

The Early-1990s Shift in the Pacific Climate

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ABSTRACT

There is substantial evidence that significant changes occurred in broad areas of the Pacific in the early 1990s, including the shift of the location of El Niño events from the eastern Pacific to the central Pacific (CP). Observational analysis and coupled model experiments are conducted to show that the early-1990s climate shift is linked to a phase change of the Atlantic Multi-decadal Oscillation (AMO) that occurred at about the same time.

The recent emergence of the CP El Niño can be attributed to this AMO phase change via the following chain of events: a switch in the AMO to its positive phase in the early 1990s led to an intensification of the Pacific Subtropical High. The intensified High resulted in stronger-than-average background trade winds that enhanced the Wind-Evaporation-SST feedback mechanism, strengthening the subtropical Pacific coupling between the atmosphere and ocean, making the subtropical Pacific precursors more capable of penetrating into the deep tropics, and ultimately leading to increased occurrence of the CP El Niño events.

Evidence is also found that the typical drought pattern in Eastern China diminished after the early-1990s climate shift and is replaced by a new pattern that is produced by the AMO via a Eurasian wave train emanating from North Atlantic to China. This study indicates that the early 1990s is a time when the Atlantic began to exert a stronger influence on climate over East Asia and a large part of the Pacific.