

Accelerating changes in ice mass within Greenland, and the ice sheet's sensitivity to atmospheric forcing

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From early 2003 to mid-2013, the total mass of ice in Greenland declined at a progressively increasing rate. In mid-2013, an abrupt reversal occurred, and very little net ice loss occurred in the next 12–18 months. Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) and global positioning system (GPS) observations reveal that the spatial patterns of the sustained acceleration and the abrupt deceleration in mass loss are similar. The strongest accelerations tracked the phase of the North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO). The negative phase of the NAO enhances summertime warming and insolation while reducing snowfall, especially in west Greenland, driving surface mass balance (SMB) more negative, as illustrated using the regional climate model MAR. The spatial pattern of accelerating mass changes reflects the geography of NAO-driven shifts in atmospheric forcing and the ice sheet's sensitivity to that forcing. We infer that southwest Greenland will become a major future contributor to sea level rise.

GRACE | GNET | NAO | SMB | mass acceleration

The satellite mission Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) has been used to monitor ice loss in Greenland by inferring near-surface mass changes from temporal variations in gravity measured in space (1–5). Before mid-2013, these measurements were remarkably consistent with a mass trajectory model (6) consisting of an annual cycle, represented by a four-term Fourier series, superimposed on a quadratic or “constant acceleration” trend with an acceleration rate of $-27.7 \pm 4.4 \text{ Gt/y}^2$ (Fig. 1). The Greenland Ice Sheet (GrIS) and its outlying ice caps were losing mass at a rate of about -102 Gt/y in early 2003, but 10.5 y later this rate had increased nearly fourfold to about -393 Gt/y , accounting for much of the observed acceleration in sea level rise (7). Then, from mid-2013 onward, mass loss ceased or nearly ceased (Fig. 1 *B* and *E*) for 12–18 mo. Because seasonally adjusted mass loss stalled, we refer to this time interval as the “2013–2014 Pause” (Fig. 1*B*), or just “Pause.”

The abrupt slowdown in deglaciation was also observed by the Greenland GPS Network (GNET), which senses mass changes by measuring the solid earth's response to changing surface loads (8–12). Vertical crustal displacements manifest a combination of (*i*) glacial isostatic adjustment (GIA), that is, the solid earth's delayed, viscoelastic response to past changes in ice loads, and (*ii*) instantaneous, elastic adjustment to contemporary changes in ice mass. GIA rates are nearly constant over decadal and shorter timescales—except, perhaps, near Kangerdlugssuaq Glacier where mantle viscosities are extremely low (11). Therefore, the vertical accelerations frequently observed in GNET displacement time series (6, 8, 12) very largely represent elastic adjustments to accelerating changes in ice mass.

For the 5-y time period of 2008.4–2013.4, which excludes the summer of 2013, our estimates of the mean acceleration in uplift were positive at about 75% of GNET stations, and the largest positive accelerations were nearly three times larger in magnitude

than the most negative accelerations (Fig. 2). In contrast, for the 5-y period of 2010.4–2015.4, which includes the summer of 2013, more than 90% of GNET stations sensed negative accelerations, and the most negative accelerations had nearly three times the magnitude of the most positive accelerations. The ubiquity of the shift in mean vertical acceleration rates can be assessed by comparing the cumulative distribution functions for each time period (Fig. 2*C*). Sign reversal is not strongly sensitive to the limits of these time intervals (see *SI Appendix, Fig. S2* for another example).

The GRACE time series suggests that the ~10-y episode of accelerating mass loss ceased, and the 2013–2014 Pause in the recent deglaciation of Greenland began near the middle of 2013. Given the level of scatter in the GRACE residuals (Fig. 1*D*), it is hard to be more precise. GNET data provide us with an independent means to estimate the onset time of the Pause. In Fig. 3, we define the station uplift anomalies using a reference period that begins in or after 2007.0 and ends at 2013.4—the final epoch was determined a posteriori, after a series of experiments, so as to establish a self-consistent result. We fit the vertical displacement (up) time series for each GNET station during the reference period with the same trajectory model used to model the GRACE data. This model was then projected forward in time. The uplift anomaly is defined as the difference between the observed

Significance

The recent deglaciation of Greenland is a response to both oceanic and atmospheric forcings. From 2000 to 2010, ice loss was concentrated in the southeast and northwest margins of the ice sheet, in large part due to the increasing discharge of marine-terminating outlet glaciers, emphasizing the importance of oceanic forcing. However, the largest sustained (~10 years) acceleration detected by Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) occurred in southwest Greenland, an area largely devoid of such glaciers. The sustained acceleration and the subsequent, abrupt, and even stronger deceleration were mostly driven by changes in air temperature and solar radiation. Continued atmospheric warming will lead to southwest Greenland becoming a major contributor to sea level rise.

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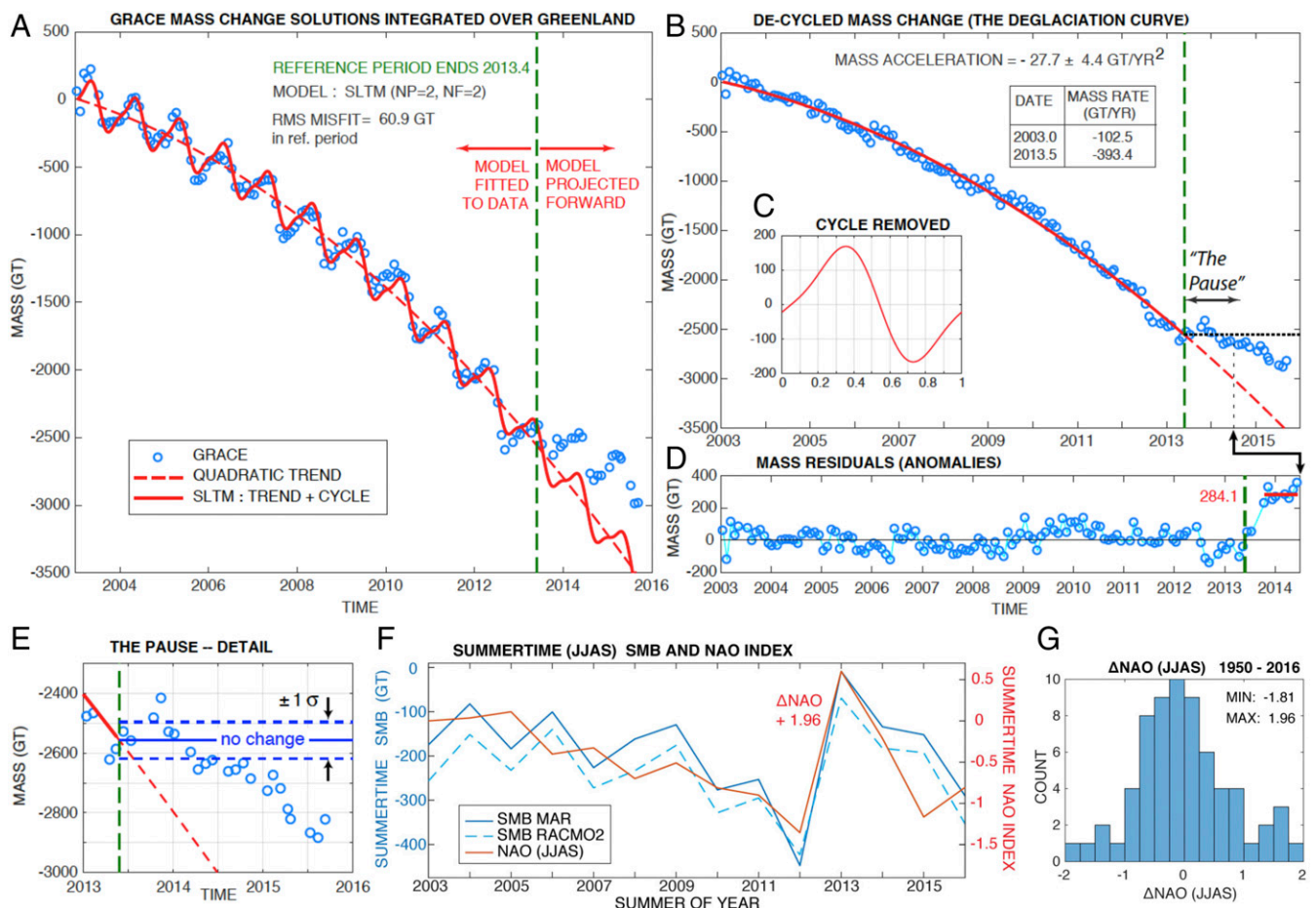


Fig. 1. (A) The GRACE mass change solution integrated over Greenland (blue circles) and the mass trajectory model (MTM) fit to these data during the reference period, 2003.0–2013.4, and extrapolated to the end of the time series (solid red curve). The dashed red curve is the quadratic trend component of the MTM. The cyclical component of the MTM (shown in C) was removed from the data and the model in A to produce the blue dots and the red curve in B. The extrapolated portion of this curve is dashed. The residuals (data, MTM) in D constitute mass anomalies. That portion of B comprising the 2013–2014 Pause is shown in more detail in E. (F) Interannual variations in summertime SMB (JJAS) from the climate models MAR and RACMO2 compared with the summertime NAO index (JJAS). (G) The distribution of all interannual changes in NAO JJAS between 1950 and 2015. NF, # frequencies; NP=2, quadratic trend; MAX, maximum; MIN, minimum; SLTM, standard linear trajectory model.

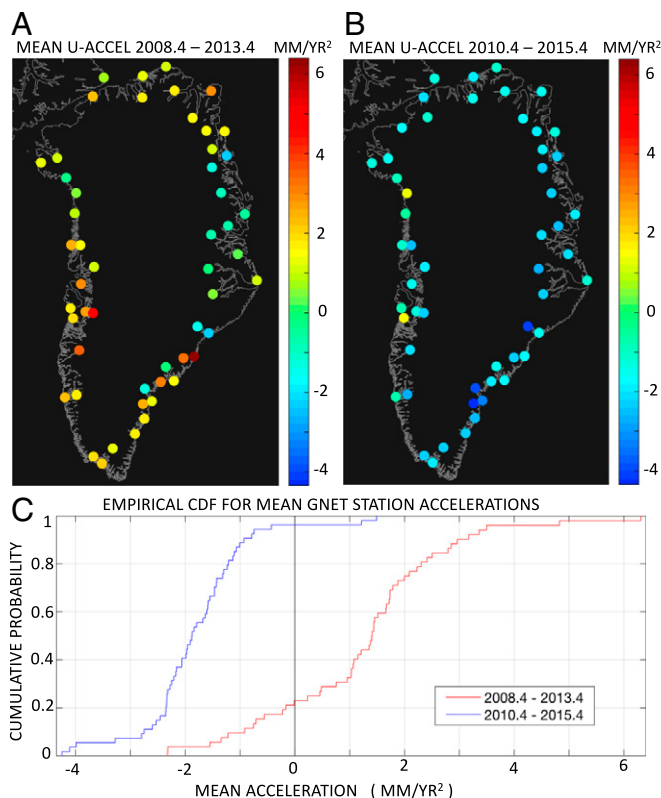
and model displacements. We combined the daily displacement anomalies for 46 GNET stations, and then computed the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles of this point cloud using a traveling window of width 0.1 y. We see that the 50th percentile curve (i.e., the median anomaly) deflects below the zero line near epoch 2013.4 and remains negative thereafter.

The epoch 2013.4 falls 18 d after the positive peak of the purely cyclical component (Fig. 1C) of the model mass curve (Fig. 1A), and 21–25 d after the annual onset of negative mass balance (for Greenland as a whole) inferred from GRACE in 2004–2012 (*SI Appendix, Fig. S1*). Since only a small fraction of the net mass loss accumulated during the “mass loss season” accumulates in the first 21–25 d of that season, we suggest that it took that long for the deviation between predicted mass change and actual mass change (in 2013) to be clearly resolved by GNET, that is, for the trend in the percentile curves to emerge from the oscillatory “noise” seen in these curves before 2013.4.

Both GRACE and GNET imply that the 2013–2014 Pause arose because the expected season of negative mass balance closely associated with summertime in the decade before 2013 did not develop, or barely developed, during the (recently) “anomalous” summer of 2013. If we examine GRACE’s mass anomaly curve (Fig. 1D), we can assess the magnitude of this deviation by averaging the residuals in the interval 2013.79–2014.45 (Fig. 1). We find

that the mass loss accumulated (in Greenland as a whole) in the summer of 2013 was 284 ± 43 Gt smaller than expected based on the accelerating trend observed in the previous decade. Total ice mass fell by no more than ~ 75 Gt during the Pause (Fig. 1B and E). Of course, little or no net change in ice mass during the Pause does not imply that there was no loss anywhere within Greenland, but rather that local changes in ice mass tended to cancel out. The Pause ended by early 2015 (Fig. 1B and E), but given the emergent onset of renewed ice loss, and the temporally correlated noise in the GRACE residuals (Fig. 1C), it is hard to determine the end time of the Pause with any great precision.

Van Angelen et al. (13) noted that the accelerating ice loss observed by GRACE through year 2012 correlated with an increasingly negative summertime North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO) index during six successive summers (Fig. 1F). The negative phase of the summertime NAO (sNAO) index increases the prevalence of high pressure, clear-sky conditions, enhancing surface absorption of solar radiation and decreasing snowfall, and it causes the advection of warm air from southern latitudes into west Greenland. These changes promote higher air temperatures, a longer ablation season and enhanced melt and runoff (14). Van Angelen et al. (13) concluded that if the sNAO switched back to positive values after 2012, then surface mass balance (SMB) might partially recover. Indeed, not only did the



mechanism will be volumetrically concentrated in thinner portions of ice sheet associated with low surface elevations. Meltwater can also accelerate ice flow by modifying the mechanical conditions at the base of the ice sheet (25–27). In extreme cases, the development of subglacial lakes can lift portions of an ice sheet or an ice cap from its bed (28, 29). The hypothesis that atmospheric warming can promote increases in discharge, dynamic thinning, and glacial retreat has recently been invoked in Prudhoe Land in northwest Greenland (30).

Discussion

The coverage and quality of our meteorological, glaciological, and geodetic datasets decline as we regress to the mid-1900s, as does our ability to track the relative importance of SMB and DMB as drivers of deglaciation. Even so, it is clear that the sustained acceleration in mass loss recorded by GRACE before mid-2013 was completely unprecedented (31), as was the collapse of seasonally adjusted mass rate from its peak value to nearly zero in the following 12–18 mo. Mass rate scales with SMB and DMB, so mass acceleration scales with the trend or rate of change of SMB and DMB. Greenland's air–sea–ice system crossed one or more thresholds or tipping points near the beginning of this millennium, triggering more rapid deglaciation. The pronounced negative shift in spatially integrated SMB (Fig. 5E and SI Appendix, Fig. S8) was dominated by increased summertime runoff (Fig. 5E and G). Runoff increased over most of the flanks of the GrIS, but most noticeably in southwest Greenland, where the margin was gaining mass in 2003 but strongly losing mass by late 2012 (Fig. 4). Total glacial discharge integrated over southwest Greenland is not only very low (9.5 ± 1.5 Gt/y) compared with other areas (32), it has been unusually stable as well. South of JI, mass acceleration was dominated by falling SMB from 2000 onward. A little further north, seasonally adjusted discharge rates at JI increased by ~44% from early 2000 to early 2006, but barely changed between early 2006 and early 2012 (32). It was SMB that

was strongly falling in this second 6-y time interval, not DMB (10). Similar considerations apply in southeast Greenland (32).

The decadal acceleration in mass loss in southwest Greenland arose due to the combination of sustained global warming and positive fluctuations in temperature and insolation driven by the NAO. In SI Appendix, we develop an analogy with the global coral bleaching events triggered by every El Niño since that of 1997/1998, but not by any earlier El Niño event. Since 2000, the NAO has worked in concert with global warming to trigger major increases in summertime runoff. Before 2000, the air was too cool for the NAO to do the same. In a decade or two, global warming will be able to drive 2012 levels of runoff with little or no assistance from the NAO. In the shorter term, we can infer that the next time NAO turns strongly negative, SMB will trend strongly negative over west and especially southwest Greenland, just as future warming of the shallow ocean is expected to have its largest impact, via DMB (33, 34), in southeast and northwest Greenland. Because ice sheet topography equips southwest Greenland with greater sensitivity to atmospheric forcing, we infer that within two decades this part of the GrIS will become a major contributor to sea level rise. There is also the suggestion that enhanced summertime melting may induce more sustained increases in discharge rates.

Materials and Methods

We used the global GRACE solution CSR release RL-05. Our regional GRACE analysis used the methodology of ref. 3. Our GPS data processing followed that of ref. 6, as did our approach to time series analysis, both for GRACE and GNET. We characterized SMB in Greenland using the regional climate models MAR (15) and RACMO2 (5). Further details, and a discussion of data access, can be found in SI Appendix.

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