

Stronger winds over a large lake in response to weakening air-to-lake temperature gradient

Ankur R. Desai^{1*}, Jay A. Austin², Val Bennington¹ and Galen A. McKinley¹

The impacts of climate change on the world's large lakes are a cause for concern¹⁻⁴. For example, over the past decades, mean surface water temperatures in Lake Superior, North America, have warmed faster than air temperature during the thermally stratified summer season, because decreasing ice cover has led to increased heat input^{2,5}. However, the effects of this change on large lakes have not been studied extensively⁶. Here we analyse observations from buoys and satellites as well as model reanalyses for Lake Superior, and find that increasing temperatures in both air and surface water, and a reduction in the temperature gradient between air and water are destabilizing the atmospheric surface layer above the lake. As a result, surface wind speeds above the lake are increasing by nearly 5% per decade, exceeding trends in wind speed over land. A numerical model of the lake circulation suggests that the increasing wind speeds lead to increases in current speeds, and long-term warming causes the surface mixed layer to shoal and the season of stratification to lengthen. We conclude that climate change will profoundly affect the biogeochemical cycles of large lakes, the mesoscale atmospheric circulation at lake-land boundaries and the transport of airborne pollutants in regions that are rich in lakes.

Since 1970, global average temperatures have increased at $0.2\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C decade}^{-1}$, largely, it is hypothesized, owing to anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases¹. Temperate mid-continent regions such as the Midwest United States of America, not insulated by the buffering effects of ocean heat capacity or tropical moisture, have warmed even faster, and impacts on ecosystems and large lakes are starting to be felt². Lakes, and especially large lakes, are known to be an important component of regional and possibly global biogeochemical cycles^{3,4}. Yet, little is known about the impact of climatic warming on large lake physical and biological environments.

The Laurentian Great Lakes contain over 20% of the world's non-frozen fresh water, and Lake Superior, is the largest freshwater lake in the world by area⁵. The impact of warming temperatures on the dynamics of Lake Superior is poorly understood. One thing we do know is that regional warming has not been felt equally in lake and air. Since 1985, summer stratified season (July–September) buoy air temperatures over Lake Superior have increased by 1.05 ± 0.53 ($1-\sigma$ least-squares slope) $^{\circ}\text{C decade}^{-1}$ and surface water temperatures by 1.21 ± 0.68 $^{\circ}\text{C decade}^{-1}$ (Fig. 1a).

Regression analysis of all decade or longer sub-periods within the record further corroborates that warming trends are robust and seen in >90% of all sub-periods. These decadal trends are similar in sign to those seen in the global temperature record, suggesting anthropogenic forcing is driving much of this change, although large climate variability, such as the 1998 El Niño are superimposed. These warming trends have raised summer surface

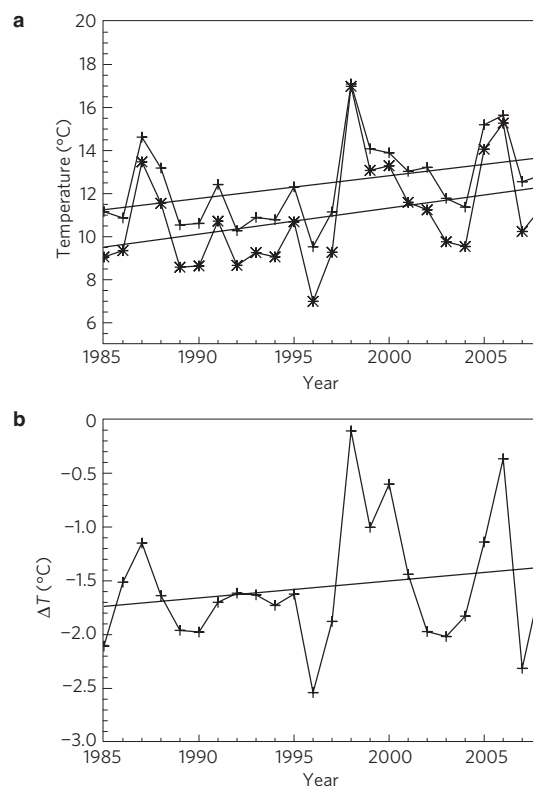


Figure 1 | Air and lake temperature from 1985 to 2008. **a**, Mean summer stratified (July–September) season temperatures for Lake Superior air (crosses) and surface water (stars), as observed by buoys. Surface water temperatures since 1985 are increasing at 1.21 ± 0.68 $^{\circ}\text{C decade}^{-1}$, which is faster than near-surface air temperature (1.05 ± 0.53 $^{\circ}\text{C decade}^{-1}$), owing to shortening of the winter ice season. **b**, The net result is a decline in the mean air-lake difference, leading to destabilization of the marine stable boundary layer by -0.16 ± 0.12 $^{\circ}\text{C decade}^{-1}$.

water temperature in Lake Superior by 2.5 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ since 1980 (ref. 5) and 3.5 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ since 1906 (ref. 6). These rates are significantly in excess of rates of regional surface air temperature increase^{5,6}.

Faster warming of water than air is contrary to what might be expected and what has been observed over the oceans⁷. Long-term trends in summer surface water temperature are stronger than those in the atmosphere primarily owing to a long-term decrease in ice cover⁸. Decreasing ice cover over the past century has been documented on rivers and lakes around the world, accelerating over the past few decades². Decreased ice cover results in a significant change in albedo and a correspondingly greater input of heat in the

¹Department of Atmospheric & Oceanic Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1225 West Dayton Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53706, USA, ²Large Lakes Observatory and Department of Physics, University of Minnesota-Duluth, Duluth, Minnesota 55812, USA. *e-mail: desai@aos.wisc.edu.

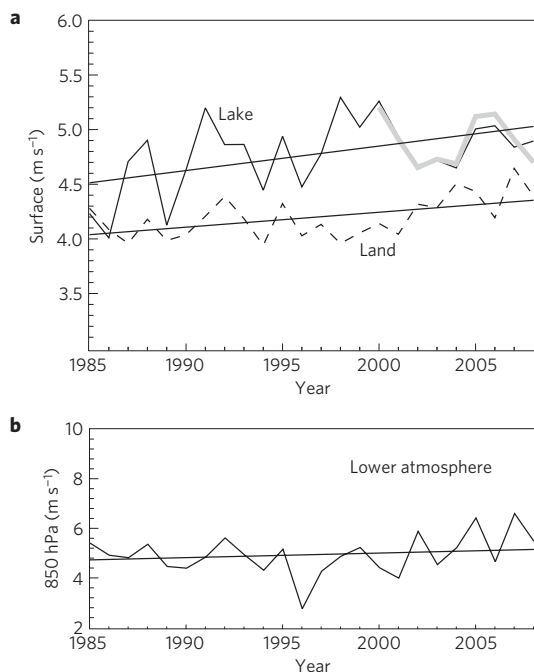


Figure 2 | Increasing regional wind speeds. **a**, Buoy (solid line) and satellite scatterometry (grey line) agree on the magnitude and trend of wind speed ($0.22 \pm 0.09 \text{ m s}^{-1} \text{ decade}^{-1}$) since 1985. This increase is 64% faster than reanalysis wind speed trends ($0.14 \pm 0.05 \text{ m s}^{-1} \text{ decade}^{-1}$) over land within a 3.75° latitude by 9° longitude area surrounding Lake Superior, suggesting that lake destabilization is causing the change in lake wind speeds. **b**, The wind speed trend ($0.15 \pm 0.17 \text{ m s}^{-1} \text{ decade}^{-1}$) in the free troposphere at 850 hPa is similar to the land trend, strengthening arguments for surface-based forcing.

late winter and spring, which in turn leads to an earlier onset of summer stratification. Summer water temperatures are sensitive to the timing of the onset of stratification, and hence summer water temperatures are a strong function of winter ice conditions⁷.

One result of faster warming of stratified season surface water than surface air is a weakening of the water–air temperature gradient, as confirmed by buoy observations in the lake (Fig. 1b), which show a gradient getting weaker by $0.16 \pm 0.12 \text{ }^\circ\text{C decade}^{-1}$. Consequently, the inversion of warmer air temperature over colder water that characterizes warm season marine boundary layers and summer season Great Lakes has become weaker. Reanalysis estimates of temperature trends over nearby land show a much weaker trend and little change in land–atmosphere temperature gradient (Supplementary Fig. S1).

The efficiency of transfer of momentum from the surface to the atmosphere in the stable layer is a strong function of the strength of this inversion⁹. Consequently, a less stable, more neutral boundary layer will lead to higher wind speeds near the surface, as demonstrated in simple, theoretical models (Supplementary Fig. S2). Although this coupling between water temperature and atmospheric boundary layer winds has been well observed over temperate¹⁰ and especially over tropical^{11–14} oceans, and also simulated in numerical models over the ocean^{15,16}, little is known about whether large lakes are able to influence the atmosphere in a similar way. Increasing wind speeds over Lake Superior have been noted and hypothesized to be due to destabilization of the atmospheric boundary layer⁴, but it has not been tested or examined in detail.

Buoy averaged summer wind speeds over Lake Superior have increased $0.52 \pm 0.20 \text{ m s}^{-1}$ since 1985, an increase of nearly 12% (Fig. 2). Buoy wind observations before 1985 (1979–1984) could

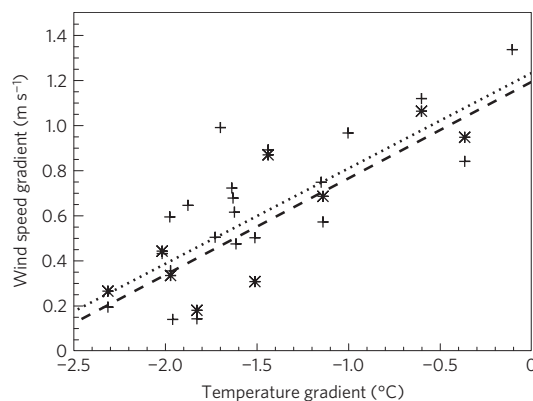


Figure 3 | Relationship of wind speed gradient to temperature gradient.

A significant positive relationship exists between the lake-to-air temperature gradient and the mean stratified season lake-to-land wind speed gradient for buoy (crosses, $r^2 = 0.49$, $n = 29$, two-tail t -test $p = 0.0001$) and satellite (stars, $r^2 = 0.73$, $n = 9$, two-tail t -test $p = 0.003$) observations. The slopes of these fits for buoy (dotted line, $0.43 \pm 0.10 \text{ m s}^{-1} \text{ }^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$) and satellite (dashed line, $0.42 \pm 0.09 \text{ m s}^{-1} \text{ }^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$) data agree with theoretical predictions from a simple boundary layer model ($0.41 \pm 0.02 \text{ m s}^{-1} \text{ }^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$).

not be compared owing to a change in wind speed averaging routines and a small correction was needed for the use of the older routine on some buoys in later years (Supplementary Fig. S3). The wind observations are further corroborated by satellite scatterometry-based observations of basin average summer wind speeds (Fig. 2, grey line) and reanalysis estimated winds. Fitting the wind speed observation distribution to a Weibull distribution¹⁷ shows that these wind speed increases are not due to changes in the shape of the wind speed distribution, but rather a shift in the magnitude parameter (Supplementary Figs S3 and S4), implying that the increase is not due to a higher incidence of very fast winds caused by a change in storminess, for example.

Moreover, the increase in wind speeds of Lake Superior is nearly twice the increase in regional reanalysis estimated surface winds (Fig. 2), and *in situ* wind speeds observed at most coastal stations and for terrestrial Minnesota¹⁸ show little or no increase. Decreasing wind speeds have been observed over much of the contiguous United States¹⁹. Coastal sites around Lake Superior have trended towards higher wind speeds, but these trends are weaker than the observed open-water trends. Thus, although surface wind speeds are at most increasing weakly region-wide, another process must explain the faster increase over the lake. Contrary to findings from the lower Great Lakes²⁰, a shift in wind direction was not observed (Supplementary Fig. S4). Furthermore, trends in wind speeds detected in reanalysis observations of the lower atmosphere are weak (Fig. 2b), further bolstering the conclusion that over-lake wind speed changes are being driven primarily by changes in surface forcing and that these changes are restricted to the atmospheric surface layer.

Indeed, when the summer average wind speeds over the lake are subtracted from the wind speeds over land and compared to the average lake-to-air temperature difference, there is a significant positive correlation between the wind speed excess over the lake and the air–lake temperature gradient (Fig. 3). The sensitivity and $1\text{-}\sigma$ uncertainty estimated by least-squares linear regression is $0.42 \pm 0.10 \text{ m s}^{-1} \text{ }^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$ for the buoy observations ($r^2 = 0.49$, $n = 29$, two-tail t -test $p = 0.0001$). This slope is very similar to that estimated by a theoretical stable layer marine wind profile model (Supplementary Fig. S2) of $0.41 \pm 0.02 \text{ m s}^{-1}$. The strength of this relationship continues to be strong even in recent years when trends in mean temperature and temperature gradient have been

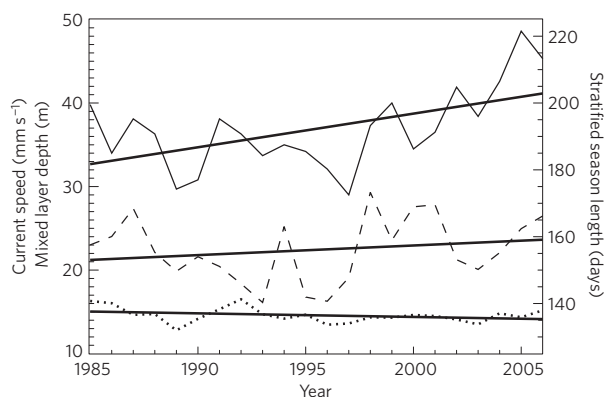


Figure 4 | Trends in Lake Superior physical circulation. Surface current speeds are primarily driven by surface wind forcing, and thus trends in wind speed are directly reflected in model surface currents (solid line, left axis) increasing by $4.0 \pm 1.4 \text{ mm s}^{-1} \text{ decade}^{-1}$. In contrast, warming temperatures drive shoaling of mixed layer depth (dotted line, left axis) by $-0.43 \pm 0.30 \text{ m decade}^{-1}$ and increase in stratified season length (dashed line, right axis) by $2.9 \pm 3.3 \text{ day decade}^{-1}$, although both trends are weak. These changes will probably affect ecosystem functioning in the lake.

changing relatively slowly, similar to global temperature trends, as demonstrated by the regression with satellite winds showing a slope of $0.43 \pm 0.09 \text{ m s}^{-1} \text{ } ^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$ ($r^2 = 0.73$, $n = 9$, two-tail t -test $p = 0.003$). Consequently, we conclude that the destabilization of the lake boundary layer is causing an increase of near-surface wind speeds over the lake.

There are a number of implications to increasing wind speeds and decreasing temperature gradients on the physical environment of Lake Superior. Large-scale circulation patterns and vertical mixing strength in Lake Superior are primarily wind-driven (V.B., G.A.M., C. Wu, A.R.D., N. Urban & N. Kimura, manuscript in preparation). A sensitivity study (J.A.A. and J. Allen, manuscript in preparation) using a one-dimensional model and realistic surface forcing suggests that the vertical extent of the surface layer increases of the order of 1 m for every 1% increase in wind speed.

Simulations with a three-dimensional model of the lake indicate that increases in wind speed are driving an increase in surface current speeds ($r^2 = 0.59$, $n = 28$, two-tail t -test $p = 1.2 \times 10^{-6}$). The model reveals surface currents increasing by $4.0 \pm 1.3 \text{ mm s}^{-1} \text{ decade}^{-1}$ (Fig. 4). Although decreased atmospheric inversion strength and stronger winds alone would increase summer mixed layer depths, we find shoaling of the summer mixed layer with time by $-0.43 \pm 0.30 \text{ m decade}^{-1}$ in the model, indicating that increasing atmospheric temperatures are having a dominant effect. Increased atmospheric temperatures are also contributing to an increase in the length of the summer stratified period by $2.9 \pm 3.3 \text{ days decade}^{-1}$. A longer stratified period and shallower mixed layers are probably contributing to the observed declining trends in lake-wide chlorophyll²¹.

The changes to the lake boundary layer atmosphere, currents and thermal stratification will probably have an impact on lake ecology, biogeochemical cycling and surface evaporation. Furthermore, changes to gradients in lake and land wind speeds will alter the vertical circulation above the lake, mesoscale weather phenomena and air pollutant transport. All of these impacts are understudied consequences of large lakes facing climate change, especially those with seasonal ice cover, and warrant further study.

Methods

Lake temperature, air temperature and surface wind observations were obtained from Lake Superior buoy data archived at the National Buoy Data Center. Processed satellite wind observations were obtained from the NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) QuikSCAT SeaWinds ocean surface

satellite observations at 0.25° resolution. Observations of land surface temperature, air temperature, surface winds and upper air winds at 32 km resolution over the Lake Superior region were retrieved from North American Regional Reanalysis²² (NARR). All of these data were annually averaged over the mean stratified season (July–September). A power-law wind profile²³, and boundary layer similarity theory⁹, with ocean surface parameters were used in construction of the theoretical model. The physical model is based on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology general circulation model configured to Lake Superior bathymetry, run at 2 km resolution. Details on each of these are provided below.

Lake meteorology. Three buoys, collecting hourly meteorology, have been operating on Lake Superior since 1979 at the earliest. All wind observations before 1985 relied on vector-averaged winds, where most data since used a scalar-average wind, and thus pre-1985 data were discarded and post-1985 vector winds were empirically corrected for a known low bias in vector-averaged winds (Supplementary Fig. S3). The results of the analysis do not qualitatively (and in most cases quantitatively) change if these data are included or the correction is not applied. Air temperature at 4 m, wind speed at 5 m and surface lake temperature at 0.5 m were retrieved, averaged for the summer season and averaged across the buoys. Temperature gradients were computed by subtracting mean air from mean surface water temperature.

Satellite winds. To verify that buoy average winds were reflective of basin average winds, satellite scatterometry data were used to compute whole lake mean winds. These data were derived from the Level 3 $0.25^\circ \times 0.25^\circ$ NASA daily average SeaWinds product collected by the NASA QuikSCAT satellite. The daily averages are based on twice-daily (approximately 6 and 18 local time) passes of the satellite over the region. A similar averaging technique as for the buoy data was applied to these observations.

Land surface meteorology. The National Centers for Environmental Prediction NARR (ref. 22) provides 3-hourly 32-km-resolution gridded reanalysis meteorology. These data were extracted for the region defined as an area from 45.7500° N to 49.3125° N latitude and 92.5000° W to 83.6875° W longitude. Free troposphere wind velocities were computed from the U and V wind vectors at the 850 hPa pressure level. For surface 2 m air temperature and land surface temperature, NARR land cover data were used to mask out water grid cells before averaging.

Trend analysis. All trends were computed using standard least-squares regression, with linear slope and $1-\sigma$ slope uncertainty reported for all relevant meteorological variables. To further test the strength of these slopes, we carried out a boot-strapping trend analysis of all subsets of ten or more consecutive years of data, finding in all variables, that most trends match in sign and on average the magnitude of the trend for the entire data record studied.

Surface layer model. A power-law wind profile²³ was coupled to Monin–Obukhov flux-profile similarity functions^{9,24} for stable layers. Charnock ocean surface stress functions²⁵ were applied to compute ocean momentum drag, roughness and friction velocity. A bulk parameterization of surface heat fluxes⁹ was then used to compute the strength of the stability. An iterative solver is applied to these sets of equations, given typical surface layer mean winds, to solve for wind speed as a function of height for a range of air–water temperature gradients. Near-surface wind speed differences as a function of temperature gradient were then extracted and linearly fitted for wind speed sensitivity to inversion strength.

Lake Superior numerical model. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology general circulation model^{26,27} was configured to Lake Superior bathymetry²⁸ at 2 km horizontal resolution. The model has 28 vertical layers of varying thickness, with a finest resolution of 5 m in the top 50 m, increasing with depth. The model was forced with 32-km-resolution 3-hourly air temperature, humidity, winds and surface down-welling radiation from NARR (ref. 22) between 1979 and 2006. A model bulk formula uses atmospheric stability to determine wind stress, latent and sensible heat fluxes at the air–lake interface. Daily fractional ice coverage from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration⁸ was applied to each model grid cell and used to decrease momentum and heat exchange between the lake and atmosphere by the percentage the grid is ice covered. The K -profile parameterization vertical mixing scheme²⁹ and Smagorinsky horizontal diffusivity scheme³⁰ were used to parameterize sub-gridscale processes. The model is spun up for five years using 1979 forcing before the final run through 2006.

Received 26 June 2009; accepted 21 October 2009; published online 15 November 2008

References

- Hansen, J. *et al.* Global temperature change. *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci.* **103**, 14288–14293 (2006).
- Magnuson, J. J. *et al.* Historical trends in lake and river ice cover in the Northern Hemisphere. *Science* **289**, 1743–1746 (2000).
- Alin, S. R. & Johnson, T. C. Carbon cycling in large lakes of the world: A synthesis of production, burial, and lake-atmosphere exchange estimates. *Glob. Biogeochem. Cycles* **21**, GB3002 (2007).

4. Cole, J. J. *et al.* Plumbing the global carbon cycle: Integrating inland waters into the terrestrial carbon budget. *Ecosystems* **10**, 172–185 (2007).
5. Austin, J. A. & Colman, S. M. Lake Superior summer water temperatures are increasing more rapidly than regional air temperatures: A positive ice-albedo feedback. *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **34**, L06604 (2007).
6. Austin, J. A. & Colman, S. M. A century of temperature variability in Lake Superior. *Limnol. Oceanogr.* **53**, 2724–2730 (2008).
7. Levitus, S., Antonov, J. I., Boyer, T. P. & Stephens, C. Warming of the world ocean. *Science* **287**, 2225–2229 (2000).
8. Assel, R. A. *Great lakes ice cover, first ice, last ice, and ice duration: Winters 1973–2002*. NOAA Technical Memorandum GLERL-125 (Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory, 2003).
9. Stull, R. B. *An Introduction to Boundary Layer Meteorology* (Kluwer–Academic, 1988).
10. Xie, S.-P. Satellite observations of cool ocean–atmosphere interaction. *Bull. Am. Meteorol. Soc.* **85**, 195–208 (2004).
11. Back, L. E. & Bretherton, C. S. On the relationship between SST gradients, boundary layer winds and convergence over the tropical oceans. *J. Clim.* **22**, 4182–4196 (2009).
12. Chelton, D. B. *et al.* Observations of coupling between surface wind stress and sea surface temperature in the eastern tropical Pacific. *J. Clim.* **14**, 1479–1498 (2001).
13. Lindzen, R. S. & Nigam, S. On the role of sea surface temperature gradients in forcing low-level winds and convergence in the tropics. *J. Atmos. Sci.* **44**, 2418–2436 (1987).
14. Wallace, J. M., Mitchell, T. P. & Deser, C. The influence of sea surface temperature on surface wind in the eastern equatorial Pacific: Seasonal and interannual variability. *J. Clim.* **2**, 1492–1499 (1989).
15. Maloney, E. D. & Chelton, D. B. An assessment of the sea surface temperature influence on surface wind stress in numerical weather prediction and climate models. *J. Clim.* **19**, 2743–2762 (2006).
16. Song, Q., Chelton, D. B., Esbensen, S. K., Thum, N. & O’Neill, L. W. Coupling between sea surface temperature and low-level winds in mesoscale numerical models. *J. Clim.* **22**, 146–164 (2009).
17. Pavia, E. G. & O’Brien, J. J. Weibull statistics of wind speed over the ocean. *J. Appl. Meteorol.* **25**, 1324–1332 (1986).
18. Klink, K. Trends and interannual variability of wind speed distributions in Minnesota. *J. Clim.* **15**, 3311–3317 (2002).
19. Pryor, S. C. *et al.* Wind speed trends over the contiguous United States. *J. Geophys. Res.* **114**, D14105 (2009).
20. Waples, J. T. & Klump, J. V. Biophysical effects of a decadal shift in summer wind direction over the Laurentian Great Lakes. *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **29**, 1201 (2002).
21. Urban, N. R. in *State of Lake Superior* (eds Munawar, M. & Heath, R.) (Ecovision World Monograph Series, Aquatic Ecosystem and Health Management Society, 2009).
22. Mesinger, F. *et al.* North American regional reanalysis. *Bull. Am. Meteorol. Soc.* **87**, 343–360 (2006).
23. Arya, S. P. *Introduction to Micrometeorology* Vol. 79 (International Geophysics Series, Academic, 2001).
24. Businger, J. A., Wyngaard, J. C., Izumi, Y. & Bradley, E. F. Flux profile relationships in the atmospheric surface layer. *J. Atmos. Sci.* **28**, 181–189 (1971).
25. Charnock, H. Wind stress on a water surface. *Q. J. R. Meteorol. Soc.* **81**, 639–640 (1955).
26. Marshall, J., Adcroft, A., Hill, C., Perelman, L. & Heisey, C. A finite volume, incompressible Navier–Stokes model for studies of the ocean on parallel computers. *J. Geophys. Res.* **102**, 5753–5766 (1997).
27. Marshall, J., Hill, C., Perelman, L. & Adcroft, A. Hydrostatic, quasihydrostatic, and nonhydrostatic ocean modelling. *J. Geophys. Res.* **102**, 5733–5752 (1997).
28. Schwab, D. J. & Seller, D. L. *Computerized Bathymetry and Shorelines of the Great Lakes*. NOAA Data Report ERL GLERL-16 (Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory, 1996).
29. Large, W. G., McWilliams, J. C. & Doney, S. C. Oceanic vertical mixing: A review and a model with a nonlocal boundary layer parameterization. *Rev. Geophys.* **32**, 363–403 (1994).
30. Smagorinsky, J. General circulation experiments with the primitive equations. I. The basic experiments. *Mon. Weath. Rev.* **91**, 99–164 (1963).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by NSF Geosciences directorate Grant Nos 0628560 (A.R.D., V.B. and G.A.M.) and 0825633 (J.A.A.).

Author contributions

A.R.D. developed the analysis framework, built the surface layer model, carried out the correlation analyses and wrote most of the manuscript. J.A.A. suggested the initial idea and analysed the buoy data. V.B. parameterized, ran and analysed the physical model of Lake Superior. G.A.M. designed the physical model framework and discussed lake biogeochemical implications. All authors discussed and revised the manuscript and figures.

Additional information

Supplementary information accompanies this paper on www.nature.com/naturegeoscience. Reprints and permissions information is available online at <http://npg.nature.com/reprintsandpermissions>. Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to A.R.D.