Internal waves across the Pacific

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Received 2 August 2007; revised 6 October 2007; accepted 23 October 2007; published 18 December 2007.

[1] The long-range propagation of the semidiurnal internal tide northward from the Hawaiian ridge and its susceptibility to parametric subharmonic instability (PSI) at the “critical latitude,” \( \lambda_c = 28.8^\circ \text{N} \), were examined in spring 2006 with intensive shipboard and moored observations spanning 25–37\(^\circ\)N along a tidal beam. Velocity and shear at \( \lambda_c \) were dominated by intense vertically-standing, inertially-rotating bands of several hundred meters vertical wavelength. These occurred in bursts following spring tide, contrasting sharply with the downward-propagating, wind-generated features seen at other latitudes. These marginally-stable layers (which have inverse 16-meter Richardson number \( Ri_0^{-1} = 0.7 \)) are interpreted as the inertial waves resulting from PSI of the internal tide. Elevated near-inertial energy and parameterized diapycnal diffusivity, and reduced asymmetry in upgoing/downgoing energy, were also observed at and equatorward of \( \lambda_c \). Yet, simultaneous moored measurements of semidiurnal energy flux and 1-km-deep velocity sections measured from the ship indicate that the internal tide propagates at least to 37\(^\circ\)N, with no detectable energy loss or phase discontinuity at \( \lambda_c \). Our observations indicate that PSI occurs in the ocean with sufficient intensity to substantially alter the inertial shear field at and equatorward of \( \lambda_c \), but that it does not appreciably disrupt the propagation of the tide at our location. Citation: Alford, M. H., J. A. MacKinnon, Z. Zhao, R. Pinkel, J. Klymak, and T. Peacock (2007), Internal waves across the Pacific, Geophys. Res. Lett., 34, L24601, doi:10.1029/2007GL031566.

1. Introduction

[2] Breaking internal waves, whose primary sources are the wind and the tides, are the dominant source of deep-ocean mixing [Munk and Wunsch, 1998]. Unravelling the geography and phenomenology of this dissipation requires understanding the generation, propagation, and dissipation of internal tides and near-inertial internal waves, which together comprise most internal-wave energy in the ocean. Internal tides (internal waves of tidal frequency) are primarily generated by barotropic tidal flow over topography. Near-inertial internal waves (waves with frequency near the local inertial frequency, \( f \)) may be generated both at the surface by surface wind forcing and below the surface by extracting energy from the internal tide through parametric subharmonic instability (PSI) [Niwa and Hibiya, 2001; Nagasawa et al., 2002; Hibiya and Nagasawa, 2004; Rainville and Pinkel, 2006; Carter and Gregg, 2006]. The latter mechanism should be particularly efficient at a “critical latitude” of \( \lambda_c = 28.8^\circ \text{N} \), where the M2 tidal frequency is exactly twice the local inertial frequency [MacKinnon and Winters, 2005] (hereinafter referred to as MW05). We report here new observations documenting the long-range propagation of the internal tide and evidence for PSI along its path.

2. Observations and Methods

[3] The experiment (Figure 1) was sited in a beam of M2 tidal energy emanating from French Frigate Shoals, Hawaii. The beam was identified in high-resolution model runs of the PEZHAM (yellow, Figure 1 (left); courtesy of E. Zaron), and POM (not plotted; courtesy of S. Johnston) numerical models. Estimates of M2 energy flux (black) from harmonic analysis of an eight-year altimetric record from the TOPEX/POSEIDON satellite [Ray and Cartwright, 2001] (hereinafter referred to as RC01) show a broader beam that appears to be the average of the FFS beam and the Necker Island beam to the east.

[4] The following observations were made over a 60 day period encompassing two cruises (4/18–5/25 and 6/1–6/18) aboard R/V Revelle during spring 2006:

[5] 1. Moored Profiler Array. 45–50 day time series of profiles of temperature, salinity, and horizontal velocity (black dots) were collected with McLane Moored Profilers at 6 locations spanning 25–37\(^\circ\)N. A profile was conducted from 85–1400 m each 1.5 hr. In addition, velocity from 5–40 m was sampled every few minutes with 300-KHz ADCP’s, and velocity and temperature at 3000 m were measured with SBE-39 temperature loggers and Aanderaa RCM-8 current meters.

[6] Semidiurnal energy flux (\( \langle u'p' \rangle \), where \( u' \), \( p' \) are perturbation velocity and pressure respectively) was computed at each mooring by bandpassing in time, projecting onto the first five baroclinic modes and computing \( p' \) following Kunze et al. (2002) and Alford (2003a). Errors are O(10%), computed using the methods of Nash et al. (2005).

[7] 2. Spatial Surveys. Two northward and two southward 1400-km transits of the line were conducted from 25–37\(^\circ\)N (white). Velocity and shear were measured using Revelle’s 50/140-KHz Hydrographic Sonar System (HDSS). Depth resolution was 4 m down to about 200-m depth and 16 m to \( \approx 1000 \) m depth.

[8] 3. High Resolution Time series. Three 5.25-day time series (blue) were obtained from R/V Revelle at locations...
spanning $\lambda_c$ using HDSS and CTD. Each consisted of a 30-hour time series of full-depth lowered ADCP/CTD stations every 3 h, and a 4-day time series with a fast CTD system that measured $T$, $S$ and density to 1000 m every ten minutes.

3. Results

3.1. Internal Tide Propagation

[9] Time-mean semidiurnal energy flux at each mooring (Figure 1) is along the beam, with the exception of MP4, which is influenced by higher-mode motions presumably emanating from the nearby seamounts to the west. Flux magnitude is 4 kW m$^{-1}$ at the southern end of the line, in good agreement with modeled values (yellow). At the northern end (MP6), the mean is about 1 kW m$^{-1}$. Hence, though the decrease is not monotonic, measured fluxes do decay noticeably over our 1400-km line. Altimetric fluxes (RC01; black arrows in Figure 1) are everywhere at least 3–4 times weaker than the modeled and measured fluxes and are nearly zero by the northern end of the line. (As will be reported elsewhere, altimetric fluxes are lower owing to a combination of smoothing in space and harmonic fitting in time.)

[10] Complementing the spatially discrete moored records, clear spatial snapshots of the internal tide were obtained by measuring upper-ocean velocity from the southward transits (Figure 1, left; white). Consider a free mode-1 internal tide propagating north near $30^\circ$N with the theoretical phase speed of $4 \text{ m s}^{-1}$, sampled by a ship steaming northward and southward at the same speed. Since
HDSS penetrates nearly to the velocity zero crossing, the upper portion of the mode 1 velocity is measurable. (Since the mode-1 zero crossing for velocity is near 1300 m in this region, \( h V_{i0} – 1000 \) is closely related to the mode-1 velocity amplitude. Given the stratification profile, it is straightforward to relate \( h V_{i0} – 1000 \) to sea surface height anomaly (SSHA) given measured stratification profiles along our line. For a northbound wave at the southern end of our line, an upward 1 cm SSHA is in phase with a northward \( h V_{i0} – 1000 \) of 2.0 cm s\(^{-1}\). The factor increases smoothly to \( 3.1 \) cm s\(^{-1}\) at the northern end as stratification decreases. The velocity axis in Figure 1 (right) is scaled using the value at 31°N.) On southbound tracks, signals are Doppler compressed by a factor of two (to an apparent horizontal wavelength of about 80 km) since the ship and the tide are approaching one another at a relative speed of about 8 m s\(^{-1}\). On northbound tracks, time-varying signals are virtually absent since the ship is nearly in the wave’s reference frame.

\[11\] Measured \( h V \) on southward transits (Figure 1, right; blue) exhibits clear features of \( \approx 80 \)-km wavelength, with amplitude \( 4–5 \) cm s\(^{-1}\). Since these have the predicted wavelength and are absent on northward tracks (not shown), we conclude they are the Doppler-compressed mode-1 internal tide. Additionally, when high-pass filtered to remove velocity signatures associated with mesoscale flows, the associated SSHA (red) agrees well in both amplitude and phase with that measured from TOPEX/POSEIDON on a nearby track (black). Importantly, no discontinuities in phase or amplitude are seen at \( \lambda_c \), suggesting that PSI disrupts the internal tide only slightly at this location. The persistence of the internal tide to 37° north is consistent both with this view and with the observed northward energy flux at 37°N.

\[12\] Observed variability in energy flux (Figure 1, gray curves) is dominated by spring/neap changes, as can be seen in time series (Figure 2b). The lag of each peak relative to the barotropic tidal currents at Hawaii (Figure 2a) increases with distance from the ridge, from MP1 (0–2 days), MP3 (1–4 days), to MP6 (5–6 days), as expected for a mode 1 signal propagating at its group velocity (1.1, 2.5, and 6.9 days, respectively), as also found by Alford and Zhao [2007].

3.2. Near-Inertial Waves and PSI

\[13\] Model simulations (MW05) predict a catastrophic loss of tidal energy at the critical latitude owing to PSI. While evidence for such a loss was not found, our observations indicate that PSI not only occurs at \( \lambda_c \), but also significantly impacts the distribution and character of internal-wave energy.

3.2.1. Time series of shear

\[14\] Shear at the critical latitude (Figure 3b) differs qualitatively from that to the north or south (Figures 3a and 3c). At all three stations, dominantly near-inertial shear
is vertically advected by predominantly semidiurnal isopyc nal displacements (black lines). Shear at all stations decreases in amplitude and increases in vertical scale with increasing depth, as a consequence of refraction from stratification differences, as typically seen. However, while the northern and southern stations exhibit classic upward phase propagation, consistent with generation at the surface by wind, shear at \( \lambda_c \) is dominated by inertially rotating motions of several hundred meters’ vertical scale that do not appear to cross isopycnals. Shear at \( \lambda_c \) is enhanced between 400–700 m relative to the other sites (inverse 16-meter Richardson number \( R_{16}^{-1} \approx 0.7 \)). The elevated shear and absence of vertical propagation are consistent with inertial waves generated by PSI of the internal tide (MW05).

Greater temporal context is offered in Figure 2c, which shows meridional shear over 50 days at MP3. A rich, variable shear field is seen, with a distinction between the strong non-propagating shear periods exemplified in Figure 3b (rectangle), and weaker periods (e.g. yeardays 152–156, 700–900 m) characterized by downward propagation of energy. The loose tendency of the periods of strong non-propagating shear to closely follow spring tide by lags of a few days (consistent with expected growth rates for PSI [MW05; Young and Tsang, 2007]) is further evidence for their tidal origin.

3.2.2. Latitudinal Dependence of Inertial Energy

The observed meridional distribution of near-inertial energy strongly argues for PSI generation at the critical latitude. Near-inertial waves (either wind or PSI generated) are near the lower limit of the internal wave frequency band and hence must propagate equatorward. Wind generated waves are constrained to propagate downward, but PSI waves generated in the fluid interior may propagate either upwards or downwards as they head equatorward. Hence, near-inertial energy equatorward of \( \lambda_c \) would be expected to (1) be enhanced and (2) show more isotropy between upward and downward motions than at higher latitude.

To test this notion, each velocity profile from the latitudinal shipboard transits and all moorings was first demeaned and detrended in depth to emphasize near-inertial (short-wavelength) rather than tidal and mesoscale features. Then, counterclockwise and clockwise components with depth (representing, for linear internal waves, upward and downward energy propagation, respectively) were computed as the positive/negative Fourier components. North of \( \lambda_c \), downdowngoing energy (Figure 4a, blue) exceeds upgoing energy (red), particularly in several near-inertial events, as often observed [Leaman and Sanford, 1976; D’Sasaro and Perkins, 1984]. South of \( \lambda_c \), both up and down energy increase by a factor of 2–3, while the up/down anisotropy
vanishes, consistent with PSI generation and subsequent equatorward propagation.

3.2.3. Mixing

[18] The dissipation rate of turbulent kinetic energy and diapycnal diffusivity were estimated using Thorpe analysis [Dillon, 1982] and from the method outlined by Gregg et al. [2003]. (For moored estimates, shear spectra were integrated out to a wavenumber cutoff where the integrated Froude variance is 0.6. For shipboard sonar estimates, spectra were only integrated to a wavelength of 60 meters, where noise becomes important.) Since the two methods yielded similar results, only the latter are presented here. A clear enhancement in diffusivity is seen near $\lambda_c$ (Figure 4b) in both moored (red dots) and shipboard shear (black). Considering only the depth range 500–1000 m (blue), where the bulk of the shear features presented above reside, the enhancement is still greater, exceeding that at higher and lower latitudes by a factor of 5 or more. The enhancement is reminiscent of that found by Hibiya and Nagasawa [2004], but more peaked at $\lambda_c$; this may owe to our location in a beam as opposed to their spatially broad measurements.

[19] In steady state, dissipation should equal the rate of transfer from the internal tide to the inertial motions. Hence, an upper bound on energy transferred from the internal tide to the near-inertial motions at MP3 can be estimated by assuming that all mixing is due to PSI. Estimated dissipation at MP3 was $\approx 5 \times 10^{-9}$ Wkg$^{-1}$. This rate of energy loss occurring over the upper 1000 m, and within $\pm 50$ km of $\lambda_c$, would remove 0.5 kWm$^{-1}$ from the internal tide – 24% of the mean flux at MP3. Given that some mixing is likely due to background and/or wind-generated waves, a more conservative estimate would be half of this, or about 12%.

[20] Hence, PSI appears not to pose a significant energy sink for the internal tide at this location, consistent with the lack of detectable change in the internal tide’s structure and energy flux at $\lambda_c$. However, the inferred rate of near-inertial wave generation by PSI ($2.5 \times 10^{-3}$ Wm$^{-2}$) exceeds the mean wind input at this latitude [Alford, 2003b] by a factor of 2–3. This implies that PSI can represent a significant source of near-inertial energy, whose subsequent equatorward propagation would explain the heightened shear equatorward of $\lambda_c$. Furthermore, limited HDSS measurements along 28.8°N to the east of our main line showed evidence of parameterized diffusivity several times larger, large enough to be a locally significant drain on propagating tidal energy flux. This suggests that PSI occurs in a patchy manner along $\lambda_c$, with more intense tidal loss occurring where the strongest tidal beams cross this latitude (H. Simmons, Spectral modification and geographic redistribution of the semi-diurnal internal tide, submitted to Ocean Modelling, 2007).

4. Discussion

[21] Our observations indicate marked changes in the spatial and temporal characteristics of the shear field at $\lambda_c$.
relative to the near-inertial field typically seen at other latitudes. The vertical isotropy, suggested spring/neap cycle and latitudinal structure of observed shear are all consistent with the transformation of the mode-1 internal tide into high-mode near-inertial waves by PSI. However, the inferred $O(10-20\%)$ energy loss from the internal tide is much less than MW05’s prediction (62%). In addition to the possibility of greater fractional energy loss in stronger beams as suggested above, preliminary numerical and theoretical work suggests that the presence in the true ocean of higher mode tides propagating in different directions detunes the perfect phase locking that led to exponential PSI growth in MW05.

[22] Though the nonmonotonicity of the moored fluxes (Figure 1) prevents quantitative certainty, the general decrease in flux over our line from 4 to 1 kWm (75%) is roughly consistent with that expected for $r^{-1}$ cylindrical spreading over this distance (85%). Therefore, spreading and (to a lesser degree) PSI can together more than account for the observed attenuation. Other processes such as topographic scattering may also occur, but determining their relative importance requires further measurements.

[23] Acknowledgments. We are greatly thankful for the expertise, cheerful attitude and hard work of R/V Revelle’s captain, Tom Des Jardines, and crew, as well as Eric Slater, Mike Goldin, Mai Bui, Jon Pompa, Tyler Hughen, Eric Boget, Andrew Cookson, Dave Winkel, Oliver Sun, Kim Martini, Paola Eccheverri and Carl Mattson. We are grateful to Ed Zaron and Shaun Johnston for numerical calculations that aided cruise planning. We thank Walter Munk for providing the inspiration for this experiment, as well as advice and encouragement. We thank the Woods Hole Buoy Group, Knut Aagard, Charlie Eriksen, Rebecca Woodgate, Craig Lee, and Elise Ralph for loan of mooring equipment. This work was supported by NSF grant OCE-0424717.

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