the coastal environment is where the continent meets the ocean. What flows out of rivers passes into coastal waters, creating distinctive alongshore buoyant currents which carry chemicals and materials that originated inland. Thus, the coastal setting is the ocean's contact zone with the terrestrial environment, and it is often here that outflows are diluted to concentrations typical of the broader open ocean.

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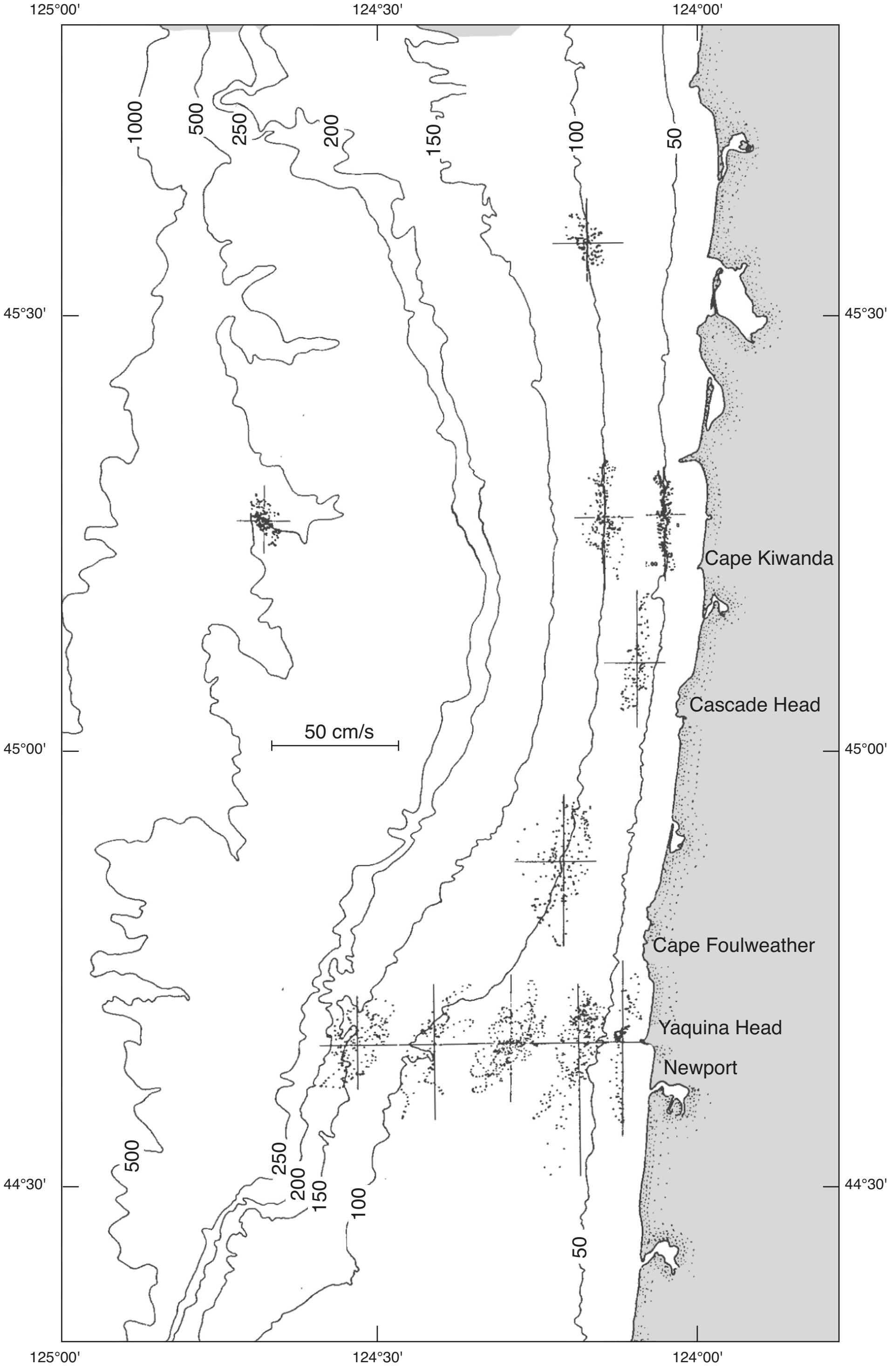

FIGURE 1.5. Scatter diagram of 40 m currents superimposed on bottom topography, demonstrating the tendency for fluctuating currents to follow isobaths. At each location, the current meter records were smoothed to remove tides and higher-frequency motions, and then the mean currents were removed. Next, at regular time intervals, the velocity vector was plotted as a dot relative to its mooring location (crosshairs). The measurements were made during the summers of 1971 and 1972. Note how the clouds of points are stretched out and aligned roughly parallel to isobaths, especially near the coast. Depths are in meters. Adapted from Kundu and Allen (1976).

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This summary is deliberately terse. However, all these concepts are dealt with in detail in the following chapters. After reading those, the reader can return to this chapter with an understanding of the physics underlying these sweeping statements.

1.4. The Common Theme: Cross-Shelf Exchange

The focus of coastal ocean research repeatedly turns to cross-shelf exchange. There are many reasons why this is so. Coastal upwelling (section 4.1), which is so important for biological productivity, is the transport of deeper waters onshore, up into the sunlight, and then offshore at the surface. In many other cases, cross-shelf gradients—of salinity, for example—reflect inputs from land spreading offshore. It is, in fact, quite common to find that cross-shelf gradients greatly exceed alongshore gradients, especially on regional and larger scales. In the face of these anisotropic property distributions, a relatively weak cross-shelf flow can still effect substantial net transports. Many interesting problems, then, such as how the Gulf Stream affects shelf waters, boil down to cross-shelf exchange. Thus, it has been a dominant focus of continental shelf research for a half century or more.

If cross-shelf exchange has been a priority for so long, why is it still a going concern? There are at least two answers. One is that we all have an understandable tendency to deal first with the most visible variability in a data set. Because tides are obvious to see and important for practical reasons, they naturally received attention from very early times, making them arguably the first topic treated in physical oceanography. Aristotle and Laplace were both engaged with this well before the twentieth century. Coastal upwelling was understood to be important by the early twentieth century and thus motivated perhaps the first major coordinated field program of continental shelf research (Coastal Upwelling Ecosystems Analysis: CUEA; see Hartline, 1980). But this program made some of its most important physical contributions on wind-driven motions and coastal-trapped waves: processes that dominate alongshore currents on time scales of days or longer. Although CUEA certainly dealt with the cross-shelf flows that structure upwelling, the more salient findings came from attacking the strongest then-unexplained variability: that involving fluctuating alongshore currents. Great progress was made, but it was not always where originally intended. A second reason for slow progress on cross-shelf transport is that it is simply a difficult problem. There is no single answer that applies everywhere. Cross-shelf currents are generally weaker than alongshore (on time scales longer than tidal), so they can be hard to separate from alongshore currents (as silly as that may appear, this is a real issue over a bottom with curvy isobaths). Further, the cross-shelf flow often has much shorter natural length scales than does the alongshore flow, so it is far more difficult to map out a coherent field.

Altogether, there are good reasons that cross-shelf exchanges remain a central focus of continental shelf research. But new understandings, new ideas, and new tools will continue to enable new progress.

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Index

A page number in italics refers to a figure or table.

active margins, 9, *10*, 11
Agulhas Current, 180
algal blooms, 4
aliased samples, 21
along-isobath flow, 189
alongshore scales: buoyancy arrest and, 195; cross-shelf flow and, 194, 195, 201–2, 205–6; infinite, 52
alongshore wave propagation, and sea level, 68, *69*
alongshore wind stress: barotropic coastal ocean and, 55–56; buoyancy current interacting with, 162–64, *163*, *164*; ceasing of, 65; coastal downwelling and, 65, 116, *116*; coastal long-wave approximation and, 90–96, 106; coastal upwelling and, 63–67, 116, *116*, 172; correlation length scales and, 176, *177*; with density stratification, 58–61; eddy fields over shelf and, 176; heat conduction analogy for, 105; on inner shelf, 116, *116*, 122; method of characteristics with, 97–100, *98*, *100*; over midshelf, 56–58; space- and time-lagged correlation functions, 102, *103*; topographic features and, 67; in two-layer flat-bottom model, 61–63
amphidrome, 134
approximations, frequently used, 17–20
arrested topographic wave, 105
Atlantic Ocean: eastern boundary eddy fields, 198–99; map of western north coast, xiv; Mediterranean flow into, 165, 204–5; western boundary currents, 179–81. *See also* Gulf Stream
atmospherically forced waves, 116–18
atmospheric pressure, 17–18; sea level and, 200
autocorrelation function, 20–23, *22*

baroclinic dynamics, and Burger number, 86
baroclinic first mode: equatorial waves in, 190–91; in two-layer flat-bottom model, 63
baroclinic instabilities: alongshore wind forcing and, 176; boundary layers and, 49; buoyancy currents and, 166, 178–79, *179*; cross-shelf density gradient and, 166; of downwelling front, 175; energy conversions and, 171, 172–74, *173*, 176; gravitational potential energy and, 169; Gulf Stream features and, 180; Richardson number and, 16; shelf break front and, 178; surface cooling and, *181*, 181–82; tidal mixing fronts and, 182; of upwelling front, 172
baroclinic modes, *77*, 77–78, *78*; equatorial waves and, 190–91; flat bottom and, 63; internal waves and, 145
barotropic coastal ocean: alongshore winds over midshelf and, 56–58; governing equations for, 53–56
barotropic dynamics, and Burger number, 86
barotropic instabilities, 171; Agulhas Current and, 180; in surf zone, 184, *185*
barotropic mode, 77, *77*; in two-layer flat-bottom model, 63
barotropic waves: Kelvin waves, *71*, 74, 79, 85; over shelf-slope topography, 79–83
barrier. *See* coastal wall
basin modes, 74, 134–35
beta-plane approximation, 19
biological processes: internal waves in shallow water and, 148; tidal mixing and, 182, 183. *See also* chlorophyll; nutrients; phytoplankton
bores, 146
bottom boundary layer: coupling to interior flows, 32; depth of upwelled water and, 58; of downwelling front, 175; with flat bottom, 38–43; measured velocity profile, 42; as mixed-layer problem, 42–43; offshore of downwelling front, 65; with onshore Ekman transport, 175; over sloping bottom, 43–48; simple results, 27, *28*, 29–30; stress measurements, 42; strong tides and, 182. *See also* buoyancy arrest
bottom stress: alongshore component of, 59; alongshore currents in surf zone and, 123; alongshore wind with buoyancy current and, 162; buoyancy arrest and, 43, 48;

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bottom stress (*continued*)
    coastal upwelling and, 67; cross-isobath advection and, 43; eddies damped by, 182; exercise about, 212; linear formulation of, 42; measured velocity profile and, 42; momentum balances and, 121, 122; negatively buoyant currents and, 164–65; tidal, 141, 150, 182
boundary layers, 6, 24–26, *25*; active areas of research, 49; barotropic coastal ocean and, 53–56; directional offsets in, 28, *28*, 31; Ekman compatibility condition, 30–32; with flat bottom, 38–43; as fraction of water column, 16; on inner shelf, 108, 109–16; in open ocean, 49; over sloping bottom, 43–48; in shallow water, 108, 109–16; simple results, 26–30; summary of active issues, 48–49; surface mixed layer, 32–38; throughout inner shelf waters, 11. *See also* bottom boundary layer; surface boundary layer; wave boundary layer
Boussinesq approximation, 17–18
breaking waves: internal, 149; in surf zone, 118–19
bulge, in estuary outflow, 154–56, *155*, 160
bulk Richardson number: buoyancy current with wind stress and, 163; thickness of mixed layer and, 35–36. *See also* Richardson number
buoyancy arrest, 43–48, *46*; alongshore variation in, 47–48; ocean observations and, 48, *49*; preventing oceanic cross-shelf extension, 195; representative summertime properties and, 47, *47*, 48
buoyancy currents, 11, 108, 156–62, 206; baroclinic instabilities and, 166, 178–79, *179*; bulge region and, 154–56, *155*; climate change and, 200; different scales of, 166; geostrophic adjustment and, 156–58, *157*; inflow water pathways, 161–62; negative buoyancy and, 164–66; with sloping bottom and friction, *159*, 159–60, *160*; speed of development of, 160–61; tidal mixing and, 142; wind-driven pulses in, 154; wind stress interacting with, 162–64, *163*, *164*
buoyancy frequency squared, 16; for waves with density stratification, 75–76, *77*
Burger number, 60–61; coastal-trapped waves and, *86*, 86–88, *87*, 90. *See also* slope Burger number

canyons at shelves, 11, *198*, 199
Cape Hatteras, 179–80, 181, 196–97, 201
Cartesian coordinates: in beta-plane approximation, 19; simplification to, 12
characteristics, with alongshore wind stress, 97–100, *98*, *100*
chlorophyll: coastal upwelling and, 51, *52*; ocean concentration of, 2, *4*; subduction at upwelling front and, 174, *175*. *See also* phytoplankton
circular geometries, with subinertial trapped waves, 104
climate change, and sea level, 199–201
coastal long-wave approximation, 90–96, 91n3; with arbitrary coastal wall, 115; geostrophic balance and, 91–92; hindcasts using, *101*, 101–2; steady barotropic limit and, 104–6; superinertial motions and, 92, 106
coastal ocean: defined, 1; distinctive features of, 6; geometries of, 9, *10*, 11; importance of, 1–5; US population near, 1, *2*
coastal-trapped waves, 84–90; applications of, 101–3; in circular geometries, 104; classes of waves included in, 85; coastal long-wave approximation and, 92; deep ocean resonance with, 193; density stratification and, 84–90; dispersion relations for, *87*, 87–88, 90; with energy spreading offshore, 193; excited by equatorial waves, 88–90, *89*, 190–91, *192*, 193; freshwater outflows and, 152; inflow to estuary and, 162; lee waves as, 149; method of characteristics and, 100; pressure modal structures, 85, *86*, 87, 88; sea level in estuary and, 154; topography and, 84–90
coastal wall: arbitrary in inner shelf theories, 115; artificial in barotropic ocean model, 55; baroclinic Kelvin waves and, 85; boundary layer and interior flows coupled at, 30; extremely thin boundary layers at, 59–60; inhibiting cross-shelf velocity, 6, *7*; two-layer flat-bottom model, 61–63, *62*; waves with, 73–74, 78
constant-stress (logarithmic) layer, 38–42, 55
continental rise, *10*, 11
continental shelf, geometry of, 9, *10*, 11
continental slope, 9, *10*, 11; depth gradient overwhelming β, 19
continuity equation, 12; hydrostatic approximation and, 18
cooling over shelf, 164, 165–66, *181*, 181–82; surface mixed layer and, 36
Coriolis parameter, 12; latitudinal variation in, 19, 189; Rossby number and, 18. *See also* Earth's rotation
cross-isobath flow: abrupt change in coastal orientation and, 196, 197; constraints on, 6, 189; major enablers of, 189; nonlinear effects and, 189, 195–99; scale dependence of, 194, 195; transient near Kuroshio Current, 196; two-dimensional models and,

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67; vortex stretching and, 79, 82, 105. *See also* cross-shelf flow; Taylor-Proudman theorem
cross-shelf exchange, 8, 207–8; at submarine canyons and valleys, 199
cross-shelf flow: adjoining deep-ocean features and, 206; alongshore scale and, 194, 195; alongshore scales and, 201–2; frictional effects and, 194–95; intermittent near Cape Hatteras, 196–97; midshelf Ekman transport, 56–57; in mixed layer, *37*, 37–38; nonlinear effects and, 195–99; possibly dominated by eddies, 186; spatial and temporal scales of, 189; time dependence and, 190–94. *See also* cross-isobath flow
cross-shelf wind stress, 55, 57; on inner shelf, 113–14, *114*, 116
CTDs (conductivity-temperature-depth), 203

Darwin notation, 132, *132*
data quality, 204–5
deformation scale, 60
Denmark Strait outflow, 165, 166
density stratification: in bottom boundary layer, 43–44; coastal long-wave approximation and, 92, 94, 107; coastal-trapped waves and, 84–90; mixing and, 140–42, *141*; oceanic cross-shelf extension and, 195; Richardson number and, 16, 35; shallow-water equations and, 20; steady barotropic limit and, 105–6; turbulence and, 13, 15, 32; in two-dimensional model, 58–61; warming at surface and, 141, 142, 182; waves in rotating flat-bottom ocean and, 74–78, *77*, *78*
density variations, and Boussinesq approximation, 17–18
depth variations, 6, *7*; vorticity and, 19. *See also* cross-isobath flow
dispersion relations, 70, *71*; for barotropic waves with shelf-slope topography, *81*; for coastal-trapped waves, *87*, 87–88, 90; for edge waves in surf zone, *185*; for equatorial waves, *191*; lee waves and, 149–50; observed edge waves and, 82; for shelf waves, 83, 84; for short gravity waves, 117–18
dispersive waves, 72. *See also* dispersion relations
dissipation: by global tidal patterns, 135, 137–38. *See also* friction; turbulence
diurnal inequality, 127
Doodson coefficients, *132*, 132–33, 132n
downwelling, coastal, 65, *66*, 67; with front intersecting the bottom, 174–76; surface cooling and, 182; wind direction on inner shelf and, 116, *116*; wind stress interacting with buoyancy current and, 163–64, *164*
drag coefficient, 40, 40n, 41–42, 141, 150

Earth's rotation: buoyant outflows and, 166; eddies over the shelf and, 167; eddy evolution and, 170; local vertical component of, 12–13, 19; logarithmic layer and, 40, 41, 42; Rossby number and, 18; shelf waves and, 82; two-dimensional turbulence and, 13. *See also* Coriolis parameter
eddies: abrupt change in coastal orientation and, 197; in adjoining deep ocean, 206; buoyancy currents and, 178–79; cross-shelf salt flux and, 201; definitions of, 14n; flux divergence of, 14; Gibraltar outflow and, 165; Gulf Stream and, 179–80, 197, *198*; on inner shelf, 125; parameterizing turbulence and, 14, 24; shelf break front and, 178, 196; shelf-ocean exchange and, 196, 208; space and time scales of, 184, 186; surface cooling and, 165–66; in surf zone, 184; tidal mixing front and, 182–83; transporting mass, momentum, or materials, 167; upwelling front and, 172–74, *173*, 176; western boundary currents and, 196–98, *198*
eddy diffusivity, 15
eddy fields: along eastern boundaries of Pacific and Atlantic, 198–99; conjectured coastal omnipresence of, 185–86; difficulty of observing, 172; from distributed densification on the shelf, 166; evolution of, 167, *168*, 170; length scales in, 176; surface cooling with sloping bottom and, 181–82
eddy kinetic energy (*EKE*), 170–71; Gulf Stream and, 179–80; shelf break front and, 178; upwelling or downwelling and, 172–74, *173*, 175–76
eddy viscosity, 14–15; in barotropic coastal ocean, 53–55; of bottom boundary layer, 29; constant in inner shelf models, 110–11, 116; density stratification and, 15, 32; Ekman number and, 16; logarithmic layer and, 41; parameterizing turbulence, 24; of surface boundary layer, 26–29; of surface mixed layer, 33; turbulent stress vector and, 26; variable, 29–30, 115; vertical profiles on inner shelf, 115
edge waves, 79–82, *81*; coastally-trapped, 85; observed, 82; radiative energy loss, 88; in surf zone, 184, *185*; tides on the shelf and, 136; as valid approximation, 85
eigenfunctions and eigenvalues. *See* baroclinic modes
Ekman compatibility condition, 30–32

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Ekman layer, 28; coastal upwelling and, 50; on inner shelf, 113
Ekman number, 16
Ekman pumping, 30, 59, 105
Ekman scale depth, 27; on inner shelf, 111, 113, *114*; in two-dimensional model, 55, 56
Ekman spiral, 28; logarithmic layer with, 41, 42; offshore wind on inner shelf and, 114; surface mixed layer and, 38, *38*
Ekman suction, 30
Ekman transport, *28*, 28–29; alongshore wind stress and, 57–58, 66–67; in barotropic coastal ocean, 56; at bottom below buoyancy current, 159–60; boundary interactions with interior and, 30–32; buoyancy arrest and, 43–48, *49*; buoyancy current with wind stress and, 162–63; cross-midshelf, 56–57; on inner shelf, 111–14, *114*, 116; of negatively buoyant current, 165; observed cross-shelf flow, 37, *37*; orthogonal to stress, *28*, 38; of seasonal density front, 64; surface mixed layer deepening and, 35; upwelling and, 172, 201
El Niño, 191–93, 196
energy. *See* kinetic energy; potential energy
energy conversions: instability and, 170–71; shelf break front and, 178; upwelling front and, 172–74, *173*
energy extraction: by Gulf Stream perturbations, 179–80; instability and, 167, 168–71; by internal waves, 88
energy propagation, by Poincaré waves, 71–72
equatorial waves, 74, 88–90, *89*, 190–93, *191*, *192*
equilibrium tide, 133
estuaries, *10*, 11, 153–54; bulge in outflow from, 154–56, *155*, 160; climate change and, 200; inflow water of, 161–62; stratification vs. tidal mixing in, 142; tidal currents in, 153. *See also* freshwater outflows; river outflow
Eulerian velocity: of gravity waves, 119, 120; Stokes drift and, 123, 124, *124*
evaporation, and cooling, 181
exercises with solutions, 211–19

fisheries, 2–4
food web, 2–3
form stress, 149–50
freshwater outflows, 151–53, *152*. *See also* buoyancy currents; estuaries; river outflow
friction: cross-isobath flow and, 194–95; Ekman number and, 16. *See also* bottom stress; dissipation; drag coefficient
friction velocity: in constant-stress layer, 39, 42; of short gravity wave, 41; in surface mixed layer, 36

geostrophic adjustment, 156–58, *157*; surface cooling and, 165–66
geostrophic alongshore flow, 91–92, *92*
geostrophic balance: coastal long-wave approximation and, 91–92; midshelf cross-shelf, 122; open ocean with assumption of, 187–89
Gibraltar outflow, 165, 166
global ocean circulation, dense waters in, 166
gravity waves, long (hydrostatic), 118; Rossby radius of, 74
gravity waves, short (nonhydrostatic), 116–21, *118*; bottom boundary layer and, 41; equatorial, 190, *191*; Eulerian vs. Lagrangian mean velocity of, 119; phase and group velocity of, 120; propagating into shallower water, 121; Stokes-Coriolis acceleration and, 123–24; surf zone and, 118–19, 184, 190
group velocity, 72
Gulf Stream, 174, 179–81, *180*, 193, 196–97; alongshore flow in South Atlantic Bight and, 201; cross-shelf exchange and, 8; eddies and, 179–80, 197, *198*; free-surface height differences in, 200

heat fluxes, at surface of mixed layer, 36–37
heat transfer by eddies, 167, 182
hindcasts, *101*, 101–2
horizontal mixing, 13, 15–16
Hudson Shelf Valley, *198*, 199
hurricanes: cross-shelf winds and, 91; Kelvin-edge waves and, 82; sea level response to, 68, *69*; wind-stress curl and, 57
hydraulic jumps, 146, *147*, 149
hydrostatic approximation, 18; coastal long-wave approximation and, 91n; edge waves and, 81; Poincaré waves and, 70
hydrostatic waves, 68, 69; long gravity waves, 74, 118
hypoxia: Mississippi River outflow and, 151, *152*; in near-bottom shelf waters, 4

ice sheets, melting, 200–201
independence length scale, 21–23
independence time scale, 21–23, *22*
inertia-gravity waves. *See* Poincaré waves
inertial oscillations, 35, 106–7
inner shelf, 11, 108–9; alongshore variability in, 125–26; boundary layers on, 108, 109–16; cross-shelf transport on, 123–25; cross-shelf wind stress on, 57; defining characteristics of, 108, 109; forcing mechanisms on, 121–23, 125; internal waves on, 148; miniature eddies on, 125; momentum transport in, 120–21, 122; oblique fronts extending from, 125; observational

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approaches to, 109; three-dimensional, time-dependent features on, 125; transition to midshelf, *114*; vertical extent of, 108; vertical transport in, 113, 114, *114*, 115
instabilities: energy extraction and, 167, 168–71; evolution of, 167, *168*; importance of, 167; nonlinearity and, 196; observational difficulties with, 172; quasigeostrophic approximation and, 168; of shelf currents, 206; transitions between types of, 182. *See also* baroclinic instabilities; barotropic instabilities; eddies; nonlinearity; turbulence
internal modes, 77
internal tides, 143–49; augmented at canyons, 199; coastal currents and, 145–46; generation of, 146, *147*, 148, *148*; global tidal dissipation and, 135; on inner shelf, 148; modeled paths at island, 144, *145*; nonlinearity in, 144, 146, 148–49; radiative energy loss to, 88, 149; turbulent mixing by, 135, 149, 190, 206
internal waves. *See* internal tides
inverse estuaries, 151
island: internal waves modeled at, *145*; with subinertial trapped waves, 104
isobaths: followed by currents, 6, *7*. *See also* cross-isobath flow

jet: cross-shelf, 91; kinetic energy of, 169; Middle Atlantic Bight shelf break and, 166; offshore-directed, 197; between surf zone and inner shelf, 125; tidal mixing front and, 142, 182; topographically channeled, 57; in two-layer flat-bottom model, 63; upwelling front and, 64, 65–67, 172, 174

Kelvin-edge waves, *81*, 81–82
Kelvin-Helmholtz instability, 16
Kelvin waves: baroclinic, 77–78, *78*, 85–86; barotropic, *71*, 74, 79, 85; coastal-trapped waves and, 85–87, 88, 90, 191, *192*; equatorial, 74, 190–92, *191*, *192*; ocean basin modes and, 74, 134–35; radiative energy loss by, 88; tides on the shelf and, 136
kinetic energy: of Gulf Stream perturbations, 180; of jet, 169. *See also* eddy kinetic energy (*EKE*)
Knudsen relations, 153
Krauss-Turner regime, 37
Kuroshio Current, 196, 197

Lagrangian mean velocity, of gravity waves, 119
Laguerre polynomials, 80–81
lakes, trapped waves in, 104
land elevation, and climate change, 200
Langmuir turbulence, 41, 49
law of the wall, 40
lee eddy, 149
lee wave, 149–50
linearity, and Rossby number, 18
linearized equations of motion: boundary layers and, 26, 29; in stability analysis, 170, 180, 184
logarithmic layer, 38–42, 55
long-wave approximation, 91n3
lunar day, 129–30
lunar declination, 130

meddies, 165, 204–5
Mediterranean Sea: dense flow into Atlantic from, 165; relative absence of life in, 2
mesoscale, ocean, 16
mesoscale, shelf, 204, 204n, 207
Middle Atlantic Bight, 47, *47*, 166, 196, 198, 202
midshelf: alongshore wind stress over, 56–58; cross-shelf momentum balance at, 122; transition from inner shelf to, *114*
Mississippi River outflow, 151, *152*
mixing: at canyons in shelves, 199; density stratification and, 140–42, *141*; in estuaries, 153, 154; exercise about, 211; horizontal, 13, 15–16; parameterizations of, 206; surface cooling and, 165, 181, 182; wind-driven, 141, 142. *See also* turbulent mixing
mixing length theory, 40–41
momentum balances, 121–23
momentum transport: on inner shelf, 120–21; by oscillating tidal currents, 139–40

Navier-Stokes equations, 11–12
neap tides, 127
negative buoyancy, 164–66
nondispersive waves, 72
nonlinearity: advection of momentum, mass, or vorticity and, 195–96; alongshore wind stress and, 63–67; in boundary layer coupling to interior, 31–32; criteria for, 18; cross-isobath flow and, 189, 195–99; cross-shelf currents and, 206; of evolving eddy field, 170; of gravity waves in shallow water, 118; on inner shelf, 116; in internal tides, 144, 146, 148–49; Rossby number and, 18, 195–96; of tidal harmonics, 131–32, 140; in tidal rectification, 139–40. *See also* eddies; instabilities
no-slip boundary conditions, 55
numerical models, 206–7
nutrients: coastal upwelling and, 51; internal waves in shallow water and, 148; in river

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nutrients (*continued*)
outflow, 4, 6, 151; supplied by Gulf Stream, 180; tidal mixing fronts and, 143, 183. *See also* biological processes

observations: evaluating, 20–23; evolving capabilities for, 203–5; of mean conditions, 201n
oceanography, as evolving science, 203–8
ocean-shelf coupling: constraints on, 187–90; oceanic fluctuations and, 193–94; puzzles for future study, 201–2. *See also* cross-isobath flow
oil and gas exploitation, 5, *5*
oxygen: dissolved, subduction at upwelling front and, 174; hypoxia, 4, 151, *152*

Pacific Ocean: coastal maps, xv–xvii; eastern boundary eddy fields, 198–99
parameterization: of mixing, 206; of turbulence, 14, 24
passive margins, 9, *10*, 11
persistence in time series, 21, 23
phase velocity, 70–71
phytoplankton: coastal upwelling and, 51; food web and, 2–3; harmful growth of, 4; nutrients in river outflow and, 151; tidal mixing fronts and, 143. *See also* biological processes; chlorophyll; nutrients
plate tectonics, 9, *10*, 11
Poincaré waves, 70–72, *71*; with coastal wall, 73; with density stratification, 77; long-wave approximation and, 106; resonances of, 190; with shelf-slope topography, 79, 80, *81*; standing, and tides on the shelf, 136, 138
Pollard-Rhines-Thompson depth, 36
potential energy: available, 171, 172–74, *173*, 176, 181–82; Gulf Stream perturbations and, 180; instabilities and, 169, 170–71; of surface mixed layer, 36–37; tidal mixing and, 140–41
potential vorticity, 19; buoyancy current and, 157–58; nearshore instability and, 184
pressure, frequent approximations for, 17–18

quasigeostrophic approximation, 168, 170, 171, 172, 178, 184

radiation stress, 120, 121, 122–23, 184
radiative energy loss, to internal waves, 88, 149
relative vorticity, 18, 19; balanced by vortex stretching, 59, 75, 105
resistance coefficient, 42
Reynolds number, 13; rough sublayer and, 40
Reynolds stress, in wave boundary layer, 123
Richardson number, 16; buoyancy arrest and, 43–46; thickness of mixed layer and, 35–36; variable eddy viscosity and, 115. *See also* bulk Richardson number
rigid-lid approximation, 56, 59, 61, 63; shelf waves and, 82–83, 96
rip currents, 125
rise, continental, *10*, 11
river outflow: climate change and, 200; hypoxia associated with, 151, *152*; sediments, chemicals and materials in, 1, *3*, 4, 6. *See also* estuaries
river tides, exercise about, 216–18
ROFIs (regions of freshwater influence), 142
Rossby number, 18, 195–96; eddy properties and, 176; estuary outflow and, 154; in surf zone, 184
Rossby radius, internal, 60, 61, 62–63; with buoyancy current, 158, 161, 162; evolution of eddy field and, 176; internal set of, 77–78
Rossby radius of deformation: for baroclinic modes, 77–78; barotropic, 56, 63; barotropic Kelvin wave and, 74; deep-sea at low latitudes, 61; for long gravity wave, 74; mesoscale defined by, 204n; shelf waves and, 82–83; topographic width and, 86. *See also* Rossby radius, internal
Rossby waves: coastal wave mode coupling to, 88; eddy properties and, 176; equatorial, 190, *191*, 192, 193; lee waves as, 149; ocean basin modes and, 134; shelf-ocean coupling and, 193, 195; topographic, 176, 193
roughness height, 40; in near-bottom wave boundary layer, 41

salinity: coastal upwelling and, 51, *52*; cross-shelf flux of, 201; eddy diffusivity and, 15; estuaries and, 153, 154; intrusions from offshore, 198; “inverse estuaries” and, 151; negative buoyancy and, 164; shelf-ocean contrast of, 187, *188*; subduction at upwelling front and, 174, *175*; turbulent flux of, 14
scale of a process, 20–23
sea level: alongshore flow and, 92; alongshore wave propagation and, 68, *69*; barometric adjustment of, 88n; climate change and, 199–201; in estuaries, 154; in global tidal models, *134*, 134–35; offshore wind on inner shelf and, 114; perturbed by wave, 70; space- and time-lagged correlation functions, 102, *103*; tidal resonances and, 136–37, *137*
seamounts, trapped waves around, 104
sediments: moving on inner shelf, 108; in river outflow, 1, *3*; weakening turbulence, 41

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shallow-water equations, 19–20; coastal long-wave approximation and, 90–92; tidal harmonics and, 131–32; two-dimensional models and, 52
shallow-water waves, 79–80
shelf, geometry of, 9, *10*, 11
shelf break, 9, *10*; orientation changes in, 196
shelf break front, 178, 180–81, 196
shelf-ocean coupling. *See* ocean-shelf coupling
shelf waves, *81*, 82–84, *84*; coastal long-wave approximation and, 96; coastal-trapped waves and, 85–87; exercises about, 212–16; tides on the shelf and, 136
shipping, 4–5
sidereal day, 129, 130
significant wave height, 119n
slip condition, 42
slope, continental, 9, *10*, 11
slope Burger number, 45–47, 176. *See also* Burger number
solibores, 146
solitary waves, trains of, 146
solitons, internal, 146, 148
South Atlantic Bight, 201
spectral gap, 14, 15
spherical coordinates, 12, 133
spring tides, 127
stochastic models, 102, *103*
Stokes-Coriolis acceleration, 123–25
Stokes drift: balancing Eulerian offshore flow, 124, *124*; cross-shelf transport by, 123–25; Langmuir turbulence and, 49; of short gravity waves, 119–20; tidal along-isobath, 140, 140n; tidal mixing front and, 143
stratification: weaker on inner shelf, 108, *109*. *See also* density stratification
stream function, *64*, *66*, 215
streaming, 123
submesoscale, open-ocean, 204n
surface boundary layer: coupling to interior flows, 30, 31–32; simple results, 26–29; thickness of, 27, 28. *See also* surface mixed layer
surface mixed layer, 32–38; coastal upwelling and, 64–65; deepened by shear at base, 34–35; gravitational potential energy balance, 36–37; heat fluxes and, 36–37; height of, 35–36; observed Ekman transport and, *37*, 37–38; with slab-like behavior, 32–33, *34*, 37; slow deepening of, 37; steady winds and, 36–37; time variability of, 32, *33*. *See also* surface boundary layer
surf zone, 11, 108, 109; barotropic instability in, 184, *185*; buoyant outflows in, 166; defined by breaking gravity waves, 118–19; eddy scales in, 167; momentum balances in, 122–23; momentum transport in, 120–21; radiation stress gradients in, 123; rip currents in, 125; streaming in models of, 123; vertical flow in, 124; wind stress and, 123
symmetric instabilities, 171, 175, 182
synopticity, 21; modeling issues and, 207

Taylor-Proudman theorem, 187–89, 194, 196
temperature: coastal upwelling and, 51, *52*, 172, *173*, 174, *175*; stratification of, *109*. *See also* cooling over shelf; warming at surface
thermal wind equations, 188; alongshore jet and, 64
three-dimensional models and concepts, 205
three-dimensional turbulence, 167
tidal forces: astronomical, 128–30, *129*, 133; tidal potential and, 133–34
tidal frequencies, 128, 129–33, *132*; harmonics of, 131–32, 140
tidal mixing, 140–43; in estuaries, 153; by internal tides, 135
tidal mixing fronts, 142–43, *143*, 182–83, *183*
tidal potential, 133–34
tidal rectification, 139–40; inner shelf flow structure and, 125; mixing front and, 142–43
tides: astronomical relationships and, *128*, 128–30, *129*, *130*; global dissipation by, 135, 137–38; global patterns of, 74, *134*, 134–35; hemispheric asymmetry, 130; local vs. global scale of, 133–34; in a river (exercise), 216–18; significance of, 150; Sun's forcing and, 130–31, *131*; topographic drag and, 149–50
tides on the shelf: coastal-trapped waves and, 103; deep-ocean tides affected by, 138–39; driven by neighboring conditions, 127; forcing by oceanic tides at offshore boundary, 134; frictional dissipation and, 137–38; generation of, 135–39; momentum transfer by, 190; resonances of, 136–37, *137*, 138; typical monthly record of, 127, *128*. *See also* internal tides; tidal mixing
time series: conditional sampling and, 205; exercise about, 218–19; statistical properties of, 21–23, *22*
topographic drag, 149–50
topographic Rhines scale, 176, 183
topographic Rossby waves, 176, 193
topographic β, 19, 176
topography: alongshore winds and, 67; barotropic waves over, 79–83, *81*; buoyancy currents and, 166; coastal-trapped waves and, 84–90; eddies on inner shelf and, 125; nonlinear internal waves and, 146, 148; in numerical studies of upwelling, 63; Rossby

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topography (*continued*)
  radius and, 74, 78; scattering among wave modes and, 88, 94; tides on the shelf and, 125, 136, 138
trench, 9, *10*
turbulence, 13–16; three-dimensional, 167; in wave boundary layer, 123. *See also* eddies; mixing
turbulence closure models, 16, 41, 43, 45, *46*, 115
turbulent mixing: on inner shelf, 108, 115–16; by internal waves, 108, 135, 149, 190, 206; in total ocean, 107, 135. *See also* mixing; surface mixed layer
turbulent stress vector, 26
two-dimensional models, 51–53; cross-isobath flow and, 195; inner shelf and, 110–14, *114*, 115; insights and limitations of, 67; with moderate density stratification, 58–61; nonlinear effects in, 63–67; realistic on short time scales, 63; of short gravity waves, 117; two-layer flat-bottom model, 61–63, *62*; upwelling numerical studies, 63–64, *64*, 115–16, *116*; validity in time-dependent models, 99n

upwelling, coastal, 8, 50–53, *51*; atmospheric effects of, 51; coastal long-wave approximation and, 106; denser nearshore waters and, 67n; depths of water origination, 58, 63; Ekman/Thorade model, 50; important regions of, 50; inner shelf vertical transport and, 113, 114; observations associated with, 50–51; offshore eddies drawing cold filaments from, 198–99; origin of upwelled water and, 201, 208; sectional view of, 51, *52*; surface cooling and, 182; topography causing eddy fields and, 67; two-dimensional models and, 51–53; two-dimensional numerical studies, 63–65, *64*; wind direction on inner shelf and, 115–16, *116*; wind stress interacting with buoyancy current and, 162–63, *163*, 164, 166
upwelling front, coastal, 64–65, 172–74, *173*, 175–76; subduction features of, 174, *175*; temperature and, 51, *52*, 172, *173*, 174, *175*

valleys at shelves, 11, 199
vertical mixing, 13, 14, 15, 16
von Kármán's constant, 38n, 39
vortex force, 120–21
vortex stretching, 59, 75, 105
vorticity, 18, 19; nonlinearity and, 195–96. *See also* potential vorticity; relative vorticity

wall. *See* coastal wall
warm-core rings, 197–98, *198*
warming at surface: mixed layer and, 36; stratification and, 141, 142, 182
wave boundary layer, 123
wave forcing, 109, 122
wave packet, 71–72
waves: classes of, 68–69; observed amplitude of, 119n; propagating information alongshore, 68–69, *69*; in rotating flat-bottom ocean, 69–78. *See also* coastal-trapped waves; internal tides; *specific types of waves*
wave setup, 122–23
western boundary currents, 179–81, *180*; eddies and, 196–98, *198*
wind speed, and surface currents, 40n
wind stress: on inner shelf, 111, 113–14, *114*; mixing by internal waves and, 107; nonlinear effects, 63–67; surface boundary layer and, 27–28; surf zone and, 123; tidal irregularities and, 127; time variability of surface mixed layer and, 32, *33*; in two-dimensional models, 56–62. *See also* alongshore wind stress; cross-shelf wind stress
wind-stress vector, 55

Yanai waves, 90, 190–91, *191*, 193