# Significant local sea level variations caused by continental hydrology signals

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#### Abstract

Space gravity missions have enabled the quantification of ocean mass increase over the past two decades due to exchanges between continents and oceans. Globally, non-steric sea level rise is predominantly driven by melting polar ice sheets and mountain glaciers. However, continental hydrological processes also contribute to sea level change at significant magnitudes. We show that for most coastal areas in low-to-mid latitudes, up to half of local non-steric sea level rise is due to changes in water storage in ice-free continental regions. At other locations the direct attraction effect of anthropogenic pumping of groundwater over the duration of the GRACE and GRACE-FO mission offsets sea level rise from ice sheet and glacier melt. If these trends in continental hydrological storage were to slow or stop, these regions would experience greatly accelerated sea-level rise, posing a risk to coastal settlements and infrastructure, however, sea level rise elsewhere would be reduced.







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8	•	Exchange of water between continents and oceans causes global sea level change
9		at rates comparable to the contributions of ice sheets
10	•	The direct gravitational attraction effect on local sea level is of a larger magni-
11		tude than the far-field sea level changes
12	•	Inter-annual continental hydrology signal impacts on local sea level have negated
13		the impacts of melting polar ice sheets in some locations

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#### 14 Abstract

Space gravity missions have enabled the quantification of ocean mass increase over the 15 past two decades due to exchanges between continents and oceans. Globally, non-steric 16 sea level rise is predominantly driven by melting polar ice sheets and mountain glaciers. 17 However, continental hydrological processes also contribute to sea level change at sig-18 nificant magnitudes. We show that for most coastal areas in low-to-mid latitudes, up to 19 half of local non-steric sea level rise is due to changes in water storage in ice-free con-20 tinental regions. At other locations the direct attraction effect of anthropogenic pump-21 ing of groundwater over the duration of the GRACE and GRACE-FO mission offsets sea 22 level rise from ice sheet and glacier melt. If these trends in continental hydrological stor-23 age were to slow or stop, these regions would experience greatly accelerated sea-level rise, 24 posing a risk to coastal settlements and infrastructure, however, sea level rise elsewhere 25 would be reduced. 26

#### 27 Plain Language Summary

It is well understood that melting of polar ice sheets and mountain glaciers cause 28 increases in ocean mass, leading to a corresponding rise in global sea level. What is not 29 as obvious is that multi-year changes in the storage of water on continents not covered 30 by ice also contribute significantly to changes in global sea level. Over recent years and 31 in some locations, the magnitude of these 'continental hydrology' contributions to sea 32 level changes have been comparable to the contributions of the ice-covered regions. In 33 some cases, the former have offset the ice sheet contributions, thus reducing regional sea 34 level rise to substantially smaller magnitudes. Through an analysis of space gravity data, 35 we have quantified the effects of continental hydrology on regional sea level and show 36 that changes caused both naturally (e.g. through La Niña events) and through anthro-37 pogenic activities (e.g. extraction of groundwater) can increase or decrease regional sea 38 level by significant amounts. 39

#### 40 1 Introduction

Increases in ocean mass has risen global mean sea level at a rate of  $2.5\pm0.4$  mm/yr 41 (Tapley et al., 2019); however, the most important impact of sea level variations on so-42 ciety lies in the local changes rather than global averages. Ocean mass variations are pre-43 dominantly caused by movement of water, including mass balance change of polar ice 44 sheets (Velicogna & Wahr, 2013; Tapley et al., 2019) (Greenland and Antarctica) and 45 glaciated regions (Wouters et al., 2019; Ciraci et al., 2019) (e.g. Alaska, Patagonia, Sval-46 bard), and changes in soil moisture, surface water and groundwater on continents (Leblanc 47 et al., 2009; Rodell et al., 2019). Closure of the sea level budget has been the focus of 48 many studies (e.g. Barnoud et al., 2023) and involves the apportioning of contributions 49 from polar ice sheets, mountain glaciers, and terrestrial water storage which are further 50 amplified by steric expansion of the oceans as they warm. Rather than considering lo-51 cal sea level changes, studies of this process tend to focus on integrated sea level signals 52 over the global oceans and use a combination of ocean height changes measured by satel-53 lite altimetry, ocean mass change from space gravity missions and temperature and salin-54 ity changes in the oceans from Argo floats (Roemmich et al., 2009) and eXpendable BathyTher-55 mograph observations (e.g. Boyer et al. (2016)). 56

Exchanges of water between continents and oceans includes three additional components that directly affect ocean height beyond the simple volumetric effect. First, variations in the water mass on the continent change the direct gravitational attraction between the oceans and continents (Mitrovica et al., 2001; Lambeck et al., 2017). This process can have a significant effect on local sea level near the location of change of continental water source (J. Sun et al., 2022). Second, water added or taken from the oceans moves the centre of mass of the Earth and is redistributed on a rotating Earth according to particular spatial patterns (Mitrovica et al., 2001; Tamisiea et al., 2010) and affects sea level in the far-field. Third, elastic deformation of the ocean floor occurs due
to changing ocean mass loads (Mitrovica et al., 2001, 2011), affecting both near-field and
far-field ocean heights. Sea level fingerprints (Tamisiea et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2019; J. Sun
et al., 2022) can be used to calculate the spatial pattern of change of ocean height related to mass changes on land.

The Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) and GRACE Follow-70 On (GRACE-FO) space gravity missions provide near-continuous data from 2002 to present 71 from which estimates of change in mass distribution on Earth can be made (Tapley et 72 al., 2004, 2019). The leakage of signals between continents and oceans has been prob-73 lematic in the analysis of space gravity data when estimating changes in mass distribu-74 tion using spherical harmonic basis functions (Chen et al., 2009; Velicogna & Wahr, 2006). 75 Various re-scaling strategies have been invoked (Watkins et al., 2015; Wiese et al., 2016). 76 as well as novel forward modelling approaches to re-instate leaked signal back to the likely 77 correct location on the continents (Chen et al., 2009; Jeon et al., 2021). The use of mass 78 concentration elements (mascons) (Mueller & Sjogren, 1968), rather than spherical har-79 monics, helps to reduce the leakage of signal by permitting more direct spatial constraints 80 on parameters to be applied (Rowlands et al., 2005; Watkins et al., 2015; Tregoning et 81 al., 2022). Irregular-shaped mascons, that follow coastlines with an accuracy of <9 km, 82 further reduce the leakage of signal between continents and oceans (Tregoning et al., 2022). 83

Through the use of forward modelling of GRACE estimates of terrestrial water storage change and sea level fingerprints, agreement was found between regional ocean height changes and those observed by satellite altimetry (Jeon et al., 2021). A similar forwardmodelling approach was used to estimate a 0.32 mm/yr terrestrial water storage contribution to global sea level, leading to a tighter closure of the total sea level budget (Kim et al., 2019). Contributions to global sea level by each continent (plus Greenland and Antarctica) have been assessed in the literature (Rodell et al., 2019).

Separating the contributions from ice-covered regions and the rest of the continen-91 tal land areas permits a more detailed assessment of how continental hydrological pro-92 cesses affect the spatial pattern of sea level height change. The latter includes ground-93 water variations, impounding of water in dams and reservoirs, and changes in soil mois-94 ture volumes. We quantify the integrated change of these components, or total water stor-95 age (TWS), from an analysis of GRACE/GRACE-FO measurements. We then convolve 96 these mass changes with sea level fingerprints to construct time series of regional ocean 97 mass change, caused by continental hydrology (i.e. excluding ice-based mass changes) 98 to identify the continental hydrology sources of changes in local sea level at certain lo-99 cations. 100

#### <sup>101</sup> 2 Space gravity data analysis

We estimate changes in mass on Earth as a change in height of a water column on 102 12,755 irregularly shaped mascons using the range acceleration as the key inter-satellite 103 observation of the GRACE and GRACE Follow-On space gravity missions (Allgever et 104 al., 2022). Data from August 2002 to September 2023 were processed, using the hybrid 105 ACH1B data to model the non-gravitational accelerations on the GRACE-D satellite (Harvey 106 et al., 2022). Non-linear effects in accelerometer measurements, caused by thermal vari-107 ations within the satellites, were mitigated using a high-pass filtering approach (McGirr 108 et al., 2022). This enables the number of accelerometer calibration parameters to be lim-109 ited to one bias and one scale per day per orthogonal axis for the GRACE data and for 110 GRACE-FO data up to the end of 2022. We computed degree-1 contributions from a 111 combination of GRACE and ocean model data (Y. Sun et al., 2016) and the  $C_{2,0}$  esti-112 mates were replaced with values derived from satellite ranging data (Loomis et al., 2020) 113 The values of  $C_{3,0}$  were also replaced for the GRACE-FO data. We formed normal equa-114

tions for 24-hour orbital arcs, then stacked these daily normal equations to form monthlysolutions, defined using calendar months.

<sup>117</sup> We regularise the solutions to overcome the noise inherent in inversions of space <sup>118</sup> gravity data, applying the same values to mascons using broad spatial regions. The off-<sup>119</sup> diagonal elements of our regularisation matrix are zero and the diagonal elements are <sup>120</sup>  $1/\sigma^2$  as shown in Figure S1. The regularisation matrix is applied for each day included <sup>121</sup> in the monthly solution and we use the same regularisation for each monthly solution <sup>122</sup> to keep the analysis process as generic as possible.

#### <sup>123</sup> 3 Calculation of sea level fingerprints

For a 1 m change in water storage on each land mascon, we calculated the corre-124 sponding change in water height of each ocean mascon (the code used for this calcula-125 tion is that employed by Lambeck et al. (2017)). We include in the computations the 126 rotational, gravitational and elastic deformation signals caused by the mass exchange be-127 tween land and oceans. The computations are done on a radially symmetric, spheroidal 128 elastic Earth using the elastic structure of the PREM model (Dziewonski & Anderson, 129 1981). Visco-elastic effects are insignificant and have not been included because the mag-130 nitudes of load variations are small (<15 m) and the time scale of the variations is short 131 (<1 month). The monthly mass changes on land are multiplied by the computed finger-132 prints to apportion the signals over the oceans, thus deriving corresponding monthly ocean 133 signals. 134

#### 135 4 Results

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#### 4.1 Terrestrial water storage contributions to sea level

We are interested in the ocean mass changes from continental hydrology signals. To isolate these signals from ice-related signals over continents, we excluded mass changes over Greenland, Antarctica, the Alaskan and Patagonian glaciers as well as the ice-covered regions of Northeast Canada (Baffin Island, Ellesmere Island), Svalbard and Russian Arctic islands (Severnaya Zemlya and Novaya Zemlya). We calculated separately the ocean mass changes caused by these excluded regions.

Continental hydrology signals in ice-free regions (grey areas; Figure 1a) contribute 143 23% to the global ocean mass budget, with the remaining portion (77%) accounted for 144 by melting mountain glaciers and ice-sheets which are predominantly found at high lat-145 itudes (grey areas; Figure 1b). Although the contribution of ice-covered regions to global 146 mean sea level is  $\sim$ 3-times greater than ice-free regions, these continental hydrology sig-147 nals contribute significantly to regional rates of sea level change. The rate of ocean mass 148 increase from continental hydrology over the GRACE and GRACE-FO era has a distinct 149 spatial pattern driven predominantly by total water storage (TWS) trends in Asia (Fig-150 ure 1a). Meanwhile, the spatial pattern of the sea level fingerprint due to ice-melt causes 151 near-uniform sea-level rise in mid-to-low latitude areas (Figure 1b). The fingerprint of 152 continental hydrology contributions to sea-level results in both the mitigation or ampli-153 fication of ocean mass increase due to melting ice at different locations (Figure S2). 154

Declining TWS in Asia over the GRACE and GRACE-FO era has led to an increase 155 of up to 0.8 mm/yr around Africa, across the central Atlantic Ocean, around Australia 156 and surrounding Pacific Island nations and in the North Pacific Ocean. The significant 157 reductions in continental hydrology contributions of ocean mass in the Black Sea, east-158 ern Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf are caused by decreased strength in the di-159 rect gravitational attraction due to declining TWS in Asia since 2002, including around 160 -0.1 mm/yr due to decreased water storage in the Caspian Sea. Although typically less 161 than 1 mm/yr, local ocean mass changes driven by continental hydrology are compara-162



Figure 1. Rate of ocean mass change due to (a) continental hydrological processes, excluding ice-related signals (b) ice-covered regions. Mascons used to compute the ocean signals from continental hydrology in specific regions are indicated (grey). (c-f) time series of global mean sea level (GMSL) changes at sites indicated in a) from ice- and continental-related ocean contributions. Monthly values (dashed lines) and low-pass filtered values (solid) are plotted. (g-j) Contributions of six continental regions (as defined in Figure S3) to the changes in ocean mass at each location (each time series is offset by 10 mm).

ble to or greater than individual contributions of the Greenland (+0.77 mm/yr) and Antarctic (+0.33 mm/yr) ice sheets over the past two decades (Rodell et al., 2019; Tapley et al., 2019).

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#### 4.2 Local sea level changes

The spatial variability of the contributions of both ice-based and continent hydrology to ocean mass change creates a complex pattern from which to extract a comprehensive synthesis of local information. We focus on particular locations where the magnitudes of rates of continental hydrology contributions are high.

The largest increase in ocean mass caused by continental hydrology occurs around 171 the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, central-west Africa near Lagos (Figure 1a). The increase 172 in total ocean mass during the GRACE period near Lagos amounts to  ${\sim}18~{\rm mm}$  of which 173 36% is derived from contributions from continental hydrology (Figure 1f). Similarly, along 174 the east coast of North America, the magnitude of ice- and continent-based contribu-175 tions is comparable from 2002-2019, at  $\sim$ 13 mm, as seen in the time series for New York 176 (Figure 1c). Interestingly, the decline at New York of sea level change contributions from 177 continental hydrology after 2020 occurs because of the reduced contributions from Asia 178 and increased wetting of the African continent drawing more water from the oceans (Fig-179 ure 1g). 180

In contrast, the total ocean mass change at Kuwait City in the western Persian Gulf 181 is only  $\sim 12$  mm over the 2002-2023 period. Here, the increase due to ice-based contri-182 butions (+29 mm) is compensated by >50% due to continental hydrology contributions 183 (-17 mm) (Figure 1d). The significant negative ocean mass signal here is driven by con-184 tributions from Asia (dark blue line in Figure 1h), including a  $\sim 2 \text{ mm}$  reduction of di-185 rect attraction by 2023 because of water loss in the Caspian Sea. Changes in TWS in 186 Europe have virtually no impact on sea level in the Persian Gulf (purple line in Figure 187 1h). 188

Continental hydrology trends are  $\sim 0.5 \text{ mm/yr}$  throughout the Pacific island nations and ice-based contributions typically contribute 70-80% of the overall ocean mass increase. During the study period, Kiribati, located in the southwest Pacific Ocean, has experienced a total ocean mass increase of 48 mm, of which 10 mm are contributed by non-ice hydrological processes (Figure 1e). Kiribati has experienced a higher proportion of ocean mass increase driven by ice mass loss compared to most other Pacific Island nations.

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#### 4.3 The 2019-2023 triple La Niña

During the GRACE/GRACE-FO period the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) index was mostly in its strong negative phase (>-0.5) from from mid-2010 to early 2012 and again from late 2020 through to early 2023, resulting in the 2010/2011 strong La Niña and three consecutive years of La Niña conditions from 2020-2023 (Figure 2). La Niña brings significantly increased rainfall to large portions of Northern South America and the Australian landmass (Holgate et al., 2022). These two extended periods of La Niña conditions resulted in record flooding across the eastern seaboard of Australia (Fryirs et al., 2023).

The earlier La Niña event of 2010/2011 caused a drop in global sea level of several 205 millimetres as ENSO conditions transitioned from a strong El Niño event to a strong La 206 Niña event during 2010 (Boening et al., 2012). The associated decrease in ocean mass 207 during 2010 is visible in the GRACE record and altimetric measurements of sea surface 208 height corrected for steric expansion of the ocean (Figure 2e). During the two-year pe-209 riod, ocean height reductions of -0.9 mm/yr and -0.82 mm/yr were caused by increased 210 TWS in northern South America and Australia, respectively (Figure 2a,b). In contrast, 211 2020-2023 saw sustained but comparatively weak La Niña conditions which caused a re-212 duction in the rate of ocean mass increase over the three-year period. The recent triple 213 La Niña resulted in a more modest contribution from Australia and northern South Amer-214 ica to ocean mass of 0.25 mm/yr and 0.76 mm/yr, respectively. The total ocean mass 215 measured by GRACE-FO exhibits a reduced rate of increase over this three-year period 216 (Figure 2e). ENSO transitioned from a strong El Niño to neutral to weak La Niña con-217 ditions during the GRACE and GRACE-FO mission gap, this period corresponds to a 218 2-year interruption in the increase in ocean mass measured by steric-corrected altime-219 try (Figure 2e). 220

The consecutive La Ninña events of 2010-2012 and 2020-2023 removed a total  $\sim 3.44$ mm and  $\sim 3.1$  mm of water from the oceans, and deposited it onto the Australian and northern South American landmasses over the two-year and three-year periods, respectively. These rates of TWS gain are comparable to the longer-term contributions of the polar ice sheets to the global ocean (+0.33 mm/yr for Antarctica, +0.77 mm/yr for Greenland) (Rodell et al., 2019)

Similar spatial patterns of change in ocean mass occurred during the two periods
of consecutive La Niña events that occurred during GRACE and GRACE-FO mission
operation (Figure 2c,d). However, the triple La Niña ocean increase is more localised off
eastern Australia and the negative ocean mass signals in the far-field oceans are approximately double the magnitude in the earlier event. The increase in ocean mass around



**Figure 2.** Change in terrestrial water storage integrated over a) northern South America, and b) the Australian continent in terms of global mean sea level (GMSL). Rate of ocean mass change derived using sea level fingerprints to apportion over the oceans the rate of change of TWS for each Australian mascon over c) the 2010-2011 La Niña event, and d) the triple La Niña period (2020-2023). GMSL from total ocean mass change measured by GRACE and GRACE-FO (black) and barystatic sea level changes from steric-corrected (blue)(Barnoud et al., 2023). The red and blue bars indicate the occurrence of El Niño and La Niña events, respectively (?, ?)

the coastline of Australia and northern South America during La Niña periods is due to the stronger direct gravitational attraction of the ocean to the increased water mass on each continent (Figure 2c,d). The southern Atlantic and northern Pacific Oceans lost water during the La Niña precipitation events in Australia.

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#### 4.4 Anthropogenic impacts on sea level

The combination of sea-level fingerprints and estimates of TWS changes allows the 237 direct attribution of sea-level changes to natural climate variability and anthropogenic 238 impacts on water storage contributions. The growing demand for water resources due 239 to socioeconomic development and population growth has resulted in the depletion of 240 groundwater resources in areas such as northern India and the North China Plain. Ground-241 water extraction in northern India (Rodell et al., 2009, 2019) is ongoing at a rate of 18 242 Gt/yr (equivalent to +0.05 mm/yr global sea level) during the past two decades (Fig-243 ure 3a), causing a 1 mm increase in global sea level from 2002 to 2023. However, the rate 244 of TWS decline in northern India during the GRACE-FO era is significantly slower at 245 +0.02 mm/yr global sea level. Annual precipitation has not increased significantly dur-246 ing this time, suggesting that rates of groundwater abstraction have slowed since 2018 247 (Figure 3a). 248



Figure 3. Time series of changes in TWS (black dashed line), low-pass filtered TWS (black solid line) and 2002-2023 and 2004-2020 TWS trends for a) northern India, and b) North China Plain, respectively, in mm of Global Mean Sea Level (GMSL). Corresponding rates of ocean mass change derived using sea level fingerprints to apportion each of these anthropogenic signals over the oceans (c,d). Mascons used to compute the ocean signals from continental hydrology in specific regions are indicated (grey). Grey bars indicate total annual precipitation in mm calculated from ERA5 monthly reanalysis (?, ?).

Following a record year of precipitation in 2003, TWS in the North China Plain 249 declines, contributing +0.04 mm/yr to global mean sea level until 2020 (Figure 3b). The 250 contribution of North China Plain TWS to global sea level reverses during the GRACE-251 FO era, storing 0.05 mm/yr of global mean sea level on the continent. This reversal in 252 trend is likely due to the combined effect of significant increases in precipitation in 2021 253 (Figure 3b) and decreased groundwater abstraction due to the implementation of poli-254 cies to reduce irrigation and south to north water diversion, resulting in groundwater recharge 255 over GRACE-FO period (Long et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Furthermore, the increase 256 in TWS corresponds to a reduction in water use due to the slowdown in manufacturing 257 during the Covid-19 pandemic (Shu et al., 2023) and recharge due to environmental flow 258 releases since 2019 (Liu et al., 2023). 259

Groundwater extraction in northern India over the GRACE and GRACE-FO pe-260 riod have resulted in a fall in sea level, due to a reduction in the strength of the direct 261 gravitational attraction of the ocean to continental water stores, of a maximum negative rate of -0.15 mm/yr along the coastline of southern Pakistan (Figure 3c). Ground-263 water extraction in the North China Plain (Rodell et al., 2019) between 2004 and 2020 264 caused the sea level to fall in the East China Sea by up to -0.54 mm/yr during this pe-265 riod due to the reduced gravitational attraction of the oceans to the China landmass (Fig-266 ure 3d). This is almost a factor of  $\sim 4$  greater than the signal caused by groundwater ex-267 traction in India because the source is much closer to the ocean, despite a comparable 268 contribution to global mean sea level. The peak increases in ocean mass due to the ground-269 water extraction in India (2002-2023) and China (2004-2020) occurred in the northwest-270 ern Atlantic and Southern Ocean, having the largest impact on sea level in North Amer-271 ica and along the South Australian and South African Coastlines (Figure 3d). 272

#### <sup>273</sup> 5 Conclusion

Continental hydrological processes in regions that are not ice-covered have contributed 274 to ocean mass increase on multi-decadal time-scales throughout the GRACE/GRACE-275 FO era. Although they contribute tens of millimetres to regional sea level in some in-276 stances, these impacts are not likely to persist indefinitely. For example, the Asian con-277 tinent, which contributed to the increase in global ocean mass (2003-2020), has been draw-278 ing water from the oceans since 2020. Natural climate variability, such as La Niña events, 279 affect sea level with rates comparable to present day contributions of the polar ice sheets, 280 although these former effects tend to persist for only a few years. Anthropogenic inter-281 vention, such as extraction of groundwater resources, increases ocean mass in the far field, 282 but causes decreases in local sea level of up to  $\sim 1 \text{ mm/yr}$ . These rates of near-field sea 283 level fall are also comparable in magnitude to the longer-term contributions of the po-284 lar ice sheets and mountain glaciers, at times masking  $\sim 80\%$  of the sea level increase caused 285 by melting of ice-covered regions. If this extraction of groundwater ceases, then near-286 field regions (such as the Persian Gulf, eastern Mediterranean, East China Sea, and coast-287 line of southern Pakistan) would see an increase in the rate of local sea level rise of up 288 to 1 mm/yr, significantly increasing the vulnerability of these regions to sea level rise. 289 However, if current trends in groundwater abstraction remain, continental hydrology would 290 continue to compound sea level rise caused by melting of continental ice in the far-field. 291 Currently, >25% of total sea level rise around Africa, across the central Atlantic Ocean, around Australia and surrounding Pacific Island nations, and in the North Pacific Ocean 293 are due to the declining trend in Asia's terrestrial water storage between 2002 and 2023. 294

#### <sup>295</sup> 6 Open Research

The GRACE and GRACE Follow-On data are available from podaac.jpl.nasa 296 .gov/dataset. The ANU mascon solution used in this analysis (ANU\_mascons\_RL02) 297 is available in netcdf format at https://datacommons.anu.edu.au/DataCommons/rest/ 298 display/anudc:6133 and can be visualised at https://portal.auscope.org.au/. The 299 sea level fingerprints computed for our mascons are available at add reference upon ac-300 ceptance of manuscript]. Barystatic sea level changes were accessed at https://doi.org/ 301 10.24400/527896/a01-2023.012. Nino3.4 anomalies were accessed at https://psl.noaa 302 .gov/gcos\_wgsp/Timeseries/Nino34/. ERA5 monthly averaged reanalysis total pre-303 cipitation was accessed at https://cds.climate.copernicus.eu/cdsapp#!/dataset/ 304 reanalysis-era5-single-levels-monthly-means. 305

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