Simulating and Visualising the Earth as a Dynamic System

Stuart R. Clark, PhD

Computational Geosciences
Simula School of Research and Innovation
The dynamic history of the Earth is represented on its surface.
The objective of my talk is for you to see the connections between High School Science and Geodynamics

Newton’s second law of motion <-> Fluid Dynamics

Newton’s law of cooling <-> Mantle Convection & Erosion

Geophysics is a Visually Stimulating Science!
The surface is mostly shaped by plate tectonics, driven by the mantle, driven by the core.
A little physics goes a long way...

Newton’s Second law of motion

\[ m \frac{dv}{dt} = F_{net} \]

Leads to the Navier-Stokes Equation

\[ \rho \frac{Dv}{Dt} = -\nabla p + \nabla \cdot \tau_{ij} + \Delta \rho g \hat{z} \]

- Momentum
- Pressure
- Shear
- Gravity
Subduction is an interplay between plates, their interfaces and the mantle.
A slice through the subducting slab shows its development
Temperature in the Mantle controlled by advection-diffusion

\[
\frac{\partial T}{\partial t} = -\vec{u} \cdot \nabla T + \nabla^2 T
\]
Badlands, Mojave National Preserve (courtesy USGS)

Endurance Crater, Mars

Mars’ Centauri Montes crater (courtesy NASA/JPL/Malin Space Science Systems)
Erosion is also modelled by diffusion, using the “heat equation”:

\[
\frac{\partial h}{\partial t} = \nabla \cdot (K\nabla h)
\]

Potential driving the equation is the gradient of height.
Surface structures on Europa may be predominately caused by convection of an ice shell.
Plumes arising from the core impact the surface as long-lived features.
Flow in the mantle can cause subsidence \textit{[nedtrykt]} or uplift \textit{[oppstå]}
Understanding the Earth’s dynamic processes involves some complicated physics and software.

At this time, higher computing power and better software mean that full-earth simulations and visualisations are a reality.

For me, this makes Earth Science the most fascinating of subjects!