

35/2013

Improved interpretation of volcanic traces in ice GEOMAR researchers are modeling the global distribution of sulfur particles following large eruptions

05 July 2013/Kiel. How severely have volcanoes contaminated the atmosphere with sulfur particles in past millennia? To answer this question, scientists use ice cores, among others, as climate archives. But the results differ, particularly in some major volcanic major events of the past, depending on whether the cores come from Antarctica or Greenland. Atmospheric scientists from the GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel and the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology in Hamburg have now found an explanation that could significantly improve the interpretation of ice cores. Their study was just published in the current issue of the internationally renowned "Journal of Geophysical Research Atmosphere".

Storms, cold, poor harvests – the year 1816 was a “year without a summer” in European history. The reason was the eruption of the Indonesian volcano Tambora a year earlier. It had thrown huge amounts of sulfur compounds into the stratosphere (at altitudes of 15-50 km) where they spread around the entire globe and significantly weakened solar radiation for several years afterwards. Such intense volcanic eruptions are quite common in Earth's history. To better understand their impact on the climate and the atmosphere, scientists try to reconstruct those eruptions accurately. Important archives of information are ice cores from Greenland and Antarctica because the sulfur particles ejected from the volcano fall back to the surface. A portion of that fallout is trapped in the ice of the polar regions and can be analyzed even thousands of years afterwards. The former aerosol contamination of the atmosphere is derived from it using a simple ratio calculation.

But this method has its limitations. “Volcanic aerosols in the stratosphere absorb infrared radiation, thereby heating up the stratosphere, and changing the wind conditions subsequently,” said Dr. Matthew Toohey, atmospheric scientist at GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel. Using an atmospheric model, he has now tested the effects of this phenomenon. “We have found that the deposition of sulfur compounds in the Antarctic after very large volcanic eruptions in the tropics may be lower than previously thought,” the atmospheric researcher summarizes the findings of the study which has just been published in the current issue of the international “Journal of Geophysical Research – Atmosphere”.

For the study, Dr. Toohey and his colleagues from GEOMAR and the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology in Hamburg have used an aerosol-climate model to track 70 different eruption scenarios while analyzing the distribution of the sulfur particles. It was based on real volcanic eruptions during the past 200,000 years in Central America, which had been investigated in the framework of the Collaborative Research Project 574. “In our calculations, we could clearly see the differences in distribution and deposition between the northern and southern hemispheres,” explains co-author and director of the working group, Dr. Kirstin Krüger. The spatial deposition of sulfur particles in the bipolar ice cores, as calculated in the model, agrees well with the actually measured deposits of large volcanic eruptions, such as Pinatubo in 1991 or even of Tambora of 1815.

“If we know how volcanic sulfur particles affect the atmospheric winds, we can have a much improved interpretation of the traces of volcanic activities in the ice cores,” says Dr. Toohey. For one, there are better estimates of the strength of an outbreak. And secondly, the previously undetermined traces of volcanic eruptions that could not be assigned to any particular event or volcano eruption, can now be clearly traced to their origin.

“In any case, the results of our model study give a clear indication that the bipolar variability of sulfate deposits must be taken into consideration if the traces of large volcanic eruptions are to be deduced from ice cores,” says Dr. Krüger, “Several research groups that deal with this issue have already contacted us to verify their data through our model results.”

The original publication:

Toohey, M., K. Krüger and C. Timmreck (2013), Volcanic sulfate deposition to Greenland and Antarctica: A modeling sensitivity study, J. Geophys. Res. Atmos., 118, 4788–4800, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/jgrd.50428>

Links:

www.geomar.de GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel

www.mpimet.mpg.de the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology

<http://sfb574.geomar.de> the Collaborative Research Project 574

Images:

Images are available for download at www.geomar.de/n1385-e

Contact:

Dr. Kirstin Krüger (GEOMAR, RD1 - Marine Meteorology), kkrueger@geomar.de

Dr. Matthew Toohey (GEOMAR, RD1 - Marine Meteorology), mtoohey@geomar.de

Jan Steffen (GEOMAR, Communication and Media), Tel.: 0431 600-2811, jsteffen@geomar.de