



NAAC (v1.0): A Seamless Two-Decade Cross-Scale Simulation from the North American Atlantic Coast to Tidal Wetlands Using the 3D Unstructured-grid Model SCHISM (v5.11.0)

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Abstract. Saltwater intrusion is an increasing concern for coastal ecosystems. While groundwater models have made progress in simulating aquifer salinization, their boundary conditions—potentially informed by ocean model simulations in shallow water systems and intertidal zones—remain constrained. Here we presented a 3D unstructured-grid model that covers the Gulf of Maine and the Mid-Atlantic Bight, and most areas of the South-Atlantic Bight along the North American Atlantic Coast (“NAAC”) for 2 decades, with a focus on the salinity simulations. This model resolves detailed geometric features of tidal tributaries down to 100 m while maintaining a resolution of 6.5 km in the coastal ocean. The two-decadal simulations from 2001 to 2020 were evaluated using a comprehensive observational dataset of elevation, temperature, and salinity. The mean absolute error in the M2 amplitude across the NOAA tidal gauges within the domain is 0.11 m. The root-mean-square deviation for salinity and temperature measurements are 0.27 PSU and 0.12 °C, respectively. The model reasonably captured the currents and circulations. For the first time, we extended a regional continental scale ocean model to the tidal wetlands to include compound flooding process. The two-decade of simulations of hydrodynamic and hydrological connectivity along the Atlantic Coast have significantly addressed numerous observational gaps in many systems. Specifically, saltwater intrusion patterns in major estuaries of the Mid-Atlantic, such as Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay, and other tributaries within the same hydrologic unit, exhibit significant correlations. The seamless cross-scale capability of this model facilitates future applications to land-sea interactions, such as carbon fluxes.

1 Introduction

Coastal regions are critical transition zones between saline oceanic waters and freshwater systems. Saltwater intrusion (SWI), defined as the landward encroachment of saltwater into freshwater aquifers, has become an increasing concern due to its adverse effects on drinking water quality, agriculture, and ecosystem stability (Barlow and Reichard,



2010; Werner et al., 2013). Numerical modeling, particularly groundwater models (e.g., Heiss and Michael, 2014; Paldor and Michael, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022), has been an effective tool for assessing SWI and its ecological impacts. Although oceanic forcing can be integrated into groundwater models through various approaches, such as incorporating observational data (Heiss and Michael, 2014), the spatial coverage and resolution often remain limited. Coastal ocean models can provide
35 comprehensive boundary conditions across extended spatial and temporal scales. Larger regional models, which are typically downscaled from global ocean models, primarily emphasize deep-water regions and ocean circulation patterns (Hofmann et al., 2008; Warner et al., 2010; Lopez et al., 2020). In contrast, higher-resolution models—often with spatial resolutions of a few hundred meters—are used to capture nonlinear dynamics influenced by local geographic features, as demonstrated in studies of Chesapeake Bay (Li et al., 2005; Cai et al., 2020), Delaware Bay (Chen et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2024), and other
40 coastal systems worldwide (Xia et al., 2007; Xue et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2011; Xue et al., 2012; Li et al., 2022). However, shallow water systems and intertidal zones are often simplified or entirely excluded unless specifically targeted in certain studies (Tian et al., 2022; Cai et al., 2023). These omissions can compromise the accuracy of certain assessments, thereby limiting the effectiveness of ocean models in estimating surface water SWI or integrating with groundwater models. Although high-resolution models are becoming more flexible for shallow regions (Cui et al., 2024), a comprehensive model
45 that explicitly incorporates all these components remains under-developed.

In addition to addressing the lack of modelling tools, developing this NAAC model is also crucial for bridging observational gaps. Over the past few decades, there has been a significant accumulation of observational data, especially for key physical parameters such as water elevation, salinity, and temperature. However, these observations are unevenly distributed, with some areas heavily monitored while others lack observational coverage. For instance, Chesapeake Bay has
50 seen extensive salinity, temperature, and nutrient monitoring since the 1980s, with numerous stations covering its main stem and tributaries, though the majority occur on a bi-weekly basis. Conversely, Delaware Bay has a few upstream stations providing daily salinity data spanning over five decades, while the remaining stations in the lower bay have records of less than 20 years or even 8 years. Beyond these two major estuaries, long-term monitoring of salinity and other parameters in smaller embayment in the mid-Atlantic region is even scarcer. Numerical model hindcasts can serve as a valuable tool to fill
55 these observational gaps and can be further complemented by methodologies like remote sensing.

In this manuscript, we introduce a modelling system based on the SCHISM (Semi-implicit Cross-scale Hydroscience Integrated System Model) framework that covers the Gulf of Maine (GoME), the Mid-Atlantic Bight (MAB), and much of the South-Atlantic Bight (SAB) along the North American Atlantic Coast using unstructured grids. We have conducted a 20-year simulation from 2001 to 2020, focusing on tidal elevation, salinity, temperature, and velocity
60 simulations. Our ultimate goal is to develop a reliable database to support future investigations, including SWI and other topics such as coastal carbon cycling. The study area, observational data used in this study, and model configuration are detailed in the Methods section. The following section presents model skill assessments. In the Discussion, we explore the implications for major water bodies, model uncertainties, and future directions before concluding the study.

2 Methods

2.1 Study area

The model domain covers the GoME, the MAB, and much of the SAB (Fig. 1). The GoME is a semi-enclosed body of water, bordered to the south and east by underwater banks, notably Georges Bank to the south. Along the GoME coastline are several estuaries, including the Bay of Fundy, Passamaquoddy Bay, Penobscot Bay, and Massachusetts Bay. The MAB is delineated from the GoME by Cape Cod and includes key estuaries such as Long Island Sound, Delaware Bay, and Chesapeake Bay. Long Island Sound, which stretches approximately 180 km, lies between Long Island and Connecticut. It connects to the ocean through the East River near New York City on its western end and through a narrow channel between Orient Point and Fishers Island on its eastern end. Outside of Long Island Sound, additional water bodies such as Great Peconic Bay, Little Peconic Bay, Noyack Bay, Sag Harbor Bay, Gardiners Bay, and Napeague Bay are closely linked to Long Island. Further south, Delaware Bay, a significant estuary bordered by New Jersey and Delaware, lies along the New Jersey coast. Chesapeake Bay is separated from Delaware Bay by the Delmarva Peninsula, though the two are connected via a canal. The division between the MAB and SAB occurs at Cape Hatteras, centrally located within the Albemarle-Pamlico Estuary System (APES), a complex lagoon system fed by six river basins. The coastline from Cape Fear to Cape Canaveral forms the Georgia Bight.

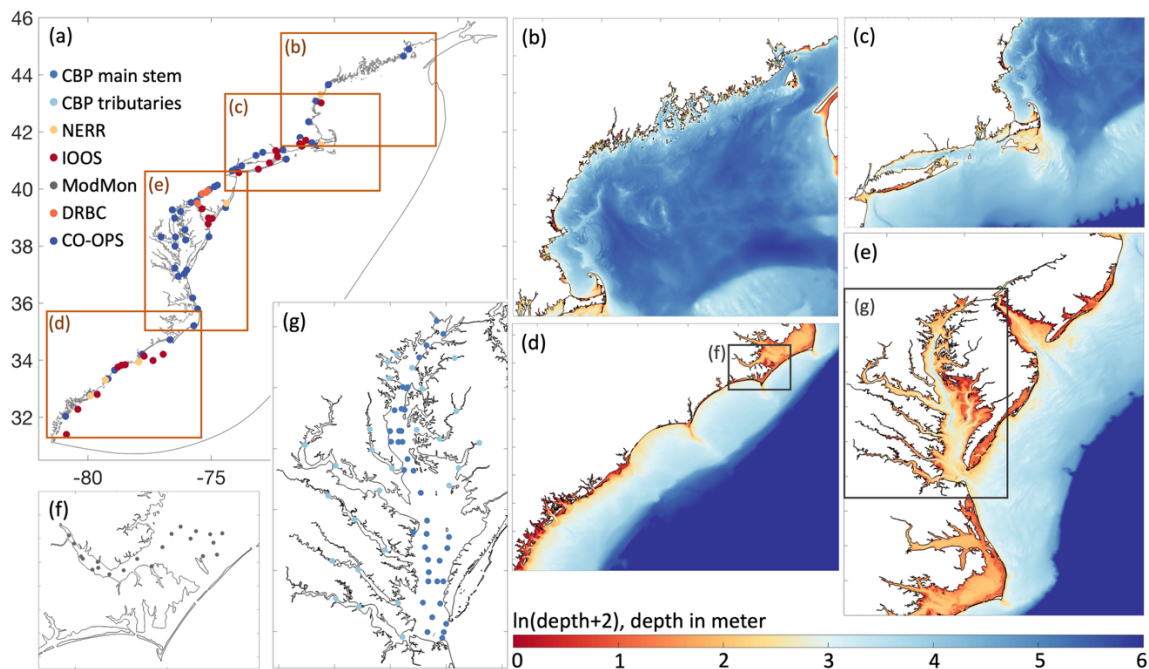


Figure 1: Study area along the North American Atlantic Coast. Scatters in (a, f, g) indicate the locations of monitoring stations from which data were used in this study for the skill assessments of elevation, salinity, and temperature. Panels (b, c, d, and e)



present detailed close-up views of specific areas within the Gulf of Maine, Long Island Sound, the South-Atlantic Bight, and the Mid-Atlantic Bight, respectively.

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The GoME shoreline is predominantly rocky and scenic, shaped by glaciation (Uchupi and Bolmer, 2008). The central basin of the GoME features undersea valleys reaching depths of about 500 m, with an average depth of approximately 150 m (Uchupi and Bolmer, 2008). The MAB is characterized by a broad continental shelf extending roughly 100 km offshore (McNinch, 2004). Depths in major estuaries vary considerably: Long Island Sound has an average depth of 20 m, Delaware Bay averages 8 m, and Chesapeake Bay averages 6.5 m (Knebel et al., 1999; Dubois, 1988; Hobbs, 2004). The shoreline of Long Island Sound features a mix of sandy beaches, rocky shores, tidal flats, and tidal marshes, while the shores of Delaware Bay and Chesapeake Bay are more dominated by extensive tidal marshes (Knebel et al., 1999; Dubois, 1988; Hobbs, 2004). The SAB's geological features include "erosion remnant islands," "marsh islands," and "beach-ridge islands" (Zeigler, 1959). Within the APES, average depths are about 4.5 m, ranging from 7.5 m to less than 2 m (Clunies et al., 2017).

The GoME is notable for having one of the highest tidal amplitudes globally, exceeding 6 m (Ray, 2006). The GoME watershed covers an area of 180,000 km², with the Saint John and Penobscot Rivers being the largest contributors, discharging 990 m³ s⁻¹ and 342 m³ s⁻¹ respectively (Huntington and Billmire, 2014). On the ocean side, the Labrador Current flows along the Scotian Shelf, and subpolar North Atlantic waters mixed with eddies from the Gulf Stream enter through the Northeast Channel (Seidov et al., 2021). The overall circulation pattern in the GoME is counterclockwise, with two major outflows passing through the Great South Channel and around Georges Bank (Seidov et al., 2021). Along the MAB coast, the tidal range is generally less than 2 m (He et al., 2011). The Hudson River stream flow, along with tidal forcing, predominantly controls the stratification at the Hudson River Estuary (Ralston et al., 2008). The Delaware River is the primary tributary of Delaware Bay, contributing over 50% of the freshwater inflow, which totals 371 m³ s⁻¹ (Kauffman et al., 2011). Tidal forcing is the main driver of circulation patterns in Delaware Bay. In Chesapeake Bay, the Susquehanna River (1,135 m³ s⁻¹), followed by the Potomac River (306 m³ s⁻¹) and the James River (194 m³ s⁻¹), are the major freshwater sources, draining a watershed of 165,759 km² across six states (Ator et al., 2020). Chesapeake Bay also exhibits seasonal stratification due to its physical water characteristics (Murphy et al., 2011). In the SAB, the tidal range varies, with only 0.6 m at Cape Fear but up to 3 m along the Georgia coast (Blanton et al., 2004). The Gulf Stream flows through the Straits of Florida, follows the SAB coastline, and then veers east near the APES (Andres, 2021).

2.2 Observations

We employed an extensive observational dataset to conduct the model skill assessments (Fig. 1). For water elevation and current velocities, we primarily relied on tidal gauge and current data from the NOAA Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and Services (CO-OPS; <https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/products.html>), metadata from the NOAA



Integrated Ocean Observing System (IOOS; <https://sensors.ioos.us>), an hourly, 6-km surface current data from Coastal Ocean Dynamics Application Radar (CODAR) SeaSonde HF radar system at the National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI, www.ncei.noaa.gov/data/oceans/ndbc/hfradar/rtv). Specifically for estuaries with additional long-term monitoring, we use long-term monitoring database from the Cheesecake Bay Program (CBP;

120 <http://www.chesapeakebay.net/data>) for the Chesapeake Bay, high frequency measurements from the USGS and relevant products from the Delaware River Basin Commission (<https://www.nj.gov/drbc/>) for the Delaware Bay, and data from the Neuse River Estuary Modeling and Monitoring Project (ModMon; <https://paerllab.web.unc.edu/modmon/>) for the APES. Additionally, long-term monitoring data from the National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERR; <https://cdmo.baruch.sc.edu/aqs>) was used to validate creek and wetland simulations.

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2.3 Model configuration

For this study, we utilized the SCHISM (v5.11.0) framework, which is particularly well-suited for seamless cross-scale modelling (Zhang et al., 2025). SCHISM is distinguished by its use of mixed triangular-quadrangular unstructured horizontal grids and its flexible vertical grid coordinate system, known as Localized Sigma Coordinates with Shaved Cell (LSC2) (Zhang et al., 2015). This adaptability in both horizontal and vertical grid configurations make SCHISM especially effective in environments with complex geometrical features, such as tidal wetlands and tributaries. Additionally, SCHISM employs a semi-implicit time-stepping scheme within a hybrid finite-element and finite-volume framework to solve the Navier-Stokes equations. This numerical approach ensures stability and reliability, particularly under wetting and drying conditions typical of tidal wetlands (Cai et al., 2022 and 2023). Notably, the model's scheme bypasses the constraints of the Courant-Friedrichs-Lewy condition (Zhang et al., 2016), allowing for the use of relatively large time steps even with high-resolution grids that capture detailed geomorphic features. This capability significantly improves numerical efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Overall, SCHISM stands out as one of the few hydrodynamic models ideally suited to our research purposes, which addresses the intricate interplay between land and sea, marked by complex geometrical and hydrodynamic processes.

140 The model's resolution varies from 6.5 km in the coastal ocean to 100 m in tidal wetlands (Cai et al., 2025). The vertical resolution ranges from up to 63 layers in the deep ocean to a single layer in the wetlands, with an average of 23.6 layers over the entire domain. The extent of tidal marsh wetlands is based on the CONUS tidal wetland cover maps (Yang et al., 2022; Fig. 2c). Since the marsh upland migration over the simulation period is generally smaller than the resolution used in this study, we did not account for horizontal evolution in the land boundary. In a simplified version of wetland tributary and creek coverage, the model consists of 983,607 total elements and 540,895 nodes. When more details of the wetland components are included, the total element count increases to 1,075,826, and the node count rises to 592,583 (Fig. 2). Considering the additional computational cost of incorporating tidal marsh coverage, we conducted a 20-year simulation



with simplified coverage of wetlands, focusing on tributaries, and a single year (2003) with comprehensive tidal marsh coverage for sensitivity analysis.

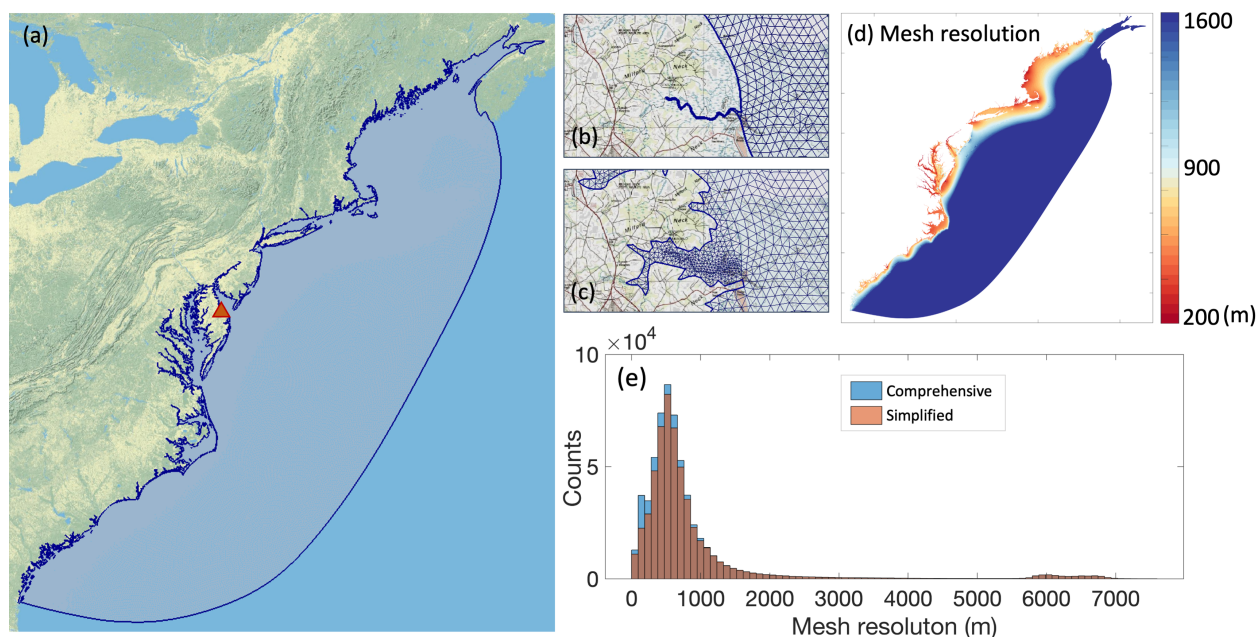


Figure 2: (a) Model domain and grid, the background is a topographic map from USGS. (b, c) Zoom-in view of the area marked by the orange triangle in (a), showing simplified and comprehensive coverage of tidal wetlands respectively. (d, e) Horizontal distribution and corresponding histogram of mesh resolutions.

We refer to NOAA Continuously Updated Digital Elevation Model (CUDEM;

<https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/metadata/geoportal/rest/metadata/item/gov.noaa.ngdc.mgg.dem:999919/html>) and USGS Coastal National Elevation Database (CoNED; <https://www.usgs.gov/coastal-changes-and-impacts/coned>) for the bathymetry setup (Fig. 1b-e). To drive the model, we incorporate river discharge data from the National Water Model (NWM;

<https://water.noaa.gov/about/nwm>) for the U.S. East Coast (Fig. 3). For the Canadian regions, we utilize real-time hydrometric data (https://wateroffice.ec.gc.ca/map/index_e.html?type=real_time). The ocean boundary conditions are defined by the Hybrid Coordinate Ocean Model (HYCOM; <https://www.hycom.org>; Fig. 4); while the atmospheric forcing is provided by the North American Regional Reanalysis (NARR; <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/products/weather-climate-models/north-american-regional>; Fig. 5). HYCOM data is used to initialize the model along the open ocean boundaries, while the finer, landward water bodies are initialized with reasonable constant values for each tracer (e.g., temperature and salinity). The model is then spun up for three years to establish fully developed three-dimensional initial conditions for the 20-year simulation period. This spin-up duration accounts for the range of residence times within the system, which can vary from a few days to several hundred days across different water bodies.

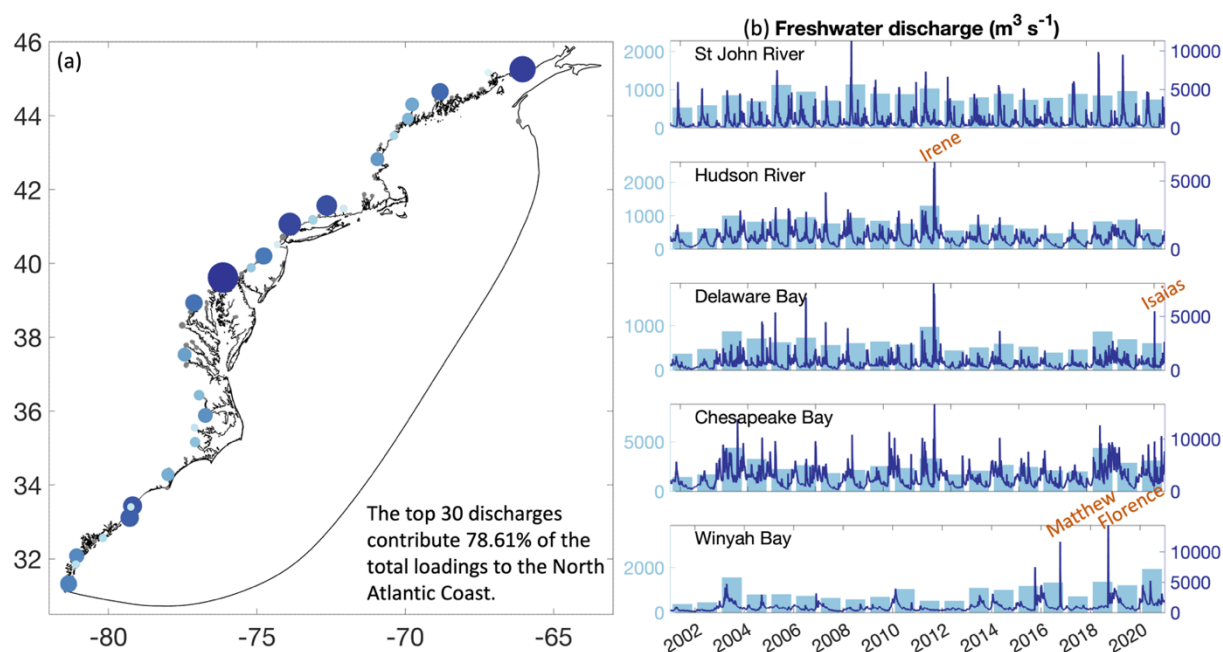
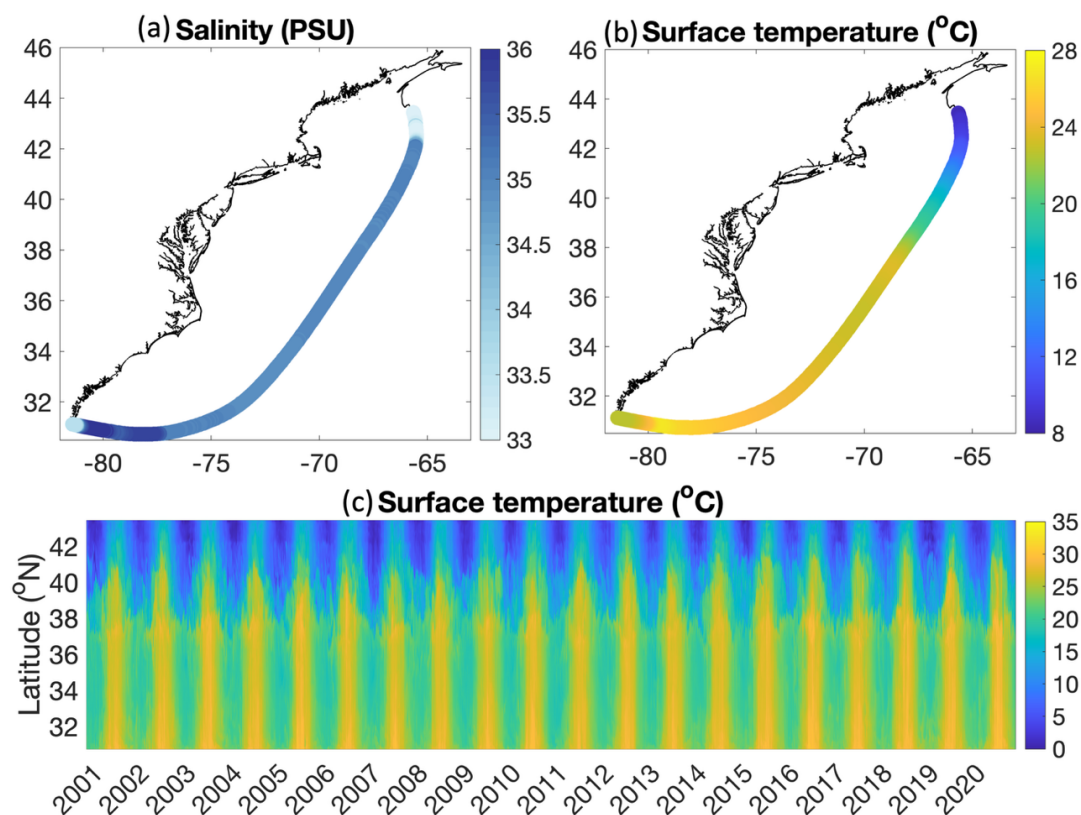


Figure 3: (a) Spatial distribution and (b) time series of freshwater discharge across the major water bodies of the North American Atlantic Coast. Darker colors, correlated to larger circle size, in panel (a) represent higher freshwater discharge amounts for the period from 2001 to 2020.



175 **Figure 4: Ocean boundary forcing in the model. (a, b) Mean salinity and surface temperature along the ocean boundary over the 20-year simulation period. (c) Time series of surface temperature along the ocean boundary excluding the near near-shoal part on the southeastern side, from lower to higher latitudes.**

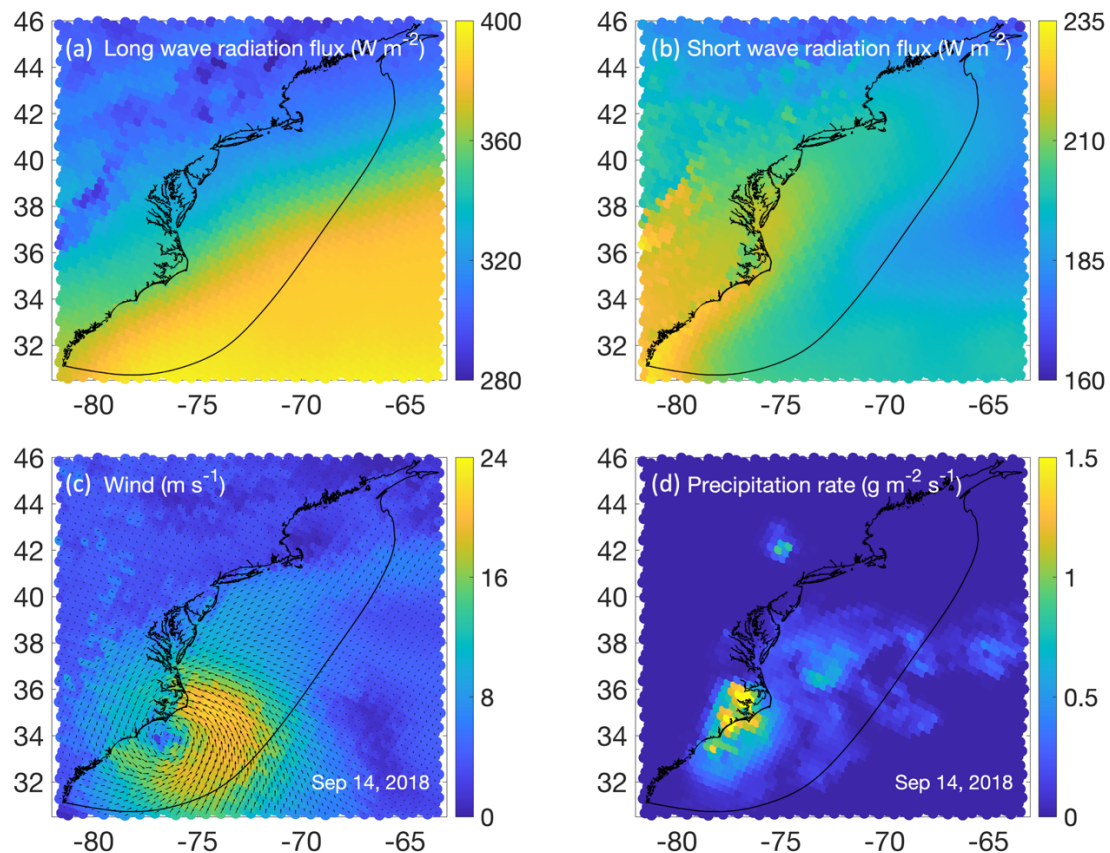


Figure 5: Atmospheric forcing in the model. (a, b) Mean downward longwave and shortwave radiation fluxes over the 20-year simulation period. (c, d) Instantaneous wind velocity and precipitation during Hurricane Florence.

3 Model skill assessments

3.1 Tidal elevations

We compare the eight tidal constituents (M2, S2, N2, K2, K1, O1, P1, Q1) between the model simulations and NOAA tidal gauge data (Fig. 6). Since the semi-diurnal M2 constituent is the dominant component along the East Coast with a higher amplitude, we specifically highlight its comparison across stations from south to north for each year (e.g., year 2003 in Fig. 6a). The mean absolute error (MAE) for the M2 constituent across all stations is 0.11 m. For the other constituents — Q1, O1, P1, K1, N2, S2, and K2 — the MAEs are 0.003 m, 0.015 m, 0.006 m, 0.011 m, 0.021 m, 0.022 m, and 0.007 m, respectively. The correlation coefficient between observations and model simulations is 0.83 for Q1, O1, P1, and K1, and 0.97 for N2, S2, and K2. Corresponding r-square values are 0.87 and 0.94, respectively, indicating strong statistical significance. These performance metrics are slightly lower than reported in previous studies using SCHISM, such as Cui et al. (2024), likely due to the inclusion of shallow water stations, where uncertainties from factors like bathymetry and local



friction are more pronounced. Additionally, overestimation in the GOME model tends to degrade the statistics. Despite this, the M2 amplitude remains highly consistent across most of the domain, particularly in the focused MAB study areas.

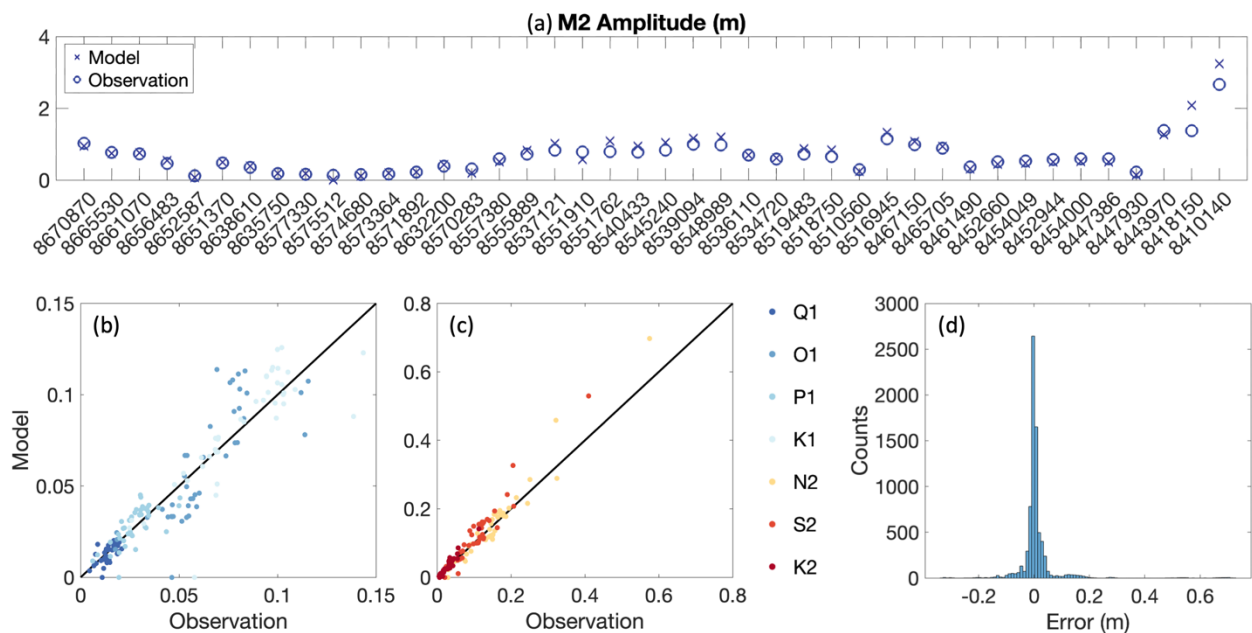


Figure 6: (a) Comparison of model-simulated and observed M2 tidal amplitude at stations along the North American Atlantic coast for year 2003. (b,c) Model versus observed values (m) for additional tidal constituents, indicated by listed colors of each constituents in the the rightside of panel (c). (d) Histogram of error differences for the eight tidal constituents across all years with available data.

3.2 Salinity and temperature

Available data from various sources (Fig. 1) were utilized to evaluate the model's performance in simulating salinity and temperature (Fig. 7). Both the Chesapeake Bay and Delaware Bay exhibit comparable model skills for salinity, with root mean square deviations (RMSD) less than 0.15 PSU for the main stem and 0.34 PSU for tributaries, normalized standard deviations (STD) below 1.08 PSU, and correlation coefficients (CC) larger than 0.95. Seasonal stratification, characterized by differences between surface and bottom salinity, is accurately represented in the Chesapeake Bay's main stem and major tributary channels (Fig. 8ab). Shallow water simulations at APES, validated by ModMon, demonstrate slightly higher RMSD (0.38 PSU), a normalized STD of 0.80 PSU, and a CC of 0.82. The narrow salinity range observed at many coastal IOOS stations (e.g., 30 to 36 PSU in Fig. 8d) generally results in small RMSDs and STDs, ensuring a reasonably high CC for temporal variations. However, NERR stations show lower model performance, with an RMSD of 0.24 PSU, a normalized STD of 1.61 PSU, and a CC of 0.89. These discrepancies may be attributed to potential historical shifts in NERR station locations, introducing uncertainties in skill assessment. Additionally, the model struggles to capture

high-frequency salinity fluctuations over tidal and diurnal cycles at NERR stations due to the limited resolution and absence of explicit representation of tidal marsh creeks and wetlands in the base scenario. Despite these challenges, the model reasonably captures the overall salinity magnitude and temporal variations at certain NERR stations, such as those in Narragansett Bay (Fig. 8c). SWI distances in the Delaware Bay are validated against salt front distance data from DRBC (Fig. 9). While the model's estimates of the upper saltwater limit align well with observations, SCHISM shows a shorter seaward salt front distance. This discrepancy may arise when USGS stations used by DRBC to determine the salt front occasionally record fresh conditions over the years (Fig. 9).

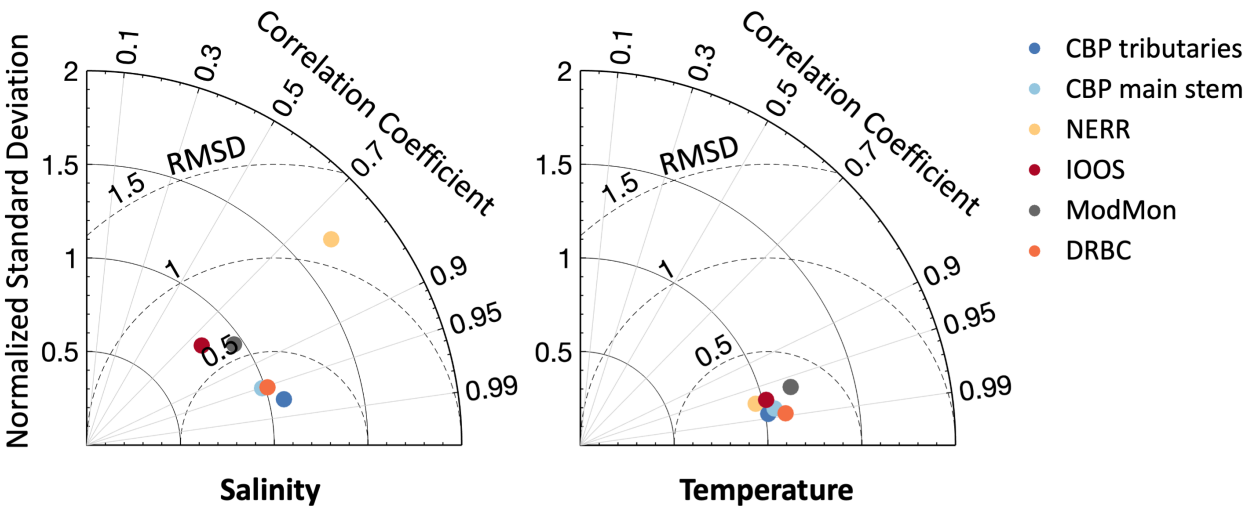
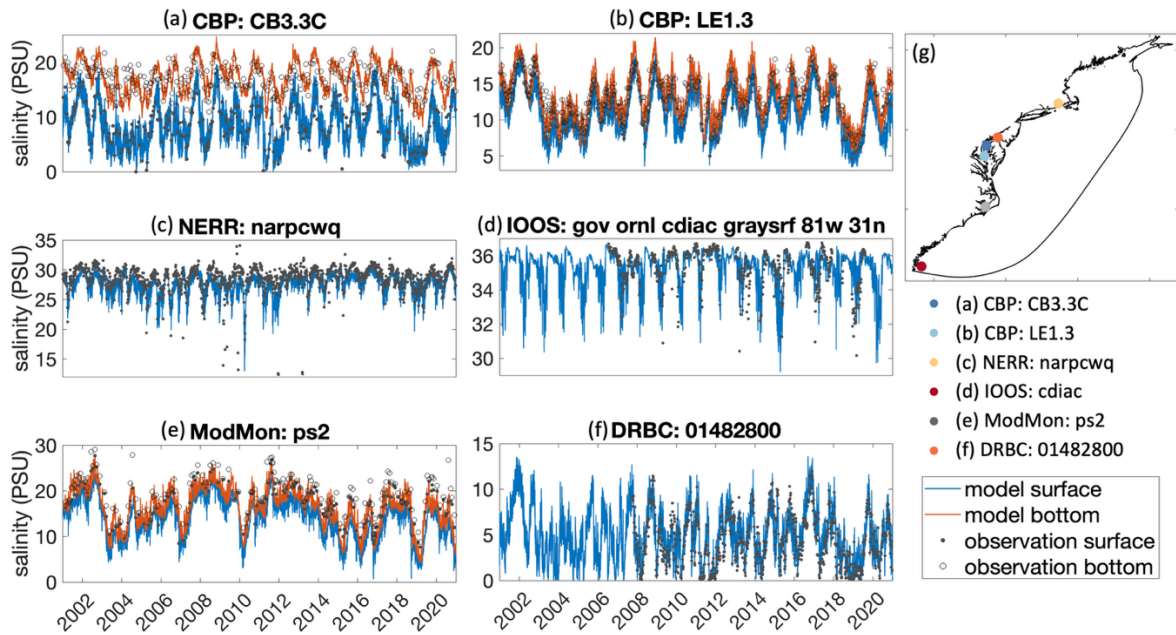
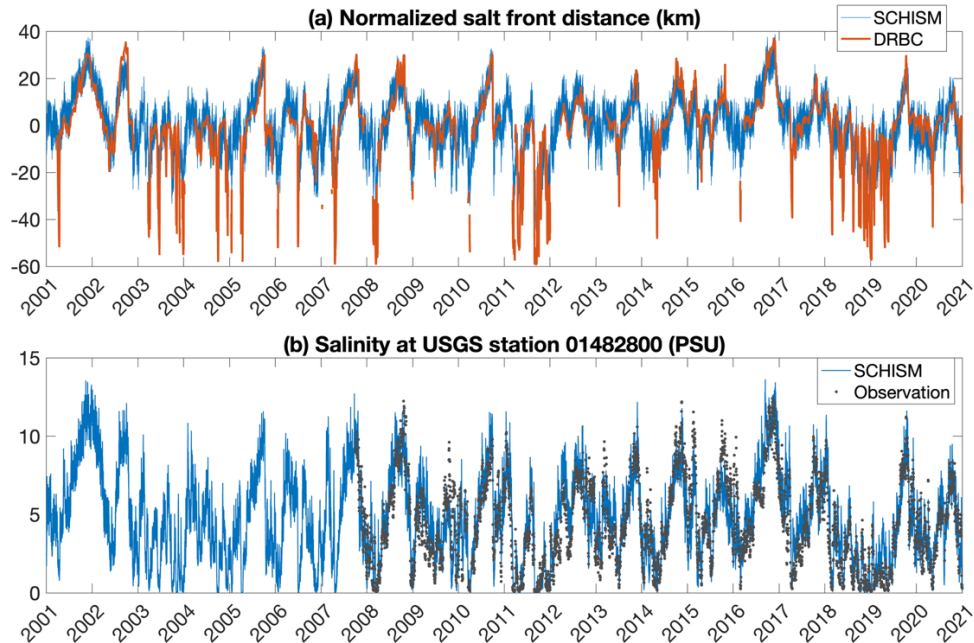


Figure 7: Taylor diagram of simulated salinity and temperature across all stations from various datasets.



225 **Figure 8: (a-f) Comparison of simulated and observed salinity at selected stations from the six observational data sources outlined**
230 **in (g).**



230 **Figure 9: Validation of the simulated SWI distance in the Delaware Bay. (a) Comparison of the normalized salt front distance**
relative to the 20-year mean between SCHISM and DRBC. (b) Comparison of simulated salinity and observed measurements at
USGS station 01482800, which represents the lower boundary for SWI estimation by DRBC.



The temperature time series in estuaries and coastal regions show RMSD values below 0.13°C across all areas, with normalized STD ranging from 0.94°C to 1.15°C and CC exceeding 0.96 (Fig. 7). Spatially, the largest errors are primarily observed in shallow tributaries. The model effectively represents the Gulf Stream, as indicated by sea surface temperature (not shown) and validated by current simulations (Fig. 10). However, the model domain does not fully encompass the entire Gulf Stream pathway, making the simulation highly dependent on the boundary conditions provided (Fig. 4).

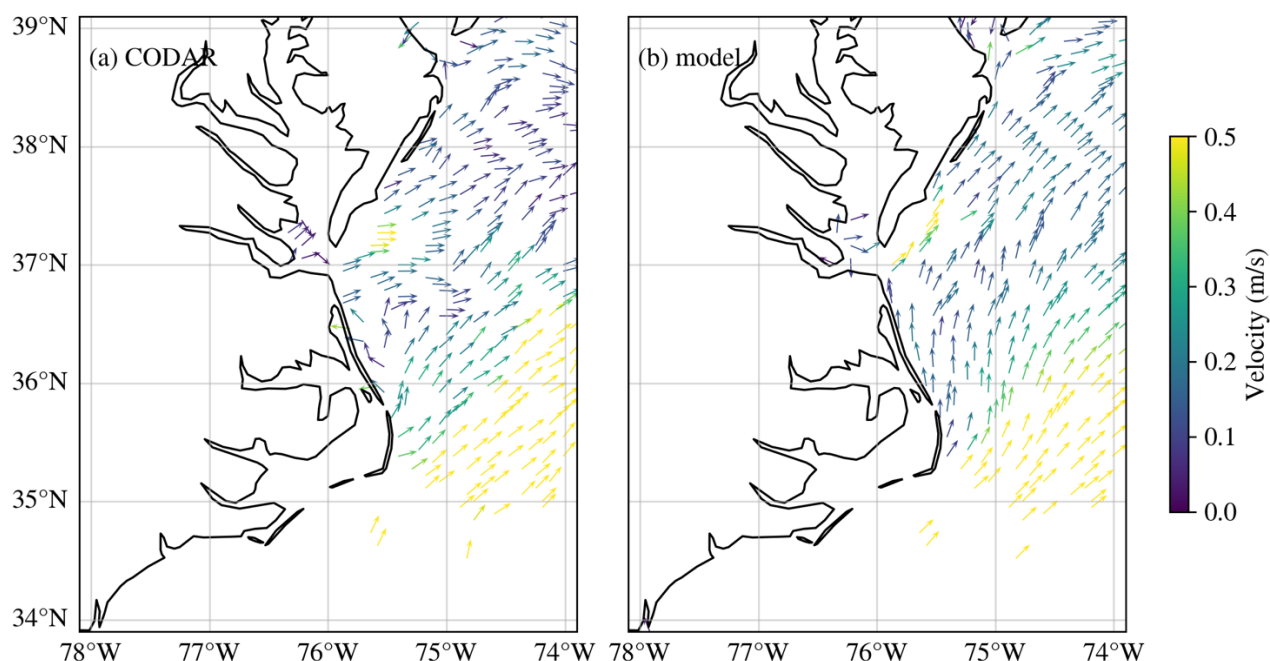


Figure 10: Daily averaged currents over Mid-Atlantic coast from (a) CODAR and (b) model on July 30, 2015.

3.3 Current velocities

In large coastal ocean areas, daily-averaged surface currents are compared with observations from CODAR (e.g., MAB at Fig. 10). Overall, the model reproduces the surface circulation but slightly underestimates the velocity magnitude near APES. Given the fact that no data assimilation was used, the model skill for the surface currents is generally acceptable. We take available time series data from NOAA gauges over Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay, and New York Bay for the validation of current simulations (Fig. 11). At New York Bay, the model tends to have slight phase shift but comparable magnitude and temporal patterns. The model slightly underestimated certain peak velocities at both lower Chesapeake Bay and Delaware Bay.

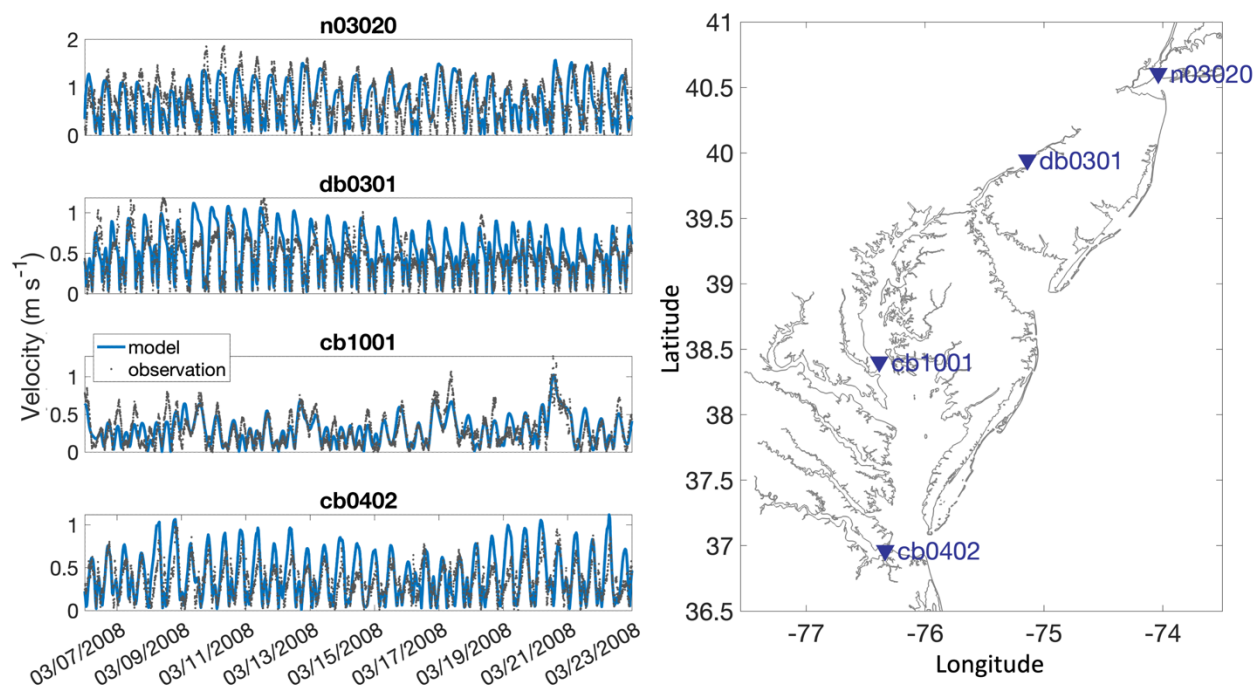


Figure 11: Time series comparison of model-simulated and observed current velocity at stations across the major estuaries along the Mid-Atlantic coast.

4 Discussion

4.1 Applications in major waterbodies along the North American Atlantic Coast

While numerous observations have been made over the centuries, significant gaps remain in many systems. The development of this model offers a valuable database for addressing these deficiencies. In cases with limited temporal and spatial coverage, it is crucial to validate the model using available data while bridging these gaps to support future research in coastal studies. For scenarios requiring higher resolution to capture finer details of localized processes, this model provides a solid foundation, potentially serving as an initial condition or offering boundary forcings. Additionally, the following sections present sample applications related to SWI and tidal fluxes in typical mid-Atlantic waterbodies. However, this manuscript does not delve deeply into these specific topics. Instead, it aims to demonstrate examples and explore the potential future applications of the developed model.

4.1.1 Estimation on saltwater intrusion and salt front distances

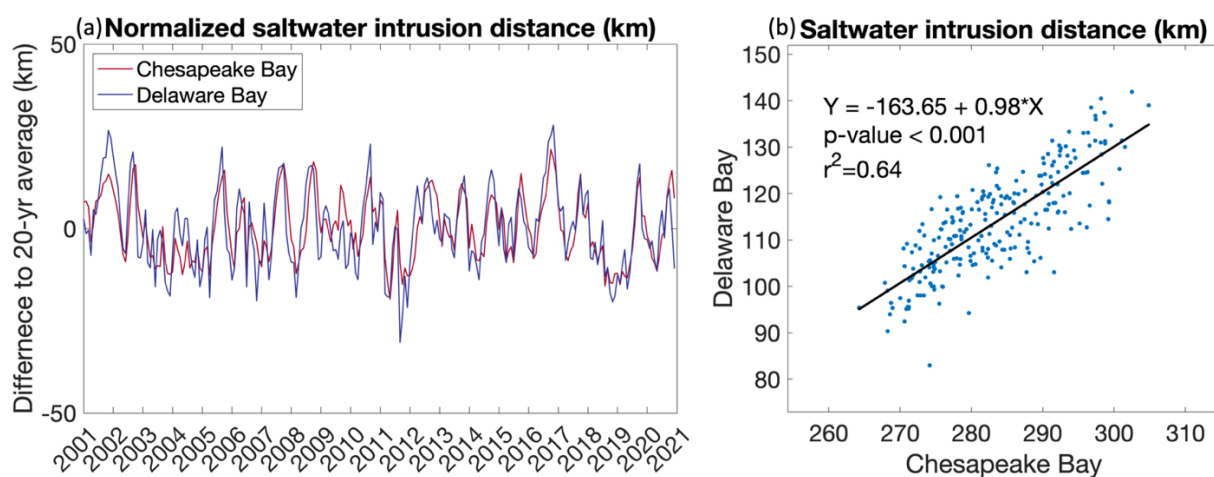
Salinity observations are significantly less abundant compared to measurements of temperature or water levels. For instance, the NOAA CO-OPS database contains over two decades and up to one century of water level data from more than



50 stations along the East Coast, yet only a few stations provide salinity measurements, and these are for much shorter durations. While the relatively small variability of salinity in ocean waters may explain its lower priority in NOAA's observational efforts, salinity data from USGS stations are also more limited compared to the measurements of discharge.

270 Consequently, the availability of salinity simulations from this model, particularly in oligohaline, mesohaline, and polyhaline zones, offers valuable support for scientific research and management practices.

One use of this model is to serve as an important supplement for the monitoring and prediction of SWI in the Delaware Bay and therefore the Delmarva that has been reported to be significantly impacted by SWI in the past decades (Mondal et al., 2023). An accurate validation to the upper stream USGS stations supports a reasonable capture of the salt front distance as supported by the salt front estimation data provided from DRBC (Fig. 10). Notably, SCHISM can not only bridge the temporal gaps of observation but also correct the salt front locations when the intrusion as not reached the first USGS station, under which conditions the estimated salt front distance from DRBC tends to be way underestimated due to constraints from the interpolation from the given stations. Importantly, we found the salt front distance at the Delaware Bay and Chesapeake Bay show significant correlation with r-square larger than 0.64 (Fig. 12). Given that the salt front distance is largely driven by the freshwater discharge in estuaries (Ross et al., 2015), and these two water bodies, along with other tributaries, share source the drainage from the same second level hydrological unit, this significant correlation is understandable.



285 **Figure 12: Simulated saltwater intrusion distance in the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays, presented as (a) a normalized view and (b) correlation analysis.**



4.1.2 Water exchange between major estuaries and the coastal Atlantic

Tidal flushing is a significant process that exchanges water between the coastal and estuarine areas, therefore
290 important information for studies such as coastal carbon cycling (Sanford et al., 1992). However, observations are not
always available on large spatial and temporal scales. Here we are showing an example of modeled tidal flow fluxes at the
gate or major inlets of the three significant waterbodies at mid-Atlantic – Delaware Bay, Chesapeake Bay, and the APES.
While the net fluxes are always associated with the riverine discharge as denoted in Fig. 3, the flood and ebb tidal fluxes
have distinct patterns among these three systems. Although the riverine loading to Chesapeake Bay is about 4-5 times larger
295 than Delaware Bay, the magnitude of tidal fluxes at Delaware mouth is 2 times larger than that of Chesapeake Bay and 16
times larger than that of the Hatteras Inlet.

The disturbances caused by numerous hurricanes are clearly noticeable at the Hatteras Inlet, while at Delaware Bay,
also these disturbances are still visible but dwarfed by the generally large tidal range. However, we could still notice
occasions such as Hurricane Irene in 2012 lead to an abnormal high-net flow in September compared to other periods in
300 those two decades. The in/out fluxes at Hatteras show relatively less structures from tide than the other two bays; instead,
wind forcings might be dominant at this low-tidal range (e.g., < 0.8 m) location. Notably, the hurricane disturbance can be
seen in flux directions, depending on the wind directions, track, and precipitation conditions.

4.2 Resolving tidal wetlands and other future directions

305 In this model development practice, we conducted a one-year simulation of an entire coverage of wetlands for a
sensitivity test on this regional-scale model. The model results show that including tidal wetlands has minor impacts on the
model skills in the physical variables away from the wetlands. In certain areas, especially for regions with complex geometry
of tidal creeks and tidal marshes, such as near some of the NERR stations, including the wetland helps local simulations
(Fig. 13). However, given the relatively small widths of the tidal creeks, an effective incorporation of a comprehensive
310 wetland details will significantly increase the model grid size and therefore computational costs (Cai et al., 2023). To
explicitly include the impacts of the wetlands on coastal processes, the model resolution at these areas needs to decrease to at
least 50 m and even be less than 10 m for some essential creeks. In addition, the local bathymetry of the creeks needs to be
fully resolved, and the varying drag force from the vegetation at the marsh platform from at the non-vegetated creeks need to
be distinguished (Cai, 2018).

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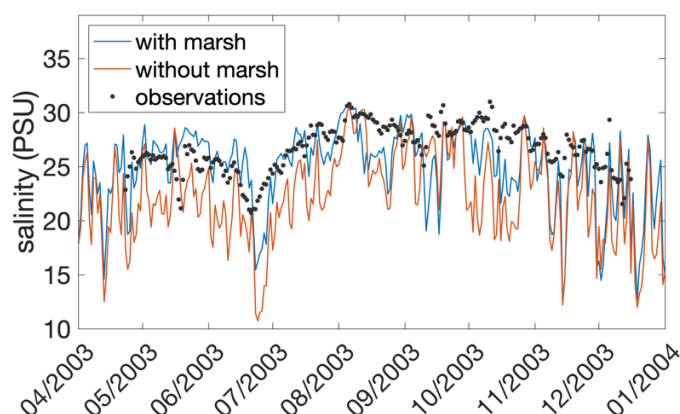


Figure 13: Salinity simulations with and without extended tidal wetland coverage versus observed data at the NEER station (jacb9wq).

320 For the future directions, improvement in bathymetry from sources with an even more realistic Digital Elevation Model (DEM) could be very helpful in the simulations. We could further incorporate other ocean boundary and atmospheric forcing sources in further evaluation. Furthermore, a two-way coupling of ocean model and regional-scale coastal groundwater could be considered to incorporating the roles of submarine groundwater discharge on the costal processes.

Conclusions

325 In this study, we developed a 3D unstructured-grid model NAAC for the North American Atlantic Coast, encompassing the GoME, the MAB, and much of the SAB. This model, based on the SCHISM (v5.11.0) framework, provides a seamless cross-scale simulation extending from the coastal ocean to tidal wetlands, allowing for the representation of fine-scale hydrodynamic and salinity dynamics over a two-decade period (2001–2020). Through extensive validation against observational datasets, the model demonstrated strong performance in simulating key physical variables
330 such as tidal elevation, salinity, and temperature. One of the key contributions of this work is the integration of shallow water systems and intertidal zones within a regional-scale model, addressing long-standing gaps in hydrodynamic connectivity along the Atlantic Coast. Our results highlight significant correlations in saltwater intrusion patterns between major estuaries, suggesting common hydrological drivers at a broader scale. The model also captures the complex tidal exchange processes that govern estuarine circulation, making it a valuable tool for future studies on coastal carbon cycling, biogeochemical transport, and climate-driven changes in coastal hydrodynamics. Overall, NAAC represents a significant
335 step forward in coastal ocean modelling, offering a foundation for future applications in coastal hydrodynamics, ecosystem studies, and climate resilience planning. The availability of this dataset will support interdisciplinary research and inform management strategies aimed at mitigating the impacts of saltwater intrusion and sea-level rise on coastal ecosystems.



Code availability

- 340 The source code of SCHISM can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14834163> (Zhang et al, 2025). The 3D
model setup can be found at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14740718> (Cai et al., 2025).

Data availability

- All observation datasets used in this paper are publicly downloadable from the following websites: (1)
<https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/products.html>, (2) <https://sensors.ioos.us>, (3)
345 www.ncei.noaa.gov/data/oceans/ndbc/hfradar/rtv, (4) <http://www.chesapeakebay.net/data>, (5) <https://www.nj.gov/drbc/>, (6)
<https://paerllab.web.unc.edu/modmon/>, and (7) <https://cdmo.baruch.sc.edu/aqs>. The model outputs used for evaluation are
available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15530712> (Cai et al., 2025)

Author contributions

- XC and QQ initiated the study. XC, LC, and YZ worked on the model setup and forcing files. XC, LC, and QQ collected the
350 observation data and did the model skill assessments. XY assessed the Atlantic Coast tidal marsh boundary from satellite
data to incorporate into the model domain. XC, QQ, and JS worked on the interpretation of the results. XC and QQ draft the
initial manuscript. All authors contributed to the writing and revising of the paper.

Competing interests

The contact author has declared that none of the authors has any competing interests.

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