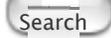


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Water works

Wednesday, 13 Dec 2006 13:39

New observations of changes in the Earth's freshwater distribution from space have found that basins in the Congo, the Zambezi and the Nile have significantly dried over the past five years.

The gravity recovery and climate experiment (Grace) also found that during the same time in the US, the Mississippi and Colorado River basins had water storage increases.

Twin Grace satellites monitor tiny month-to-month changes in the Earth's gravity field that are primarily caused by the movement of water in global land, ocean, ice and atmosphere reservoirs.

Nasa and University of California scientists behind the experiment argue that the information gleaned from it is "vital" for managing precious water resources in vulnerable parts of Africa and south-east Asia.

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It is hoped that the data will help scientists to make more informed regional water management decisions.

Jay Famiglietti of the University of California said: "Grace is providing a first-ever look at the distribution of freshwater storage on the continents. With longer time series, we can distinguish long-term trends from natural seasonal variations and track how water availability responds to natural climate variations and climate change."

And Matt Rodell, a hydrologist at Nasa's Goddard Space Flight Centre, said: "Grace data improves our understanding of the water cycle and simulations of soil moisture, snow and groundwater in computer models. This is a key step toward better weather, stream flow, flood, drought and water resource forecasts worldwide." 

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The Congo river

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