

Nonlin. Processes Geophys. Discuss., referee comment RC4
<https://doi.org/10.5194/npg-2021-22-RC4>, 2021
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Comment on npg-2021-22

Anonymous Referee #4

Referee comment on "An approach for constraining mantle viscosities through assimilation of palaeo sea level data into a glacial isostatic adjustment model" by Reyko Schachtschneider et al., Nonlin. Processes Geophys. Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/npg-2021-22-RC4>, 2021

This manuscript introduces a combination of a data assimilation method with a GIA model. The new combination approach is supposed to, ideally, better determine mantle viscosities or, in future, 3D earth parameters. To achieve this, a set of global synthetical relative sea level rates is generated. The authors perform a number of tests to convince the reader about the favourable outcome of their new approach. They seem to be new in the field of GIA modelling. I am not aware of any previous GIA work with the exception of Volker Klemann, who has a strong background in this field.

The study is very interesting and the approach may receive much interest in the GIA and earth rheology communities. The text is well written and a smooth read. Figures and tables are clear and support the text.

Nonetheless, I am somewhat disappointed about the whole manuscript. Main reasons are that, despite the nice presentation and different tests made by the authors, (1) nothing is presented about the performance of the new approach compared to 'GIA standard' methods, (2) no interesting conclusions are drawn that present a step forward in GIA/earth rheology research, and (3) it is a very idealized experiment because the synthetic data does not represent typical data used in GIA modelling. RSL rates is not used, moreover, rates are hard to find in real data as there is rarely a large number of samples at a certain location available. Also, uncertainties of rates are much larger than used in these setups. Overall, the main message is that the technical combination of two codes is working and gives results that are expected. The results thus, at this stage, cannot help to further advance our understanding of GIA or earth parameters.

However, I think the manuscript can be elevated if my main concerns can be addressed.

- (1) Especially, I would like to see a comparison with a 'standard' GIA investigation, where modelled RSL rates from a set of pre-defined models (e.g., 50 models covering the viscosity ranges in your experiment) is compared to the synthetic set and the misfit is determined so that a best model of such set is identified. Is the best-fitting model comparable to the final assimilation model? Which misfit is better? What is the computation time for both approaches? At which point is it better to use the assimilation approach? This would help the reader to get more perspective if this approach can help advance our understanding of GIA and the determination of earth parameters.
- (2) I miss new findings or hints that can help the community. The manuscript presents the approach with some tests, which gives it the style of a technical note rather than a scientific study. The authors should at least present 1 or 2 major conclusions that can be drawn from the tests.
- (3) The reliability of the rates set should be further discussed in comparison to real world data. You mention some shortcomings but they are not put into perspective with real data availability. How many locations can actually give you solid RSL rates? What is a realistic error of such RSL rates? This should definitely be addressed as RSL data are concerned with time and height errors. You did not include time errors which are actually much larger! Are there enough locations with rates at times where there is a strong RSL fall? Such discussion would help the reader to get more insight on the reliability and evaluate the success of your approach.
- (4) A discussion is needed on the tested parameters. Just analyzing two mantle viscosities is very idealized. There is a trade-off between the thickness of the lithosphere and mantle viscosity. The reader should be informed. Similarly, a note on ice model uncertainty and its potential impact on the results should be added.

Minor remarks

The paper is written from a quite technical perspective. In the introduction, focus is a lot on the assimilation approach but I would like to see a paragraph from the 'GIA site' with an overview of previous attempts to get more insights from GIA modelling with alternate approaches. Studies by Steffen & Kaufmann (2005), Al-Attar & Tromp (2013) and Caron et al. (2017) should help here. Similarly, the discussion does not contain much references to other works. Are all these findings/conclusions new?

References

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- Caron, L. et al., 2017. Inverting Glacial Isostatic Adjustment signal using Bayesian framework and two linearly relaxing rheologies. GJI, doi: 10.1093/gji/ggx083.
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