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Stochastic Heterogeneity Mapping as a tool to quantify turbulence in reflectivity layers of thermohaline staircases in the Tyrrhenian Sea

Grant George Buffett (1), Richard W. Hobbs (2), Ekaterina A. Vsemirnova (3), Dirk Klaeschen (1), Charles Hurich (4), Cesar Ranero (5), and Valenti Sallarès (6)

(1) GEOMAR - Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel, Marine Geodynamics, Kiel, Germany (gbuffer@geomar.de, +49-(0)431-600 2922), (2) Dept. Earth Sciences, Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE, UK, (3) Geospatial Research Ltd, Dept. Earth Sciences, Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE, UK, (4) Department of Earth Sciences, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, A1C 5S7, (5) Barcelona Centre for Subsurface Imaging, Instituto de Ciencias del Mar, CSIC, Pg. Marítim de la Barceloneta 37-49, 08003 Barcelona (Spain), (6) Institute of Marine Sciences - CMIMA - CSIC (Barcelona - CSI), Passeig Maritim de la Barceloneta, 37-49, 08003 Barcelona, Spain

Processed multi-channel seismic data acquired in the Tyrrhenian Sea in April-May 2010 with the B/O Sarmiento de Gamboa provide images of oceanic thermohaline staircases. Thermohaline staircases are regular, well-defined step-like variations in vertical profiles of temperature and salinity. In the ocean they are thought to be the result of double diffusion driven by the two order of magnitude difference in the diffusivities of heat and salt. Staircases are believed to have an anomalously weak internal wave-induced turbulence, making them suitable for the estimation of a lower limit of turbulent disturbances detectable by multi-channel seismics.

We apply stochastic heterogeneity mapping based on the band-limited von Kármán function to post-stack time-migrated seismic data to extract stochastic parameters such as the Hurst number (a measure of reflection interface roughness) and correlation length (scale length). For scale sizes smaller than the correlation length, the von Kármán model describes a power law (fractal) process where the Hurst number is its exponent.

We present the results of our analysis corroborated by benchmark tests performed on synthetic seismic data generated from random fractal surfaces. The synthetic tests are found to verify the robustness of the technique. Lower Hurst numbers represent a richer range of high wavenumbers and therefore correspond to a broader range of heterogeneity in reflection events. We interpret a broader range of heterogeneity as indicative of a greater degree of turbulence. Some areas of the seismic data show a spatial variation in Hurst number across several frequency bands that may indicate some preferential coupling of energy at different depths.