An Analysis of the Intensification of Hurricane Wilma from the 2005 Atlantic Hurricane Season

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Purpose

This work was designed to gain insight into Hurricane Wilma (2005) by investigating what dynamic and thermodynamic variables can characterize its rapid intensification (RI) period. This case study will serve as a foundation to build upon by others exploring the RI of Wilma or other tropical storm systems.

Background

Figure 1. Composite of the names and tracks of all 2005 Atlantic tropical storms.
Source: http://www.nasa.gov/vision/earth/lookingatearth/2005hurricane_recap.html

Factors for such an active 2005 hurricane season, as shown in Figure 1, include record warmth sea surface temperatures, low vertical wind shear, and increased latent heat flux across the tropical Atlantic Ocean (AO), Caribbean Sea, and Gulf of Mexico (GOM).

Wilma first organized over the western Caribbean Sea as a broad area of disturbed weather (Figure 2). After its eye feature was attained, Tropical Storm Wilma rapidly deepened to a category 5 hurricane. Weakening making landfall in Cozumel, Mexico, it re-strengthened over the GOM and shifted its direction to the northeast towards Florida. Weakening as it raced across the state, it regained its strength once more as it entered into the AO. Eventually, cold air and abundant wind shear penetrated into the system, leading to its transition as an extra-tropical cyclone.

Figure 2. Track positions for Hurricane Wilma.
Source: http://www.hpc.ncep.noaa.gov/tropical/rain/wilma2005trk.gif

Unidata's Integrated Data Viewer (IDV) presents a clever way of illustrating a multi-dimensional perspective of the atmosphere. Figure 3a shows the contours of Wilma's winds at 10 m/s and 30 m/s while Figure 3b provides a structure of Wilma's winds.

Using the IDV 3-D display can lead to the discovery of an aspect not otherwise portrayed in a 2-D display. The spots of yellow near the center of the circulation in Figure 3b indicate wind speeds of 40 m/s, a magnitude not represented in Figure 3a.

The 2-D and 3-D IDV tools serve as a great advantage to analyzing the structure of weather systems. In this example, it is observed that there are wind speeds greater than 30 m/s, which are found near the center, or the eye, of the storm.

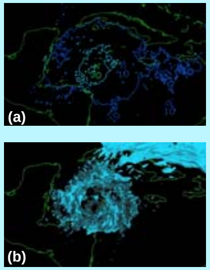

Figure 3. Display of the wind speeds for Wilma and its environment in (a) 2-D (b) 3-D.

Data and Methods

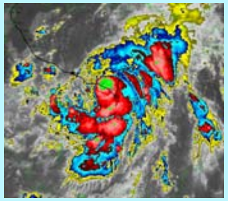

Figure 4. IR satellite image of Wilma. The black line represents the ATCF storm track, and the black star indicates the 30-hour observation point.

An Automated Tropical Cyclone Forecast (ATCF) storm track (Figure 4) was used to observe and interpret how various dynamic and thermodynamic variables changed as Wilma approached a data probe placed at the 30-hour observation point.

GOES IR satellite imagery was evaluated to ascertain what part(s) of Wilma experienced the deepest convection and to study the behavior of desired meteorological variables as the storm progressed and deepened. Most of the probes were placed on the northern side of the storm. (Figure 5). This may suggest a relationship between the areas of Wilma that experienced the deepest convection and intensification.

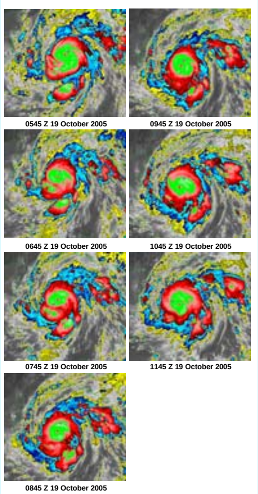

Figure 5. A series of IR satellite images showing the 6-hour period prior to Wilma's point of deepest pressure. The magenta star represents the position of the data probe within areas of deep convection.

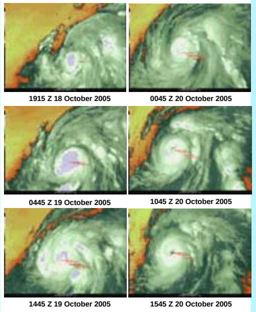

Figure 6. A series of WV satellite images depicting Wilma prior to landfall in Cozumel, Mexico on 21 October. Shades of purple indicate areas of high water vapor content and red text state Wilma's central pressure.

GOES water vapor satellite imagery was used to assess how moist Wilma's environment was. Abundant moisture provided the latent heat release needed to fuel and further intensify Wilma, as shown in Figure 6. As it approached the Yucatán Peninsula, dry air became a hindrance to the system, weakening its warm core structure.

Results

Figure 7. Time series of various meteorological variables simulated during Wilma's RI period.

Figure 8. Correlation table of meteorological variables, where red, green, and yellow colors represent strong, moderate, and weak correlations, respectively.

Wilma's pressure dropped dramatically while latent heat (LH) flux and wind speed increased during its RI (Figure 7). Before the system reached its deepest pressure point, the LH flux and wind speed had sharply decreased. This may indicate the onset of Wilma's eye. The strongest positive correlation was found between LH flux and wind speed (0.95); the strongest negative correlation between pressure and wind speed (-0.93) (Figure 8).

Wilma held a strong, tightly-wrapped cyclonic circulation near the surface. This cyclonic pattern was evident throughout the lower and mid-troposphere. At 200 mb, Wilma held a distinct anticyclonic circulation. The amalgamation of the surface cyclone and upper-level anticyclone allowed Wilma to ventilate and maintain its deep low pressure, as shown in Figure 9.

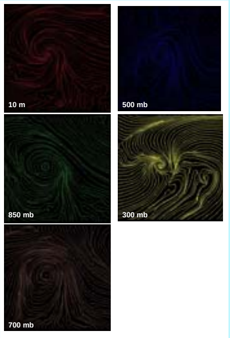

Figure 9. A collection of streamline images simulated during Wilma's point of deepest pressure at different levels in the atmosphere .

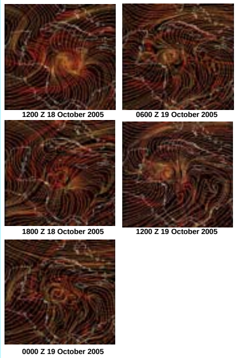

Figure 10. A collection of Wilma's streamline patterns during its RI. Red and yellow streamlines are taken at 10 m and 200 mb, respectively.

Wilma was able to sustain its surface cyclone and upper-level anticyclone throughout its RI period, as shown in Figure 10. This is especially evident after 0000Z 19 October, as the streamlines organized, intensified and certainly showed the tight wind flows of Wilma.

Conclusions

The key findings considered most significant to characterizing Wilma's RI period…

- Positive correlations between:
- Latent heat flux and wind speed
- Relative humidity and precipitable water
- Negative correlations between:
- Pressure and wind speed
- Pressure and precipitable water
- Maintenance of surface cyclone and upper-level anticyclone
- Intensification due to moist environment

Future work

Figure 11. Sample of file upload to the RAMADDA.

- Show capabilities of IDV to perform detail analysis of an event and build educational content.
- Establish a research foundation to build upon by others who are exploring RI of Wilma or other tropical systems.
- Use RAMADDA, an online publishing tool, to encourage access, ancillary data analysis or model output to advance Wilma case study (Figure 11).

References

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