Towards Simultaneous Clear-Sky and Ocean Dynamics Analyses in the NOAA SST System

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Customarily, clear-sky masks for ocean are independent of downstream ocean dynamics applications, such as detection of ocean thermal fronts, currents, cold upwelling, eddies, and monitoring of their evolution in time.

Ocean dynamics in satellite SST imagery is analyzed over clear sky pixels, only, and may be strongly affected by the quality of clear-sky scene detection.
Majority of current masking algorithms use thresholds. Liberal thresholds result in “cloud leakages”, whereas conservative settings lead to “false alarms”

Conservative SST mask is usually considered preferable, to minimize cloud leakages, at the expense of excluding a (presumably, relatively small) fraction of clear pixels, globally

**Standard Quality Criteria:**

- Minimal cloud leakages; and
- Large geographical coverage
The geographic distribution of “false alarms” is highly non-uniform.

“False alarms” are often persistent from pass to pass.

Misclassification mostly occurs in those ocean areas where SST is variable and/or significantly colder than surrounding waters and/or climatology.

It is those highly dynamic and coastal waters that are of most interest to the SST users for fishing, ship navigation, ocean dynamic modeling, climatology and marine biology studies.
Open up interesting areas of the ocean by incorporating elements of ocean dynamics analysis in Clear-Sky Mask

- Initially, we want to reclassify (at least, some) “false alarms” back into clear-sky domain for SST users
- We do not address “cloud leakages”, at this stage of analysis
- This study makes use of VIIRS superior radiometric and imagery performance
- Eventually, we plan to extend the method to MODIS 1km, and AVHRR (1km FRAC, and 4km GAC) data
Typical clear sky ocean regions misclassified by the ACSM

- Contiguous
- With well-defined boundaries
- Typically located in the vicinity of ocean thermal fronts

Existing image processing techniques

- Segmentation
- Morphological Procedures: erosion and dilation
- Thermal Front Detection
Human eye does not perceive absolute pixel values (i.e., SST values)

Instead, it relies on local contrasts and ratios, which more directly correlate with gradients in an image

Difference between ocean and cloud patterns is more pronounced in the SST gradient magnitude domain
Gradient magnitudes viewed as a terrain look like sharp ridges towering over flat valleys.
Step 1: Identify Search Domain

Step 2: Determine SST gradient ridges

Step 3: Determine spatially connected cold SST regions

Step 4: Discard SST segments found in Step 3 that do not border the ridges found in Step 2

Step 5: Statistical Test
VIIRS SST
Narrow down search space, in the interest of processing time
Step 2: Gradient Ridges

Determine contiguous portions of thermal fronts
Step 3: Segmentation

Find spatially connected regions with negative ΔSST
Step 4: Adjacency

Keep Segments that have adjacent Ridges
Keep segments which more statistically similar to ocean then cloud
Restore identified “false alarms” back to SST domain
Existing Image Processing Tools:

- Thermal Front Detection
- Edge Detection
- Gradient Ridges and Valleys
SST Gradient Ridges
Watershed Segmentation

- Segmentation/Clustering is a well studied field
- Many ways to perform segmentation
- We use watershed type applied to ΔSST
Segments obtained via iterative procedure:

Iter 0: Initial segments
Iter k: Lower the threshold level

Find new “catchment basins”
Re-label in case of split
Pattern Recognition techniques assumes that the data is “clean” and free of artifacts. However, VIIRS is subject to:

- Striping
- Pixel deletion zone
- Bow-tie distortions
Destriping

- VIIRS brightness temperatures are subject to striping due to independent characterization of its 16 detectors and double-side mirror.

- This leads to spatial discontinuities and severe artifacts in the SST gradient field rendering pattern recognition analysis unusable.

- As a pre-processing step, VIIRS BT’s are destriped using STAR destriping code.

- The code is currently finalized for operational implementation.
Accuracy of SST retrieval

Stripes noise in level 1B or SDRs BTs can lead to SST errors of up to ± 0.3K
SST Fronts

Striping introduces artificial structures and affects the analysis of thermal fronts (orientation, intensity and location)
Bow-tie area
With Monotonic Latitudes
Resampled
Considered 2 sets of VIIRS data:

- 48 hand picked and cropped regions with typical clear sky misclassification
- 144 granules representing 1 day global observations

Results were visually inspected and analyzed; Success rate is promising but more work is needed.
South Africa, 02/17/13 (night)
Gulf Stream, 05/10/13 (day)

Data courtesy of: USDOC/NOAA/NESDIS

Satellite: NPP
Sensor: VIIRS
Date: 2013/05/10 JD 130
Start time: 21:10:00 UTC
End time: 21:19:59 UTC
Projection type: SWATH
Latitude bounds: 36 N -> 42 N
Longitude bounds: 70 W -> 63 W
Uruguay, 05/05/13 (night)
The algorithm presented here was initially designed as a supplementary step to the existing ACSPO Clear-Sky Mask.

We will consider redesigning the current ACSM, based on the new pattern recognition principles.

It will be first implemented and extensively tested with the VIIRS SSTs, and later extended to also include AVHRR and MODIS data.

We will also consider generating an ocean front product at the stage of cloud masking, and outputting in the SST files, as an additional layer.