Groundwater Flow in the Ganges Delta

Basu et al. (1) reported that $2 \times 10^{11}$ m$^3$/year of groundwater flows directly into the Bay of Bengal, an outflow equivalent to 19% of the discharge from the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system. They showed that this estimate of flow could have important consequences for the interpretation of marine strontium isotope records, because strontium concentrations are higher in Ganges delta groundwater than in Ganges-Brahmaputra river water. The flow could also have implications for the origin and fate of other groundwater constituents in the Ganges delta that could be flushed by such rapid regional flow, such as the dangerously high concentrations of arsenic contaminating millions of drinking water wells (2). Here, I show that the large estimate of regional groundwater flow by Basu et al. is implausible given the extremely flat topography of the Ganges delta, and that the young helium-tritium ratios that they find in groundwater may reflect irrigation pumping rather than basin-scale flow.

The physical plausibility of the Basu et al. flow estimate may be considered by applying Darcy’s law, without application of hydrologic models that require specification of boundary fluxes. One hundred kilometers inland from the coast of the Ganges delta, elevations reach only 5 to 10 m above sea level, and the water table reaches only 2 to 4 m above sea level (3). Assuming upper bounds for aquifer thickness and hydraulic conductivity (pp. 2.1–2.22 in (4)), Darcy’s law indicates that maintaining the discharge estimated by Basu et al. requires a hydraulic gradient of $\sim 0.06$ perpendicular to the coast (3). Such a gradient implies drastic artesian conditions, with a potentiometric surface $\sim 300$ m above sea level 5 kilometers inland; such conditions do not exist in this area. Even if the assumed aquifer thickness is further increased to 2 km—an implausible depth for rapid, topographically driven flow in low-relief terrain—the implied artesian conditions remain incorrect. Furthermore, many aquifers in coastal areas suffer from high salinity (pp. 2.1–2.22 in (4)) that would be flushed out if groundwater flowed so quickly to the coast.

Basu et al. estimated groundwater flow to the ocean by first calculating an average groundwater recharge rate of 0.6 m/year from helium-tritium dating of wellwater extracted below 30 m, and then assuming that this recharge flows directly to the Bay of Bengal. As an alternative hypothesis, irrigation pumping and local flow cells, rather than regional flow to the ocean, may draw young groundwater to depth. Although the highest groundwater extraction rates are in the north-west of Bangladesh, groundwater extraction is also widespread on the delta. The gross groundwater extraction rate for the delta region can be estimated at approximately 25 cm/year (6), which implies an annual downward groundwater velocity of approximately 1.25 m/year assuming an aquifer porosity of 0.2. This downward velocity is somewhat less than the 2 to 3 additional meters that Kinnirigh and Smedley have estimated for drawdown by irrigation pumping (7) for a hypothetical cross section. Some references describe irrigation pumping at the specific locations sampled by Basu et al. (8). Many wells are screened below 30 m, and pumping drives complex flow patterns that extend below the screened depth. In some areas, local topography may also drive groundwater flow below 30 m, but in these areas most of the discharge is also local (9). Basu et al. considered groundwater discharge directly to the Bay of Bengal. However, such local flow cells could conceivably provide some additional flux of strontium into rivers downstream of the locations where strontium concentrations and river flows were measured.

During the onset and recession of monsoon floodwaters, hydraulic head values change dramatically. However, flooding drives very little groundwater flow because inundation erases lateral gradients and downward flow by compression of water is negligible. Hydraulic gradients that emerge after soon floodwaters, hydraulic head values are sufficient for extraction rates ranging from 43 to 65 cm/year, assuming 6 hours of pumping for 3 months, which gives downward groundwater velocities ranging from 2 to 3 m/year using a porosity of 0.2. Likewise, British Geological Survey et al. (vol. 53, p. 18 in (4)) estimated an extraction rate of 45 cm/year for the 21 km$^2$ study area in Faridpur. Yokota et al. (12) mapped seven deep irrigation wells in Sampa Village.

Response: The comment by Harvey is not the first statement noting large discrepancies between estimates of submarine groundwater discharge (SGD) from geochemical tracer flux indicators and those from hydraulic modeling. Before responding to the specifics of Harvey’s comment, we point out that these
discrepancies, although important and in need of resolution, are not central to the main conclusions of our study (1) on the marine Sr budget. A principal conclusion of our paper was that the groundwater in the Bengal Basin has approximately 10 times more dissolved Sr than in the adjacent water of the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system. Even allowing a conservative SGD, equivalent to 10% of surface riverine flow, if this were also true for the global Sr cycle, it would have a tremendous impact on the seawater Sr isotope balance, effectively doubling the Sr flux to the oceans.

Harvey questions the plausibility of our estimates (1) of large submarine groundwater discharge (SGD) to the Bay of Bengal, and suggests that our calculated tritium-helium isotopic ages of groundwater may reflect recent irrigation pumping effects on groundwater flow. Younger (2) used a similar analysis of physical hydrologic conditions to question the presence of substantial submarine groundwater discharge into the South Atlantic Bight, estimated by Moore (3) on the basis of spatial distribution of $^{226}$Ra in the near-shore waters. However, the claims of Younger were refuted by Moore and Church (4), who showed that the physical constraints derived from simple mathematical formulations of Darcy flow may not fully describe the SGD process. Additional research is necessary to develop appropriate models of SGD to explain excess $^{226}$Ra and Ba observed in the Atlantic Ocean as well as in the Bay of Bengal (5). In particular, uncertainty in average hydraulic conductivity ($K_a$) related to “dual permeability” of floodplain sediments—the proportions of high-$K_a$ channels and low-$K_a$ overbank sediments—should be considered, as well as density-driven SGD and tidal pumping effects (6).

Stable isotope data for oxygen and hydrogen and other chemical data (7, 8) of the groundwater allow an evaluation of Harvey’s interpretation that our $^3$H–$^3$He-based flow rate primarily reflects increased irrigation pumping in recent years (Fig. 1). The groundwater of our study (1) had oxygen and hydrogen isotope ratios ranging from −2.4 to −7.1 per mil and −12 to −50 per mil (7), respectively (Fig. 1). All samples plot on or slightly below the meteoric water line, which suggests an origin from local rain and rivers from the Bengal Basin as well as from the Himalaya. The isotopic compositions of groundwater collected in 1979 (dark diamonds in Fig. 1) were nearly the same as those collected in 1999 (light triangles in Fig. 1). If pumping in the past two decades had resulted in a large recycling of groundwater through irrigated fields, with high evaporation during the dry season, one would certainly expect a substantial isotopic shift toward heavier values in the 1999 data relative to the 1979 data, which is not seen. This comparison argues strongly against Harvey’s contention of groundwater drawdown by irrigation pumping, which has reached its highest extraction rates in the past 20 years. The British Geological Survey report cited by Harvey (9) also concluded after considering groundwater extraction rates in Bangladesh in 1995 that “large-scale groundwater abstraction for irrigation has limited impact on regional groundwater flow velocity” [vol. S3, p. 35 in (9)].

The similarity of the 1979 and 1999 isotope data could also be due to a steady state between the groundwater and irrigation pump water attained before 1979. However, there was effectively little irrigation pumping before 1979 in the Bengal Basin. Moreover, our isotopic data clearly demonstrate that the system of irrigation pump water and the groundwater in the Bengal Basin had not reached a steady state by 1979, because if it had done so one would expect the stable isotope data to fall off the local meteoric water line. Similarly, agricultural tracers such as PO$_4^{3-}$ and NO$_3^-$ are uniformly low (8) at depth in groundwater of the Bengal Basin, indicating limited infiltration of pumped irrigation water to depth. Thus, Harvey’s interpretation of our young groundwater ages as reflecting irrigational pumping is not acceptable.

Asish R. Basu
Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences
University of Rochester
Rochester, NY 14627, USA
E-mail: abasu@earth.rochester.edu

Stein B. Jacobsen
Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

Robert J. Poreda
Carolyn B. Dowling
Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences
University of Rochester

Pradeep K. Aggarwal
Isotope Hydrology Section
International Atomic Energy Agency
Post Office Box 100
A1400 Vienna, Austria

**Technical Comments**

Fig. 1. Stable oxygen and hydrogen isotope compositions of Bengal Basin groundwater collected in 1979 and 1999, after (7). The 1979 data of approximately 100 samples are almost the same as the 1999 data, all falling on the local meteoric water line.

**References**


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