

**THE SOUTH PACIFIC SEA LEVEL & CLIMATE
MONITORING PROJECT**

MONTHLY DATA REPORT

NO. 177

MARCH 2010



Australian Government

Bureau of Meteorology

This project is sponsored by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), and is managed by the Bureau of Meteorology with its National Tidal Centre (NTC) providing key technical support.



Australian Government

Bureau of Meteorology

**National Tidal Centre
Bureau of Meteorology
Australia**

GPO Box 421
Kent Town SA 5071
Australia

Tel: (+618) 8366 2730
Fax: (+618) 8366 2651
Website: <http://www.bom.gov.au/oceanography/>

Quality Certification:

I authorise the issue of this South Pacific Sea Level and Climate Monitoring Project Monthly Data Report for March 2010 in accordance with National Tidal Centre Quality Assurance procedures.

William Mitchell
Manager - National Tidal Centre

South Pacific Sea Level and Climate Monitoring Project

Monthly Data Report

March 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary, and the overview that follows, are intended to provide a synopsis of the Monthly Data Report and of the trends observed over the life of the project to date.

March 2010

- The SEAFRAME network continued to collect high quality sea level and associated meteorological information for monitoring climate variability and climate change.
- Tropical Cyclone Tomas caused slightly elevated sea levels, strong winds and low barometric pressures at the SEAFRAME stations at Fiji and Tonga.
- Lower than normal sea levels were observed at many stations during March, as is typically observed during an El Niño. Sea level anomalies at some stations are the lowest they have been since the 1997/98 El Niño. Sea levels are not expected to reach the extremely low levels observed during the strong 1997/98 El Niño.
- El Niño climate conditions continued to be observed during March with warmer than normal ocean temperatures across the central and eastern equatorial Pacific. However, strengthening trade winds and cooling ocean temperatures across the equatorial Pacific during March is indicative of an El Niño event in decay.
- The majority of international climate models predict that El Niño conditions will continue to breakdown as Pacific Ocean temperatures steadily cool in the coming months.

Short-Term Trends

It is important to stress that as the sea level record becomes longer, the short-term trend estimate becomes more stable and reliable. Observed trends in sea level include natural variability, for example, events such as El Niño and effects due to many other atmospheric, oceanographic and geological processes. Longer-term data sets for all stations are required in order to separate the effects of the different signals. ***Please exercise caution in interpreting the short-term trends in the table below*** – they will almost certainly change over the coming years as the data set increases in length.

Figure 13 later in this report provides the “time history” of the short-term trend at all project locations.

Recent short-term sea level trends in the project area based upon SEAFRAME data through March, 2010				
Location	Lat / Long	Installation Date	Trend (mm/yr)	Change from previous month
Cook Is	21°12'17.1"S / 159°47'5.2"W	Feb 1993	+5.2	-0.1
Tonga	21°8'12.5"S / 175°10'50.5"W	Jan 1993	+9.4	0.0
Fiji	17°36'17.7"S / 177°26'17.7"E	Oct 1992	+5.5	-0.1
Vanuatu	17°45'19.2"S / 168°18'27.7"E	Jan 1993	+6.5	-0.1
Samoa	13°49'36.4"S / 171°45'40.7"W	Feb 1993	+5.3	-0.2
Tuvalu	8°30'8.9"S / 179°11'42.6"E	Mar 1993	+4.0	-0.6
Kiribati	1°21'54.2"N / 172°55'58.8"E	Dec 1992	+4.2	-0.1
Nauru	0°31'45.9"S / 166°54'36.2"E	Jul 1993	+5.1	-0.1
Solomon Is.	9°25'44.1"S / 159°57'19.3"E	Jul 1994	+6.5	-0.5
PNG	2°2'31.5"S / 147°22'25.6"E	Sep 1994	+6.6	-0.2
FSM	6°58'49.9"N / 158°12'0.8"E	Dec 2001	+14.2	-0.5
Marshall Is.	7°6'21.7"N / 171°22'22.1"E	May 1993	+3.6	0.0

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the March 2010 Monthly Data Report for the South Pacific Sea Level and Climate Monitoring Project (SPSLCMP). The report details the month by month operation of the SEAFRAME monitoring stations in the Pacific, including operational problems with the network or with satellite communications, the occurrence of abnormal sea level or climate events, interpretation of sea level fluctuations in the context of El Niño and the emergence of trends in the data.

The SPSLCMP was developed as an Australian response to concerns raised by the member countries of the South Pacific Forum over the potential impacts of global warming on climate and sea levels in the Pacific. Support was provided for the installation of SEAFRAME monitoring stations across the South Pacific Forum region.

SEAFRAME gauges not only measure sea level by two independent means, but also observe a number of “ancillary” variables - air and water temperatures, wind speed, wind direction and atmospheric pressure. There is an associated programme of levelling to first order, to determine shifts in the vertical of the sea level sensors due to local land movement. Continuous Global Positioning System (CGPS) measurements are now also being made to determine the vertical movement of the land with respect to the International Terrestrial Reference Frame.

The AusAID funded project has, as its principal objective *‘the provision of an accurate long term record of sea level in the South Pacific for partner countries and*

the international scientific community, that enables them to respond to and manage related impacts’.

The project’s monitoring network consists of 12 SEAFRAME stations, providing a wide coverage across the Southwest Pacific basin. All of these stations (see Figure A), with the exception of the Pohnpei (FSM) gauge, which was established in December 2001, have been operational since October 1994.

The monthly data report, one of a range of information products produced by the project, is the primary form of SPSLCMP data dissemination. Its content is designed to provide up-to-date access to the project’s data products.

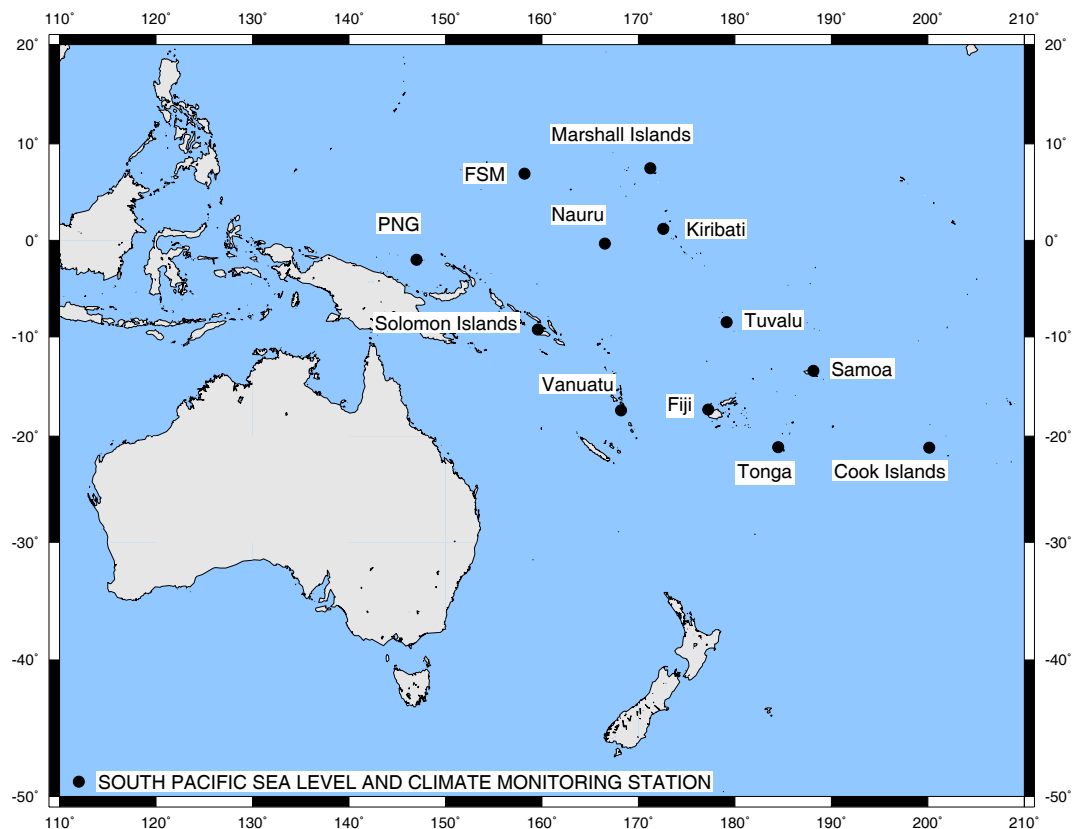


Figure A: *South Pacific Sea Level and Climate Monitoring Stations*

MARCH CLIMATOLOGY

El Niño climate conditions continued to be observed across the equatorial Pacific, although a cooling of ocean temperatures and strengthening of Trade Winds across the equatorial Pacific during March is evidence that the El Niño is in decay. International climate models predict that Pacific Ocean temperatures will steadily cool over the coming months and neutral climate conditions will return by the southern hemisphere winter.

The Southern Oscillation Index (SOI) remained negative, with the March value of –11 following the February value of –14. Sustained negative values of the SOI are typical during an El Niño event (**Figure B**).

Sea surface temperatures remained warmer than normal across the central and eastern equatorial Pacific during March. Sea surface temperature anomalies exceeded +1°C across much of the central equatorial Pacific and parts of the eastern equatorial Pacific. Sea surface temperatures in the western equatorial Pacific remained close to normal. The sea surface temperature pattern across the Pacific remains typical of a weak El Niño (**Figure C**).

Subsurface ocean temperatures also remain warmer than average across the central and eastern equatorial Pacific. Subsurface cooling occurred in the western and central equatorial Pacific during March in response to a strengthening of the Trade Winds, but renewed subsurface warming occurred in the eastern Pacific in a delayed response to the weaker than normal Trade Winds across the western Pacific during February that initiated an easterly-propagating Kelvin Wave. Subsurface warmth has generally been in decline since December signifying a decaying El Niño (**Figure D**).

During El Niño (warm-episode) conditions there is a sustained weakening of the Trade Winds across much of the equatorial Pacific and an increase in cloudiness in the central equatorial Pacific particularly near the dateline. During La Niña (cold-episode) conditions there is a reversal of this situation, with stronger Trade Winds and a decrease in cloudiness in the central Pacific. During March 2010 Trade Winds were of near-average strength for this time of the year across the entire equatorial Pacific (**Figure E**), having strengthened from their weakened state last month across the western and central equatorial Pacific. Cloudiness near the dateline has generally been above average in recent months, which is typical of El Niño.

The consensus among international computer models surveyed by the Bureau of Meteorology predict El Niño conditions will breakdown steadily in the coming months as sea surface temperatures across the equatorial Pacific gradually ease.

The preceding description of the climatology of the Pacific region, and Figures B, C and D are based on information sourced from the National Climate Centre of the Australian Bureau of Meteorology at <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/>. Figure E was generated from the Tropical Atmosphere Ocean project website courtesy of PMEL, NOAA at <http://www.pmel.noaa.gov/tao/>.

Southern Oscillation Index (SOI)

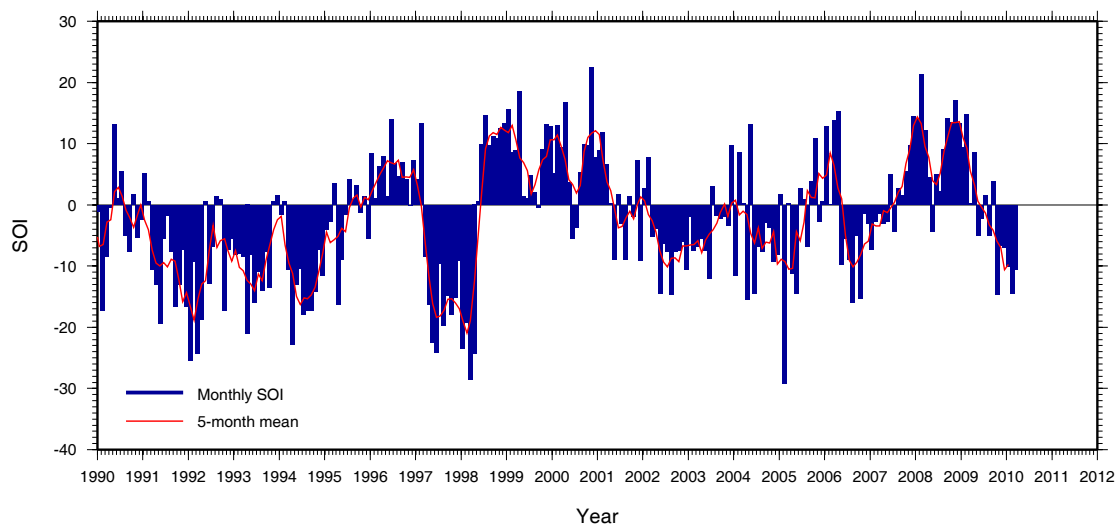


Figure B: The five-month weighted mean and individual monthly means of the Southern Oscillation Index (SOI). The SOI is ten times the monthly anomaly of the difference in mean sea level pressure between Tahiti and Darwin, divided by the long-term standard deviation of that difference for the relevant month.

SSTA 1.0X1.0 NMOC OCEAN ANOMALIES (C) 20100301 20100331

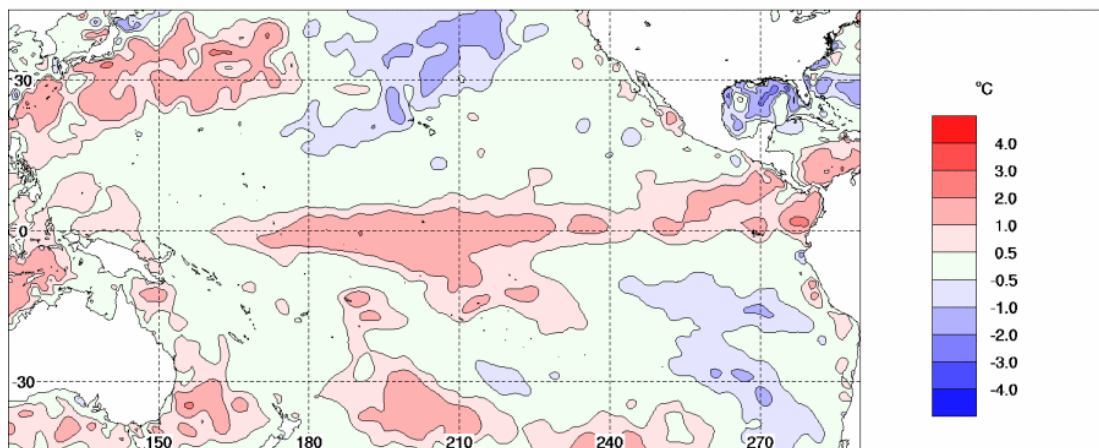


Figure C: Sea surface temperature anomaly (°C) for March 2010.

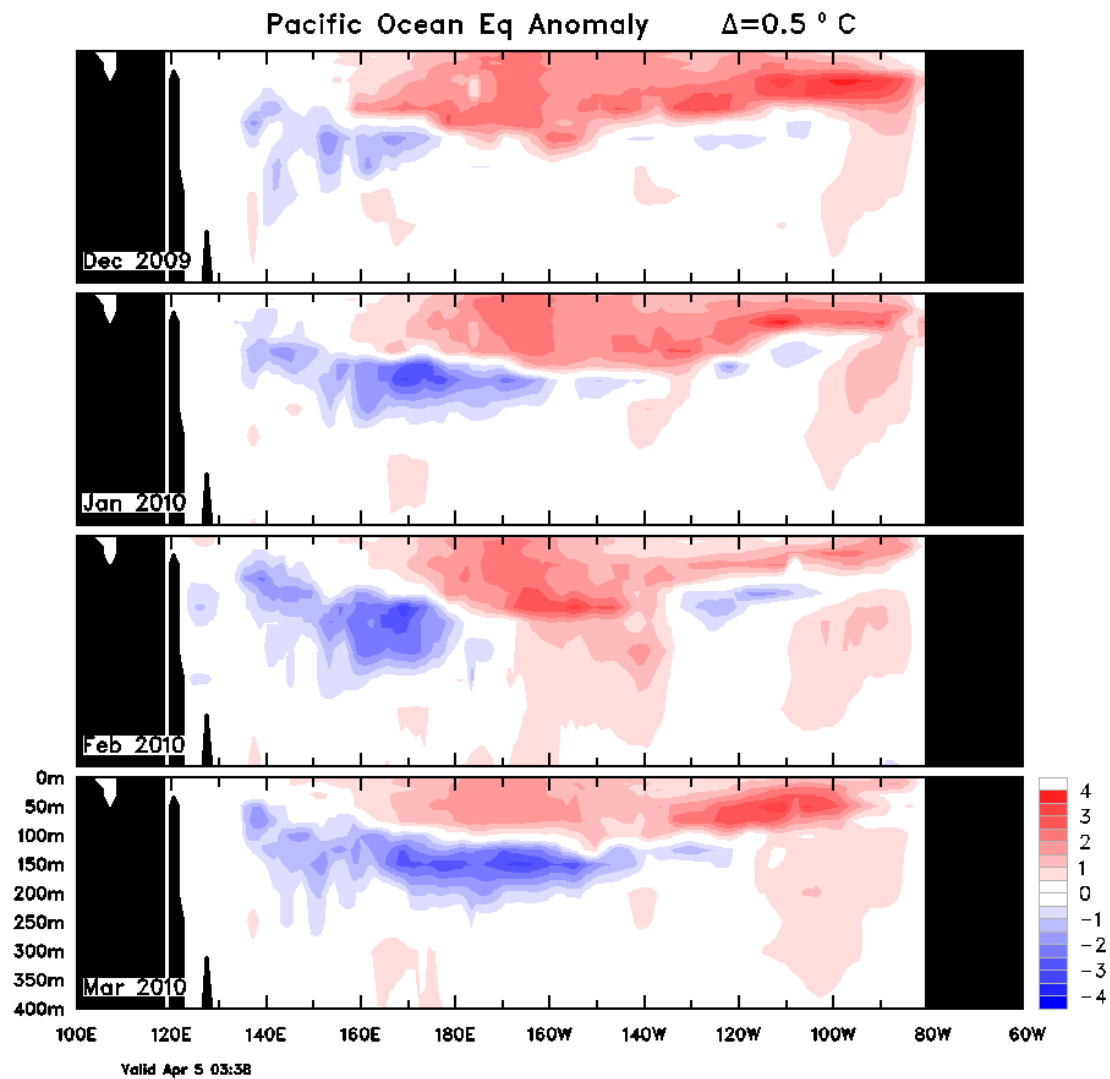
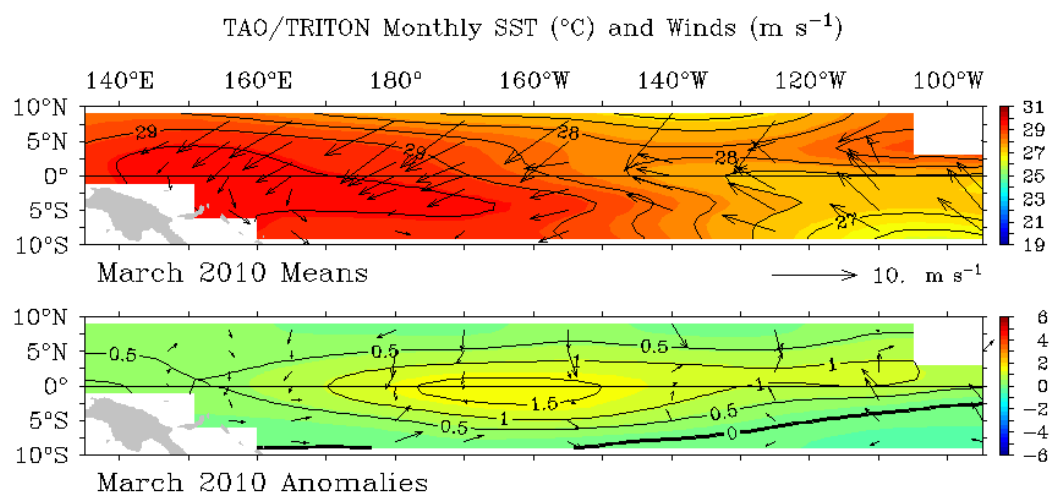


Figure D: Equatorial depth-longitude section of ocean temperature anomalies for December 2009 through to March 2010. Contour interval is 0.5°C .



TAO/NDBC/NOAA

Apr 6 2010

Figure E: Monthly mean wind vectors (top) and anomalies (bottom) for March 2010. The colour-shaded contours represent the monthly mean sea surface temperatures (top) and anomalies (bottom).

MARCH SEAFRAME DATA

Monthly Sea Level and Environmental Data (Figures 1-10)

The **observed sea levels (Figure 1)** are dominated by the daily oscillations of the tide. In most cases, the tide rises and falls twice per day (semi-diurnal), but at PNG and the Solomon Islands the tide tends to have a single high and low per day (diurnal). The greatest variations are called spring tides and tend to occur close to the full and new moon. There was a new moon on the 15th of March and a full moon on the 30th of March UTC.

Gaps in the data are the result of instrumental errors or data retrieval problems and are discussed under **Instrument Performance**.

The **residuals (Figure 2)** are the differences between the observed sea levels and the tidal predictions. They highlight the non-tidal sea level fluctuations such as those due to the short-term effects of weather or tsunamis. Residual sea level fluctuations may also be amplified or sustained by the shape of the harbour in which the gauge is located. Persistent sloshing of water within a bay or harbour, for example, is known as a seiche. Seiches are sometimes generated in Seeadler Harbour, PNG where they are recorded by the SEAFRAME at Manus Island when the wind suddenly changes strength or direction. Seiching is also commonly observed at FSM during periods of reduced tidal range and at Nauru during periods of strong westerly winds.

Tsunami waves generated by an undersea earthquake of magnitude Mw8.8 on the 27th February 2010 off the coast of Chile, as discussed in the February 2010 monthly data report, continued to be observed into March. The 'tail-end' of the tsunami whose primary waves were observed in February can be seen in the residuals at PNG, Samoa, Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga and Cook Islands.

Small storm surges were observed at Fiji on the 15th of March and at Tonga on the 16th of March as a result of strong winds and low barometric pressure associated with Tropical Cyclone Tomas. Sea levels at Tonga at the time were observed at more than 20cm above the predicted tide.

The sea level residuals at all stations, to some degree, exhibit semi-diurnal or diurnal fluctuations, which last a few days or weeks and then disappear. If these peaks were to persist, rather than appear as occasional 'transients', then the tidal analysis would be able to account for them, and the end result would be virtual eradication from the residuals.

The **barometrically corrected residuals (Figure 3)** have had the effect of atmospheric pressure fluctuations removed from the sea level residuals of Figure 2. The rule of thumb for the 'inverse barometer effect' is that a 1-hPa fall in the barometer, if sustained over a day or more, produces a 1-cm rise in the local sea level (within the area beneath the low pressure system).

The **winds, temperatures and barometric pressures** are plotted in **Figures 4 to 9**. The short lines in **Figure 5** follow the meteorological convention, that is, they point in the direction the wind is coming *from*. For example, the winds at Marshall Islands prevailed from the northeast for most of the month. Wind gusts associated with

Tropical Cyclone Tomas of 25m/s (50knots or 90 km/h) were observed at Tonga on the 16th of March.

Air and water temperatures (**Figures 7 and 8**) are plotted using the same vertical scale for the purpose of comparison. The air temperatures are seen to fluctuate over a much wider range than the water temperatures. At some sites (e.g. FSM) the water temperature shows almost no variation, although the air temperature varies by several degrees between night and day. At Nauru a twice-daily fluctuation in water temperature is related to the tide, as it is usually more pronounced during the larger spring tides.

Barometric pressures (**Figure 9**) tend to fluctuate by around 3 hPa twice-daily at all stations as a result of atmospheric tides, which are largest in the tropical regions and reduce to near zero toward the poles. The longer-term barometric pressure fluctuations that occur over periods of days to weeks are due to passing weather systems. These fluctuations tend to be larger at sites further away from the equator such as Cook Islands and Tonga.

The **meteorological data** are put into perspective by **Figure 10**. In this figure, if an open circle falls above (below) a solid dot, a new maximum (minimum) for the particular month has been set. *The data sets only include South Pacific Sea Level and Climate Monitoring Project data, which have been collected since October 1992 when the first station was installed (Fiji). The data from FSM has only been collected since December 2001.* New maximum March air temperatures were recorded at Nauru (32.0°C) and Fiji (33.9°C). Nauru also recorded a new minimum March air temperature of 22.6°C.

Mean Sea Level and Anomalies (Figures 11-13)

Figure 11 shows the **monthly mean sea levels**, which are simple arithmetic averages of the sea levels, relative to an arbitrary zero. The figure shows that Tuvalu, for example, normally experiences an annual cycle of about 0.2 metres, reaching a peak around February or March. One effect of the El Niño of 1997/1998 was to disrupt the annual sea level cycle at many of the SEAFRAME stations. The monthly mean sea level at Tuvalu in March 2010 was the lowest recorded since the extreme low sea levels recorded during the 1997/98 El Niño.

Figure 12 shows the **monthly mean sea level anomalies**, or departures from normal conditions after tides, annual and semi-annual seasonal cycles and the sea level trend have been removed. The annual cycle at Tuvalu (which has the largest consistent annual cycle) is quite notable in **Figure 11** but less apparent in **Figure 12**. By removing the seasonal cycles, the anomalies help to bring out irregular features, such as lower than normal sea levels across the region during the 1997/98 El Niño.

In March 2010 lower than normal sea levels continued to be observed across the region in connection with El Niño climate conditions. Lower than normal sea levels are typical during El Niño, as can be seen during previous events in 1997/98, 2002/03 and 2006/07. Sea level anomalies are particularly low at FSM, PNG, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu as a result of lower than normal Trade Wind convergence along the South Pacific Convergence Zone, and at many sites the anomalies are the lowest they have been since the 1997/98 El Niño. The current El Niño event is in decay and

therefore sea level anomalies are not expected to reach the low levels observed during the 1997/98 El Niño.

Sea Level Trends

The **short-term sea level trends** at individual stations as at March 2010 are shown in the following table. Sea level trends are updated every month by allowing for a linear trend term in the tidal analysis of all the data available at individual stations. *Please exercise caution in interpreting the trends* – they will continue to change over the coming years as the data sets increase in length. The evolution of the monthly trend values (in mm per year) at each station from one year after installation to present is depicted in **Figure 13**. This figure illustrates that as the sea level record becomes longer, the relative sea level trend estimates become more stable and reliable. The reason for this is that the trends from short sea level records are affected by the natural sea level variability occurring on inter-annual, El Niño and decadal timescales due to atmospheric, oceanographic and geological processes. Longer-term data sets for all stations are required in order for the underlying trend to emerge from these short-term variations. Further details are available from the *National Tidal Centre (NTC), Australian Bureau of Meteorology*.

Recent short-term sea level trends in the project area based upon SEAFRAME data through March, 2010				
Location	Lat / Long	Installation Date	Trend (mm/yr)	Change from previous month
Cook Is	21°12'17.1"S / 159°47'5.2"W	Feb 1993	+5.2	-0.1
Tonga	21°8'12.5"S / 175°10'50.5"W	Jan 1993	+9.4	0.0
Fiji	17°36'17.7"S / 177°26'17.7"E	Oct 1992	+5.5	-0.1
Vanuatu	17°45'19.2"S / 168°18'27.7"E	Jan 1993	+6.5	-0.1
Samoa	13°49'36.4"S / 171°45'40.7"W	Feb 1993	+5.3	-0.2
Tuvalu	8°30'8.9"S / 179°11'42.6"E	Mar 1993	+4.0	-0.6
Kiribati	1°21'54.2"N / 172°55'58.8"E	Dec 1992	+4.2	-0.1
Nauru	0°31'45.9"S / 166°54'36.2"E	Jul 1993	+5.1	-0.1
Solomon Is.	9°25'44.1"S / 159°57'19.3"E	Jul 1994	+6.5	-0.5
PNG	2°2'31.5"S / 147°22'25.6"E	Sep 1994	+6.6	-0.2
FSM	6°58'49.9"N / 158°12'0.8"E	Dec 2001	+14.2	-0.5
Marshall Is.	7°6'21.7"N / 171°22'22.1"E	May 1993	+3.6	0.0

Barometric Pressure, Water Temperature and Air Temperature Anomalies

The anomalies of barometric pressure, water and air temperature (**Figures 14 to 16**) are determined in the same manner as the sea level anomalies (**Figure 12**), except the trend is not calculated.

The **barometric pressure anomalies** (**Figure 14**) show substantially higher than normal barometric pressures were observed at SEAFRAME stations during the

1997-1998 El Niño. In March 2010 barometric pressures were generally near average for this time of the year.

The **water temperature anomalies (Figure 15)** show in March 2010 cooler than normal conditions were observed at Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu where anomalies exceeded -0.5°C . At Tonga and Cook Islands water temperatures have warmed but remain slightly cooler than normal. Slightly warmer than normal conditions were observed at PNG and Nauru, while elsewhere water temperatures are close to normal for this time of the year.

The **air temperature anomalies (Figure 16)** show near normal conditions were generally observed during March 2010. The only notable anomalies exceeding 0.5°C are Samoa where it was slightly warmer than normal and Vanuatu where it was slightly cooler than normal. Over the duration of the record the air temperature anomalies generally (although not always) follow the water temperature anomalies, which is an indication of the large influence the ocean has upon the climate of the Pacific Islands.

Instrument Performance

In **Figure 17**, which shows **sea level data return**, colour is used to distinguish five-year project phases. The number of missing days is noted in gaps in the bars.

Sea level data return was good across the network during March 2010. Missing satellite data transmissions from FSM, Nauru and Tuvalu on the 12th of March, and from FSM again on the 22nd of March were unable to be retrieved by dial-up modem communications. At Nauru problems with the primary sea level sensor continued and data from the secondary sea level sensor were used.

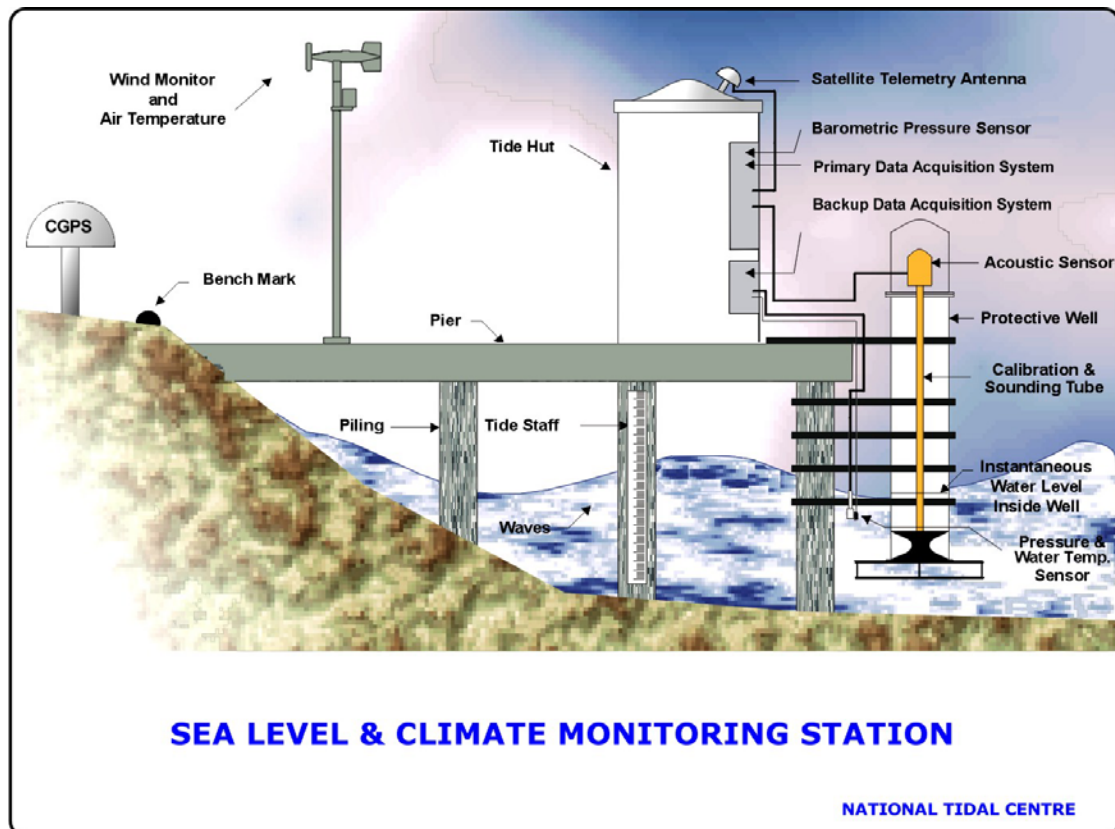
Various problems were encountered with ancillary meteorological sensors, including the air temperature sensor at Marshall Islands and water temperature sensor at Kiribati. At Tuvalu the wind sensor failed on the 12th of February, and a replacement part has since been despatched for its repair. A calibration and maintenance visit was performed at Samoa from 15th – 19th of March 2010.

SEAFRAME STATIONS

SEAFRAME stations employ a SUTRON programmable data logger, water level gauges and other sensors. The data logger and associated electronics are normally housed in fibreglass huts. A sketch of a typical station is shown in the following figure. Water level sensors include:

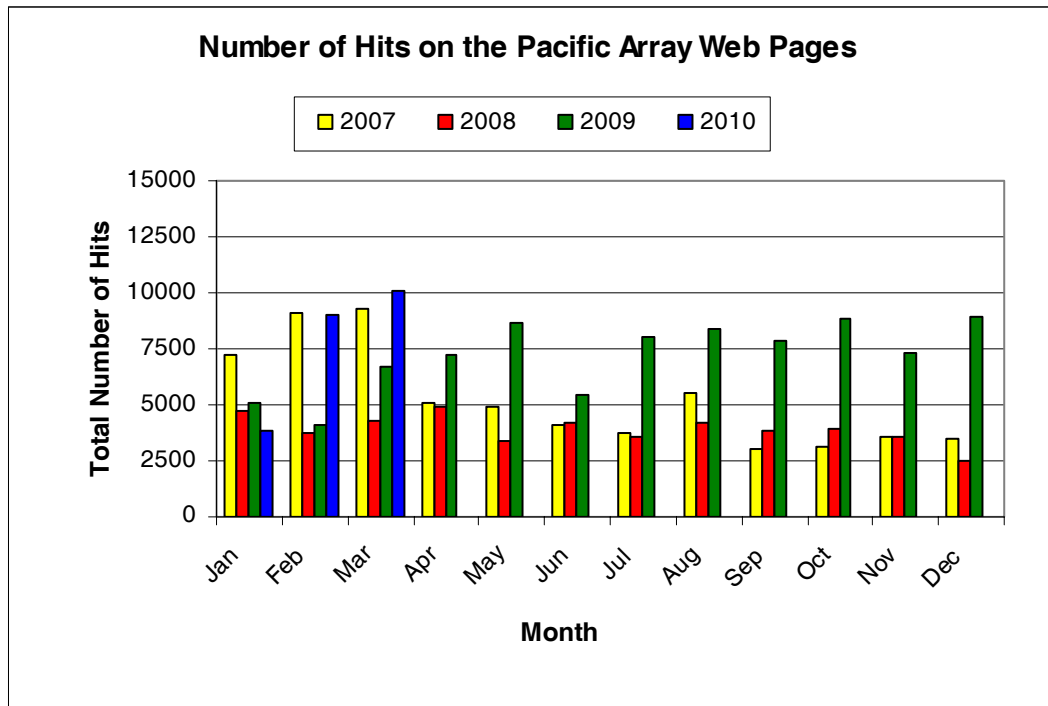
- (1) Primary water level using a Bartex 'AQUATRAK' acoustic-in-air sensor, and
- (2) Secondary water level (or backup) using a Druck pressure transducer mounted close to the seabed.

The primary and backup water level sensors provide water level values, which are averaged over three minutes and are logged every six minutes. The data logger has the memory capacity to store approximately one month of data. The meteorological sensors are logged to the SUTRON data logger on an hourly basis.



Web Hits

The following chart shows the number of times the Pacific pages on the *NTC* web site have been visited, by month since January 2007.



The *Monthly Data Report* is prepared by *NTC* for *AusAID*.

NTC would appreciate feedback from readers on the content and presentation of the *Monthly Data Report*.

Please spare a few moments to let us know your constructive opinion.

Further communication on the *Monthly Data Report* may be made to *NTC*. Anyone interested in a more detailed account of the project should contact:

National Tidal Centre
Bureau of Meteorology
PO Box 421
Kent Town SA 5067
Tel: (+618) (08) 8366 2600
Fax: (+618) (08) 8366 2693
Website: <http://www.bom.gov.au/oceanography/tides.shtml>

Or visit the project website at <http://www.bom.gov.au/pacificsealevel>

Please refer to: <http://www.bom.gov.au/oceanography/projects/spslcmp/spslcmp.shtml> for details.

Please also note the following:

While care has been taken in the collection, analysis, and compilation of the data, it is supplied on the condition that neither the *Commonwealth of Australia* nor *NTC* shall be liable for any loss or injury whatsoever arising from the use of the data. Copyright for material contained in this document is held by the *Commonwealth of Australia*.

Individuals and organisations are advised that quality controlled six-minute or hourly data from these stations are available on request from *NTC*. Some handling fees may be charged. For commercial agencies requesting data, some additional costs may be levied.

Figure 1

MARCH 2010

SIX MINUTE WATER LEVEL OBSERVATIONS (m)

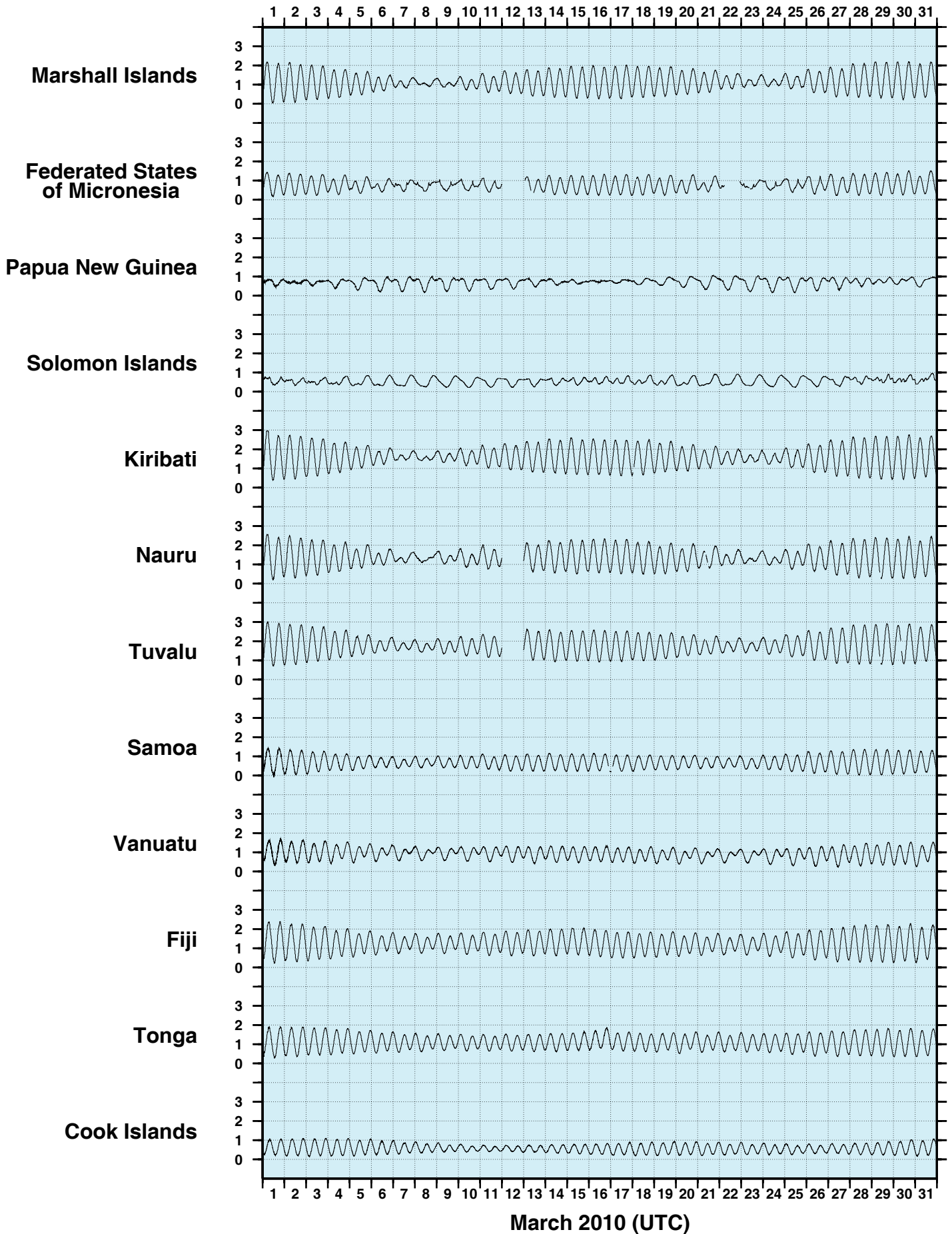


Figure 2

MARCH 2010
SIX MINUTE RESIDUAL WATER LEVELS (m)

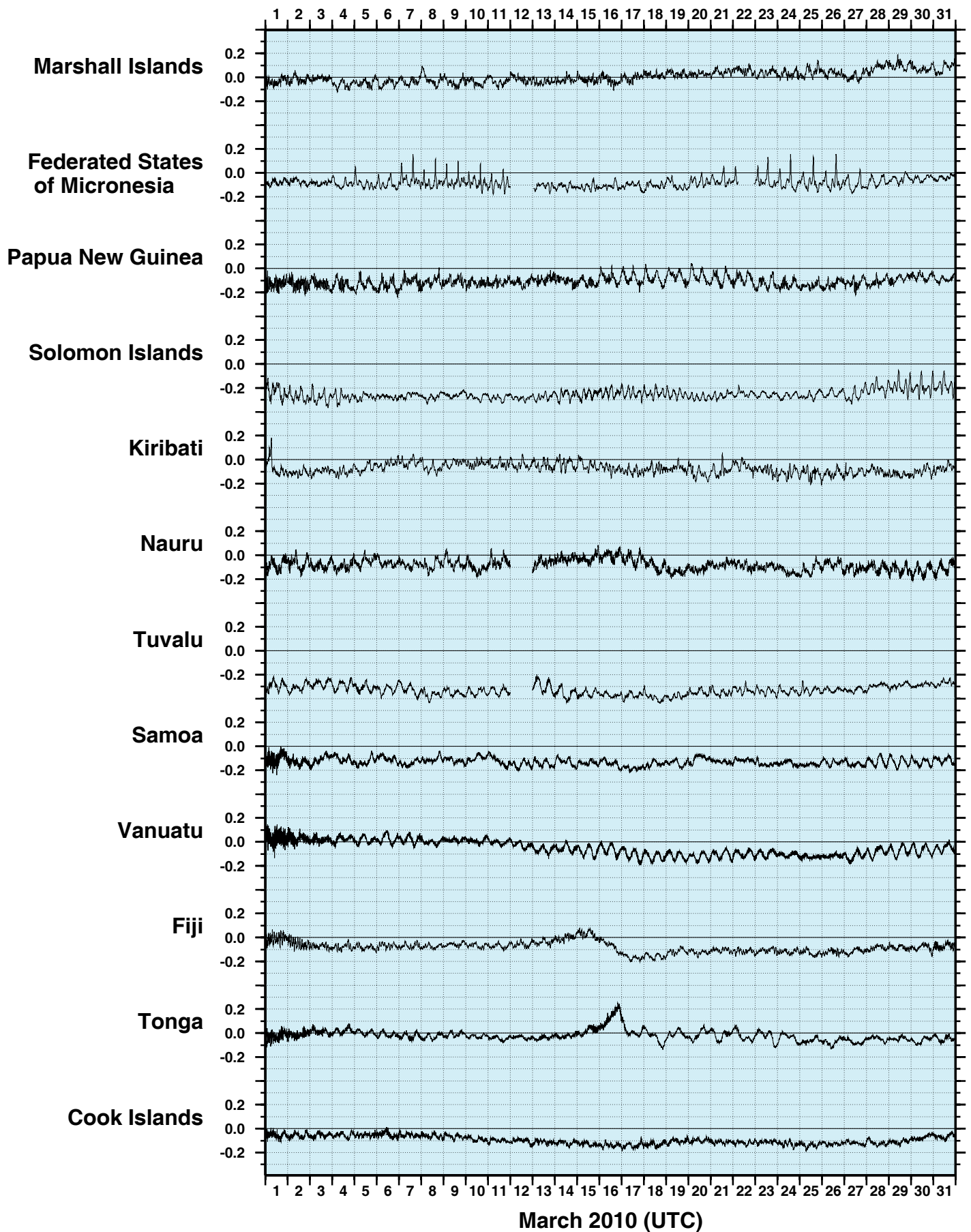


Figure 3

MARCH 2010

SIX MINUTE RESIDUALS

ADJUSTED FOR ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE (m)

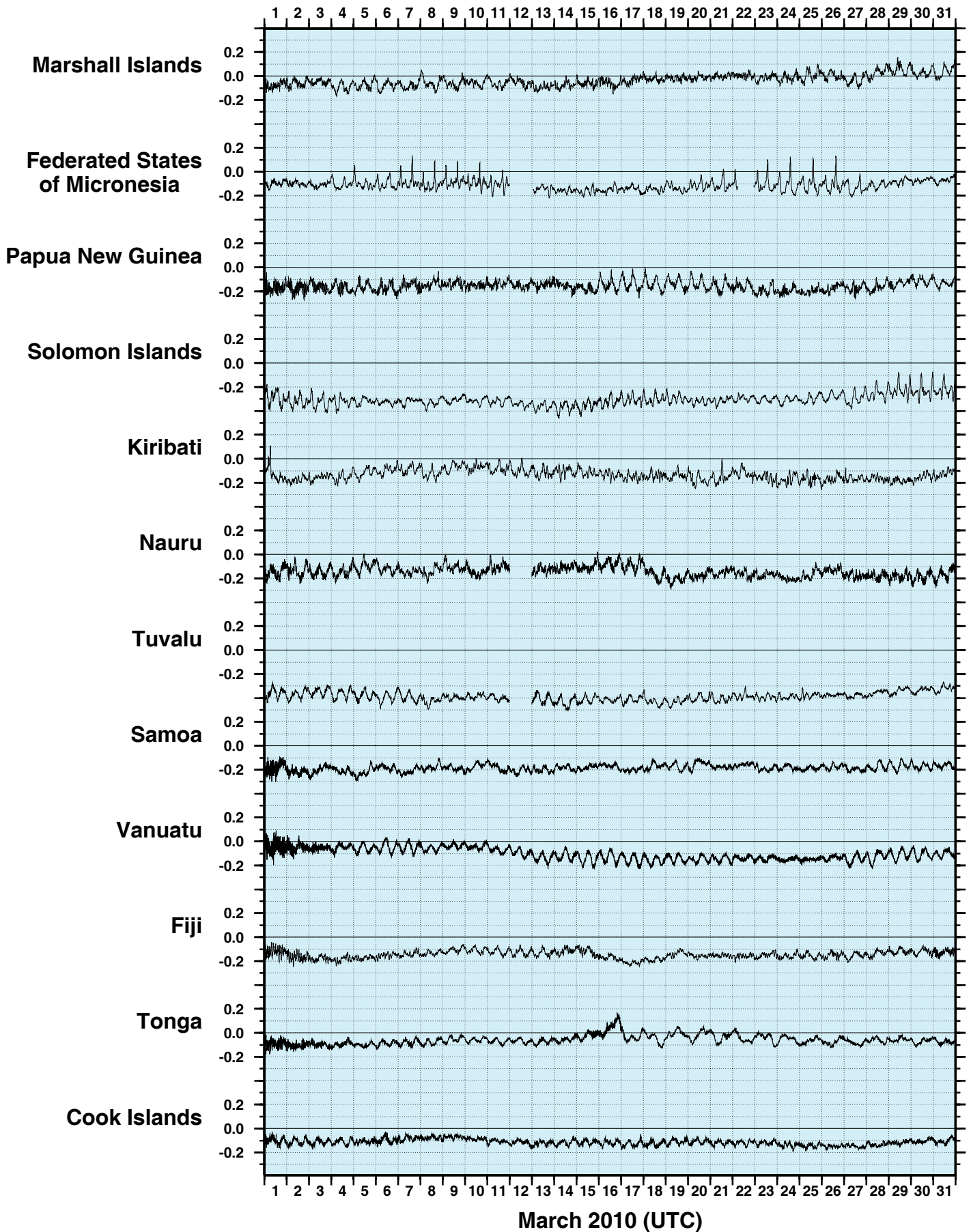


Figure 4

MARCH 2010
HOURLY WIND SPEEDS (m/s)

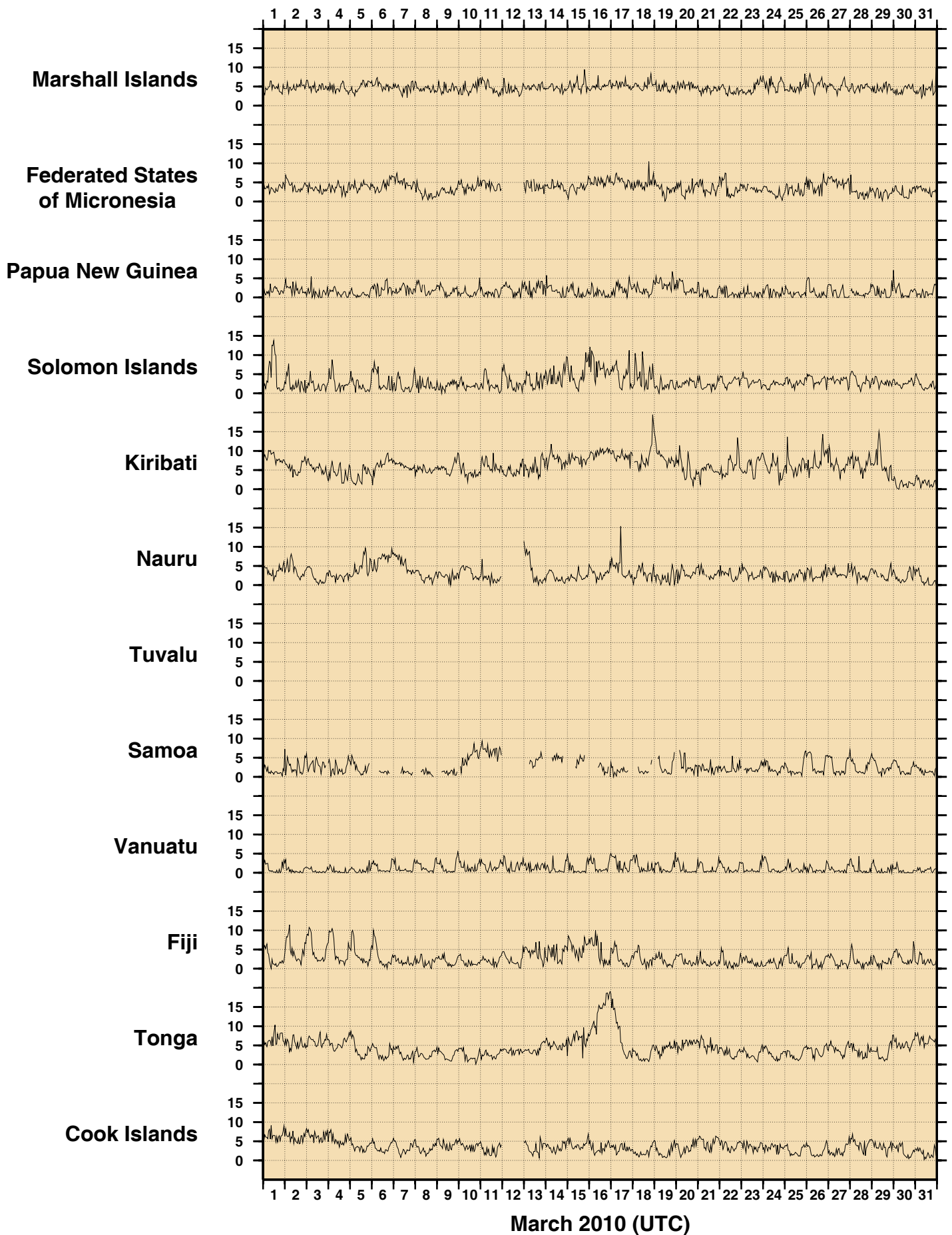


Figure 5
MARCH 2010
HOURLY INCIDENT WINDS (m/s, deg True)

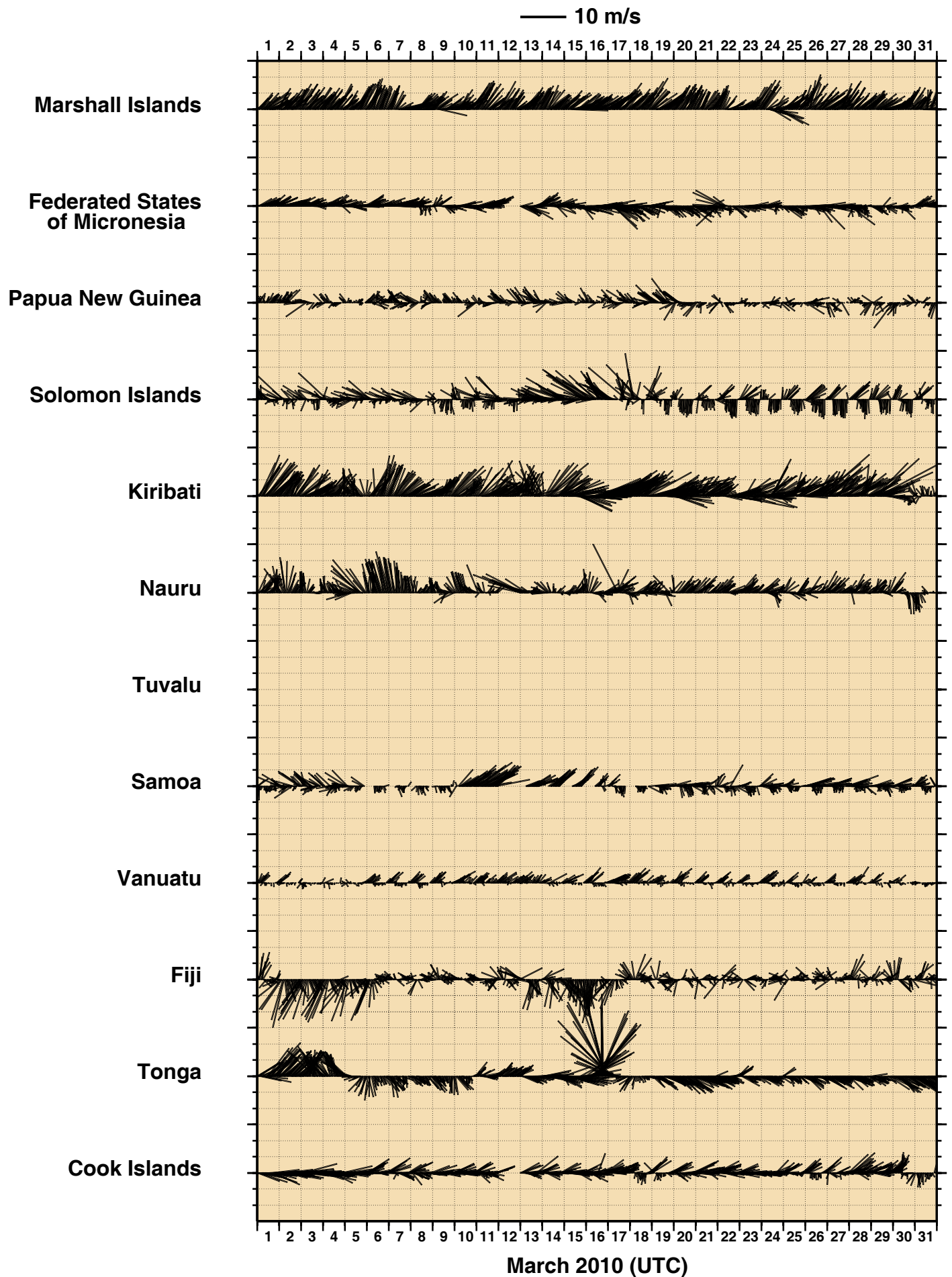


Figure 6
MARCH 2010
HOURLY MAXIMUM WIND GUSTS (m/s)

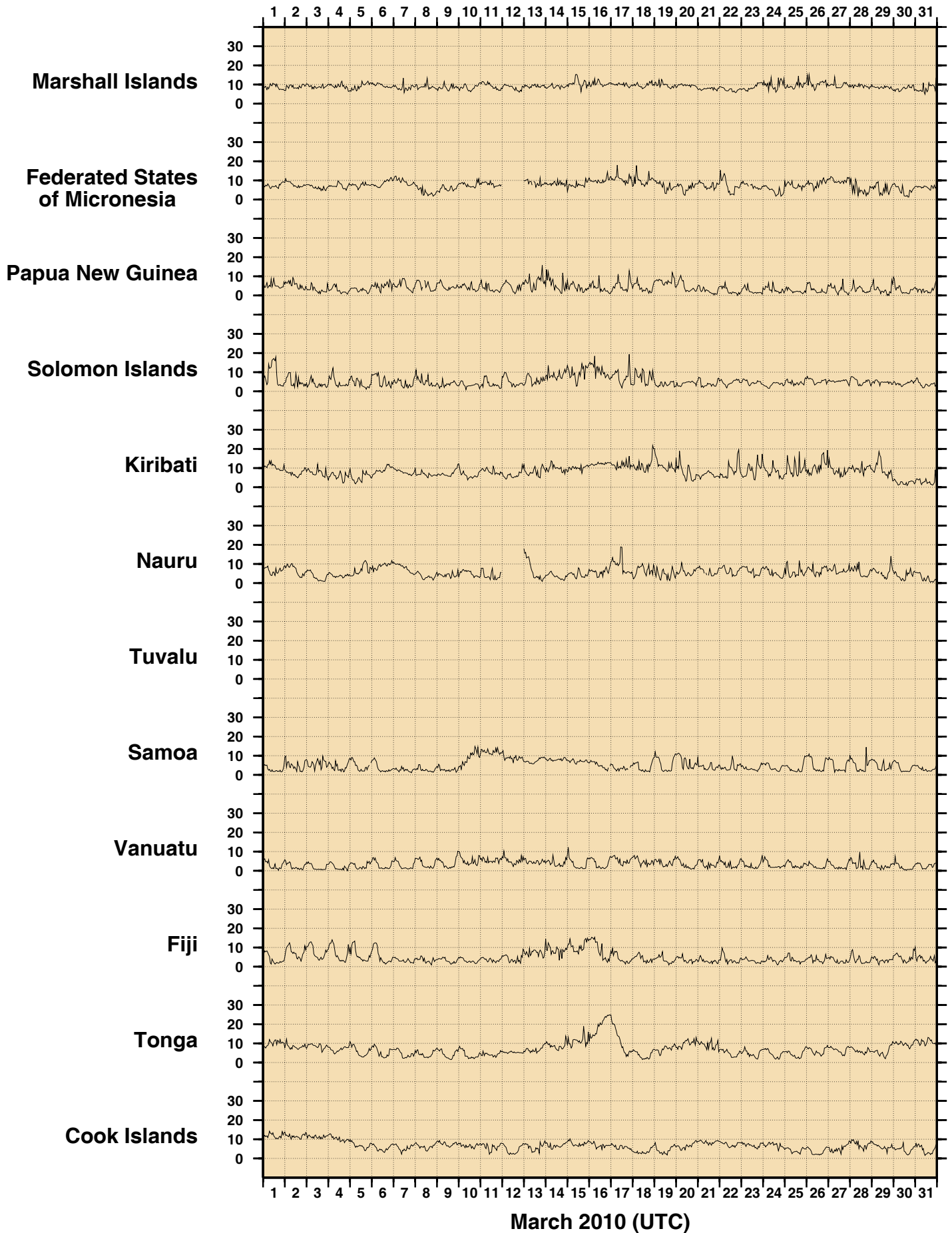


Figure 7

MARCH 2010
HOURLY AIR TEMPERATURES (°C)

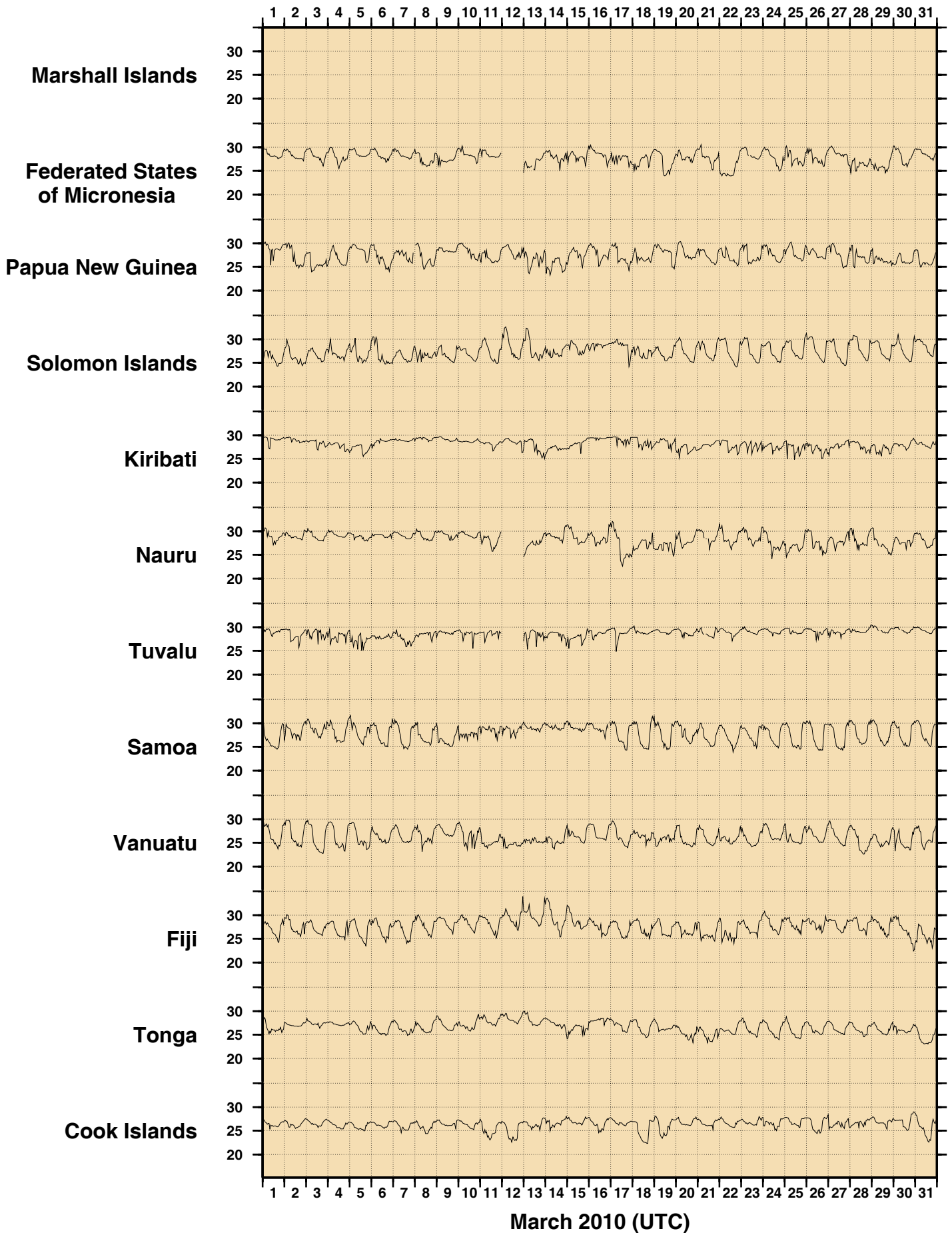


Figure 8

MARCH 2010
HOURLY WATER TEMPERATURES (°C)

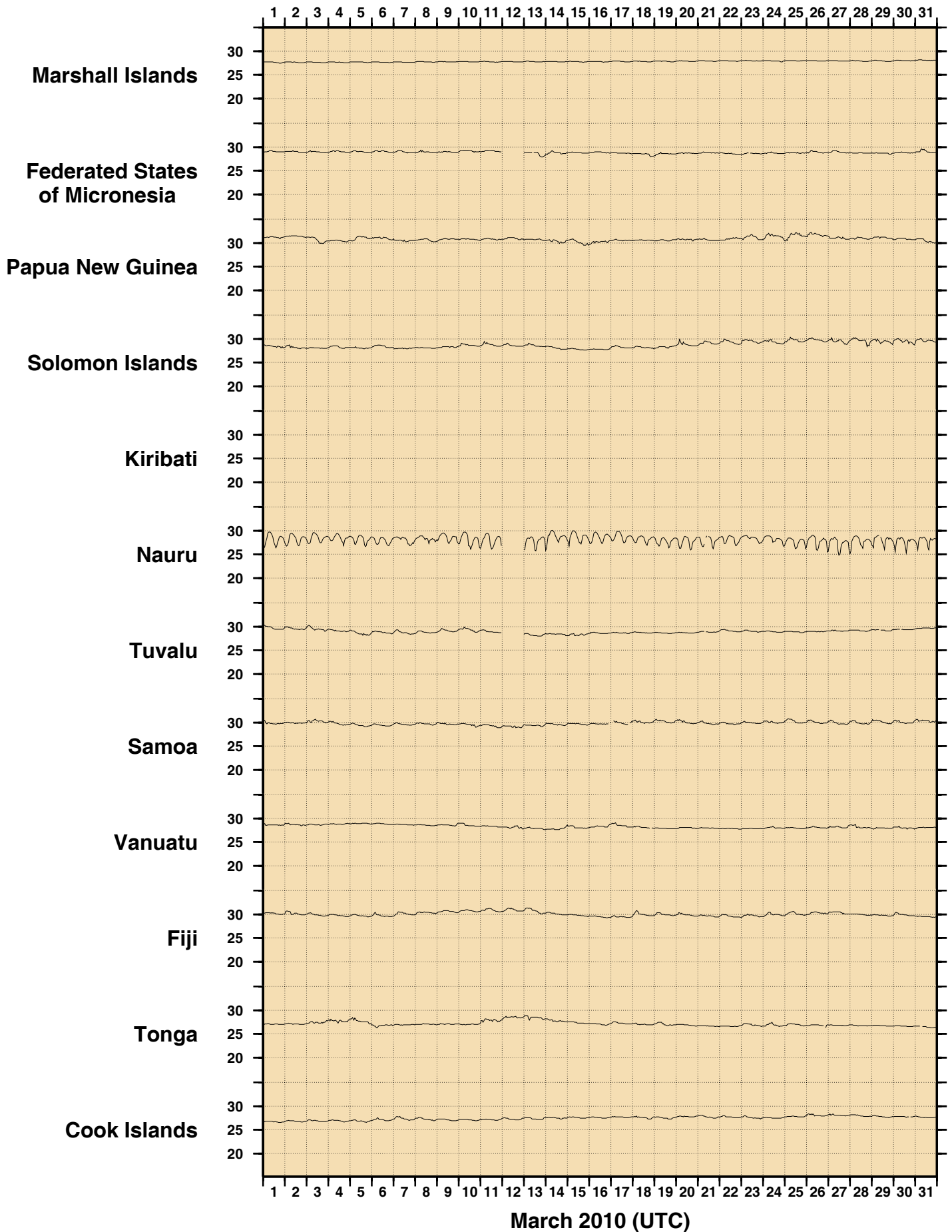


Figure 9
MARCH 2010
HOURLY ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE (hPa)

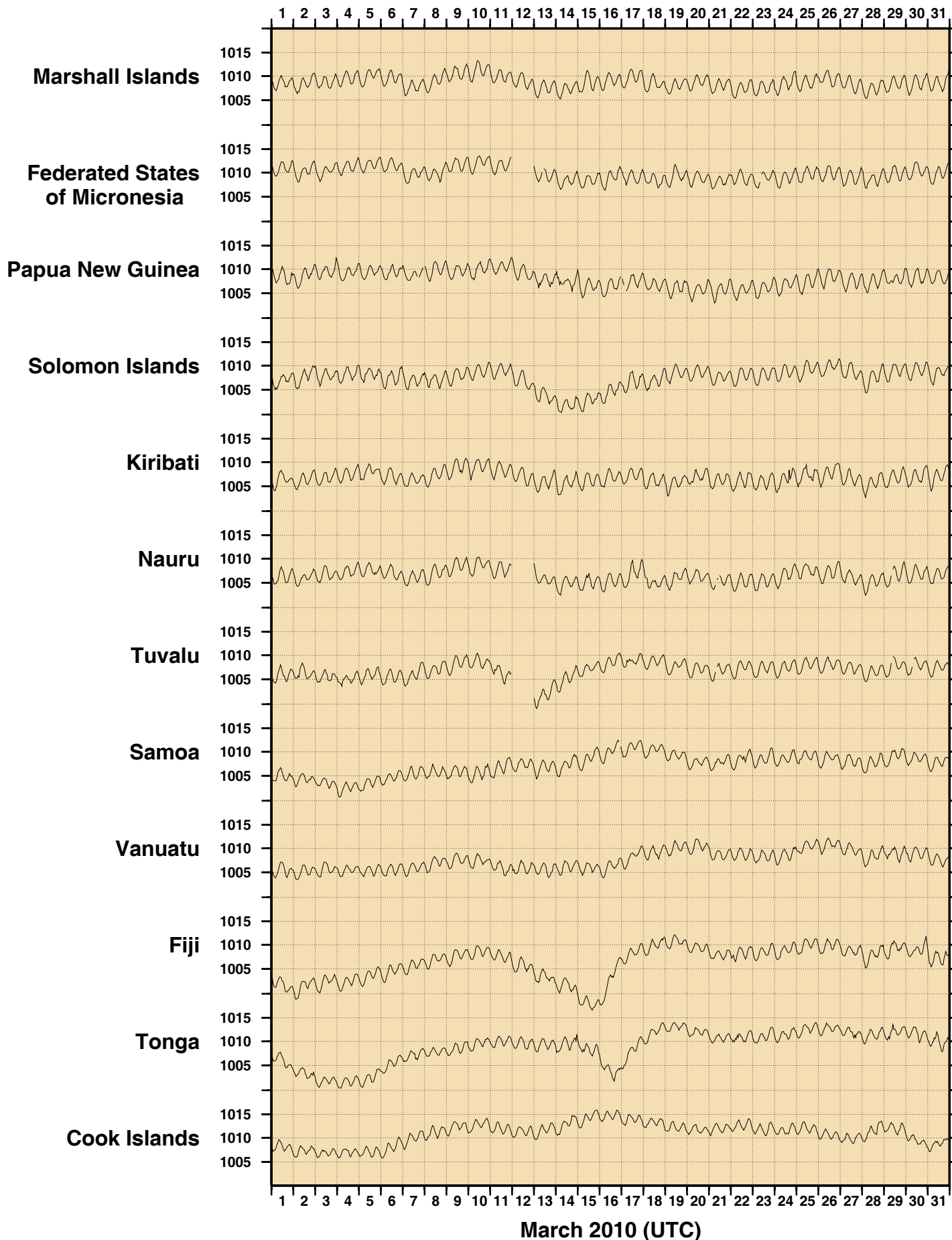
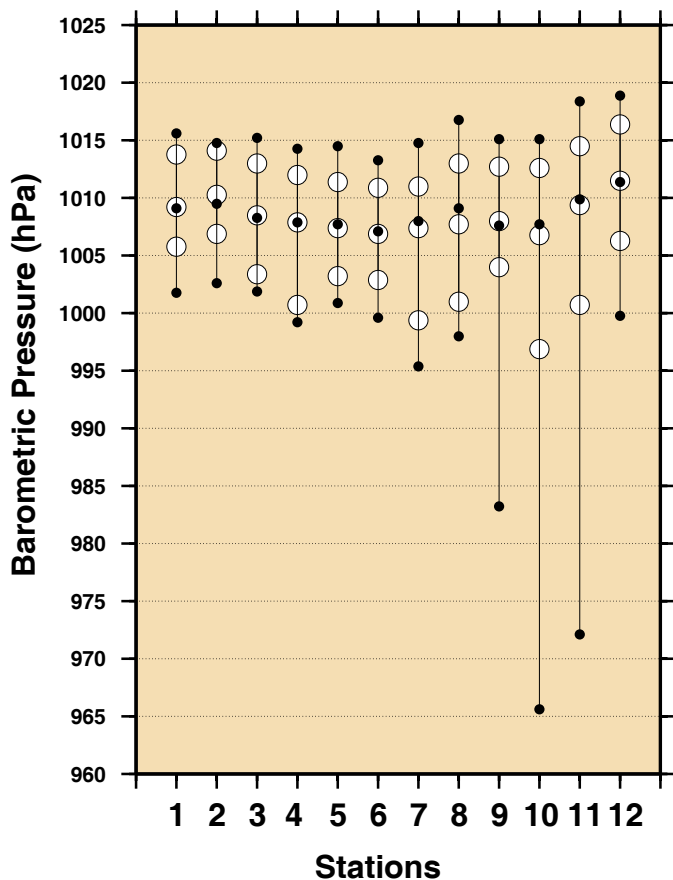
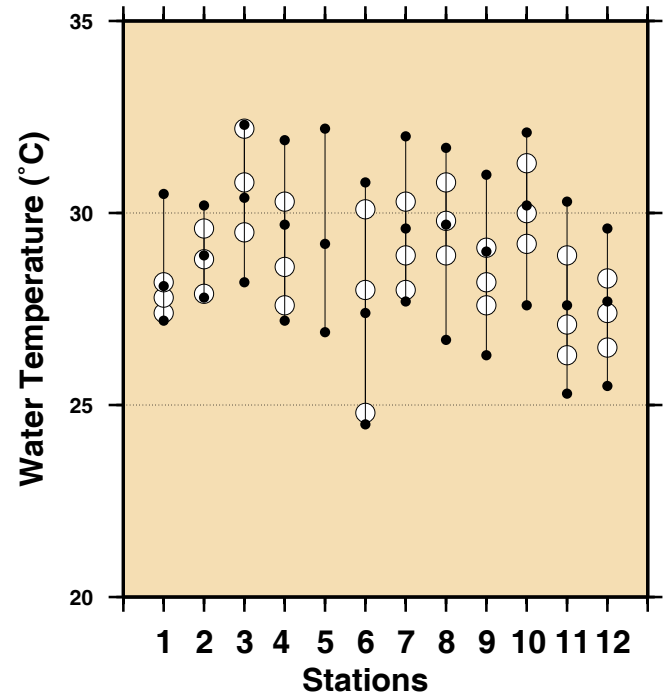
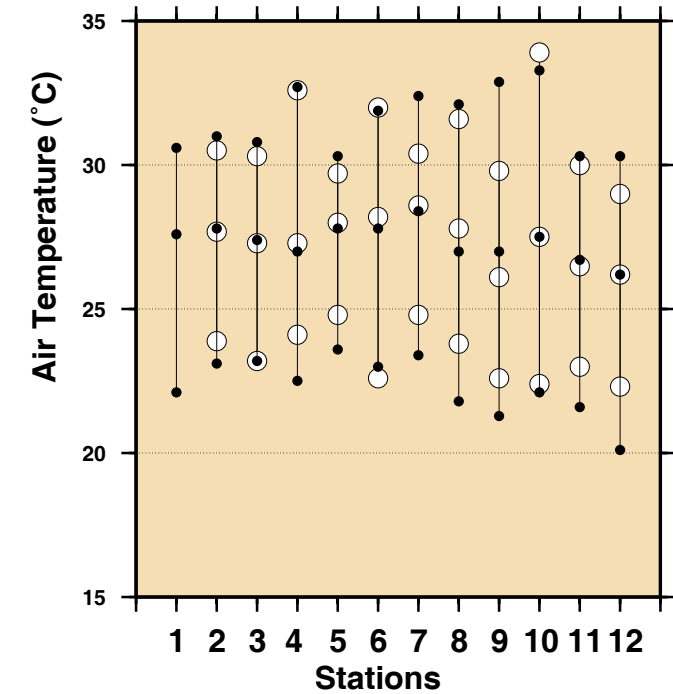


Figure 10

Comparison of March 2010 Max, Min & Mean with Long Term March Values.



Stations

- 1 - Marshall Islands
- 2 - Federated States of Micronesia
- 3 - Papua New Guinea
- 4 - Solomon Islands
- 5 - Kiribati
- 6 - Nauru
- 7 - Tuvalu
- 8 - Samoa
- 9 - Vanuatu
- 10 - Fiji
- 11 - Tonga
- 12 - Cook Islands

- March 2010 Maximum
- March 2010 Mean
- March 2010 Minimum

- Long Term March Maximum
- Long Term March Mean
- Long Term March Minimum

Figure 11

MONTHLY MEAN SEA LEVELS TO MARCH 2010 (m)

The zero line represents an arbitrary fixed offset from the zero of the tide gauge.

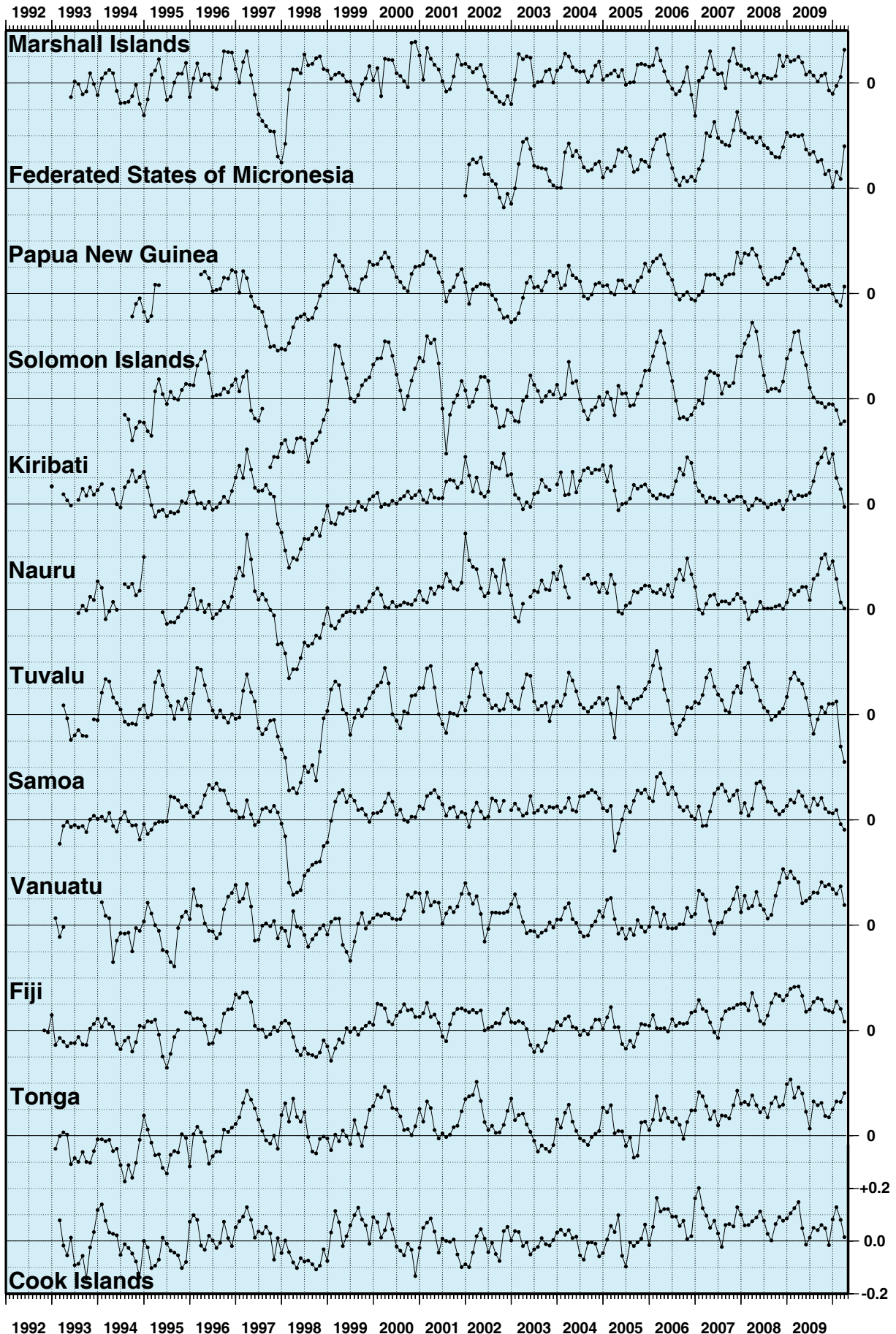


Figure 12
SEA LEVEL ANOMALIES THROUGH MARCH 2010 (m)

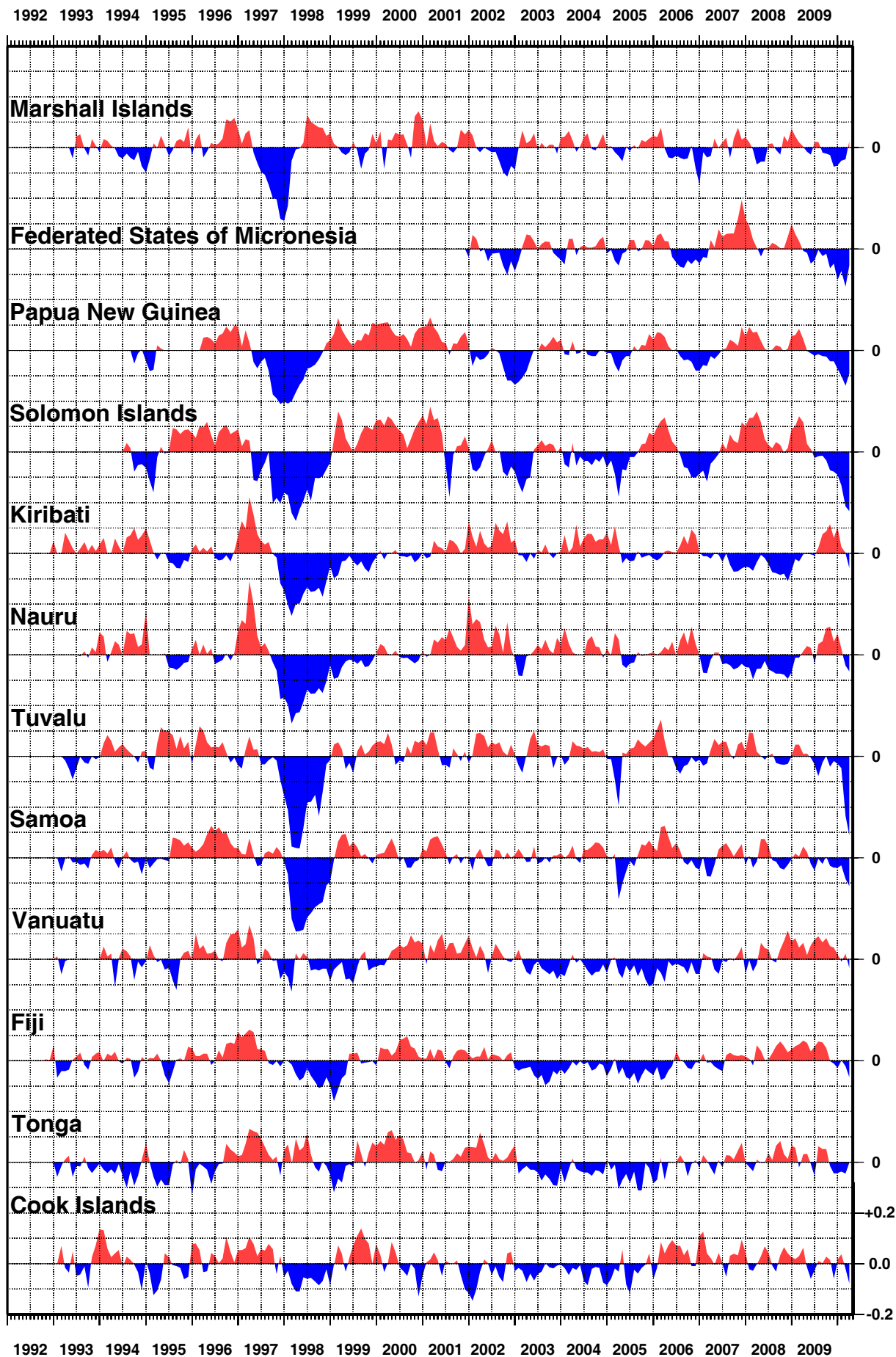
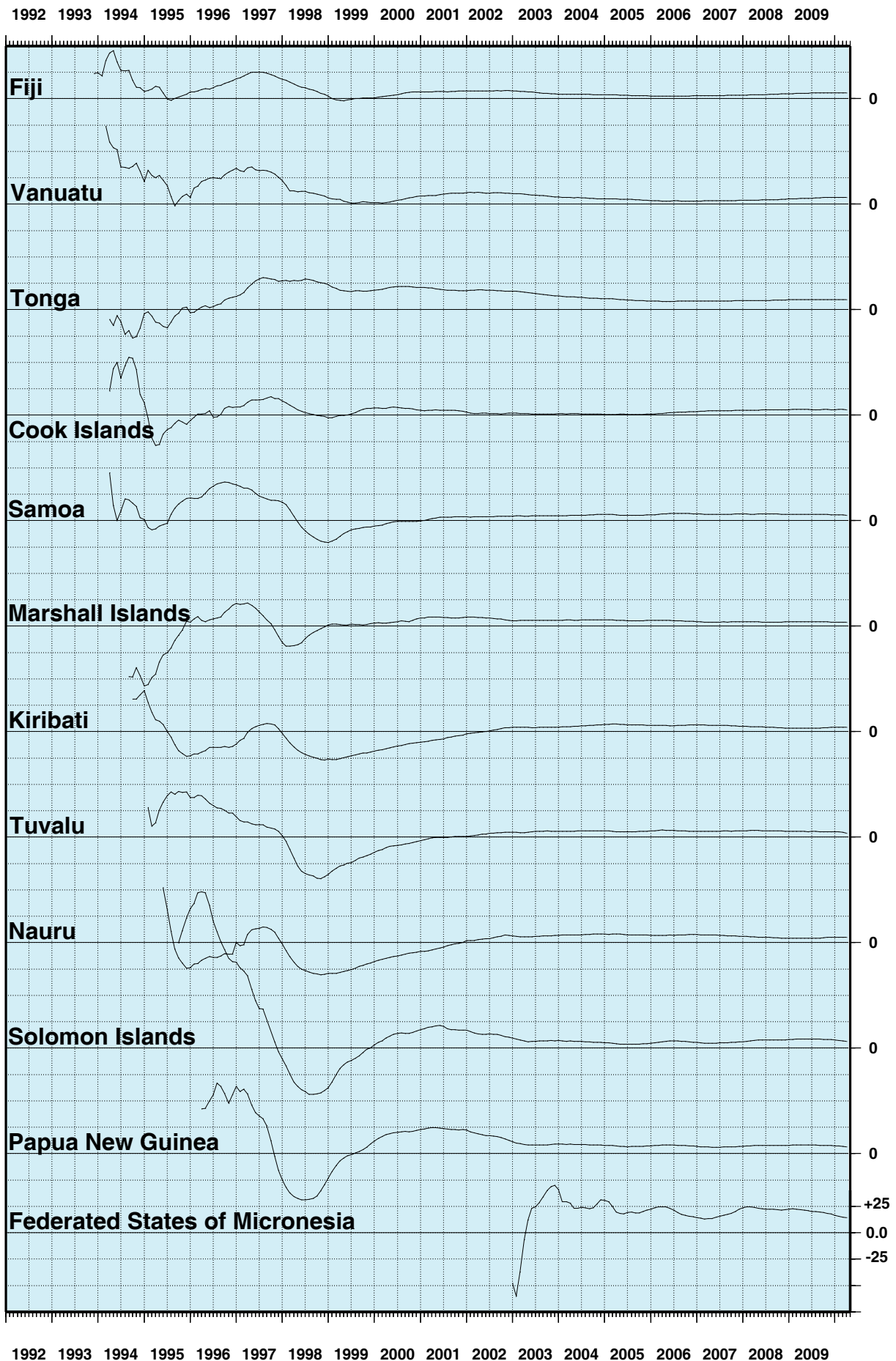


Figure 13

SEA LEVEL TRENDS THROUGH MARCH 2010 (mm/year)



BAROMETRIC PRESSURE ANOMALIES THROUGH MARCH 2010 (hPa)

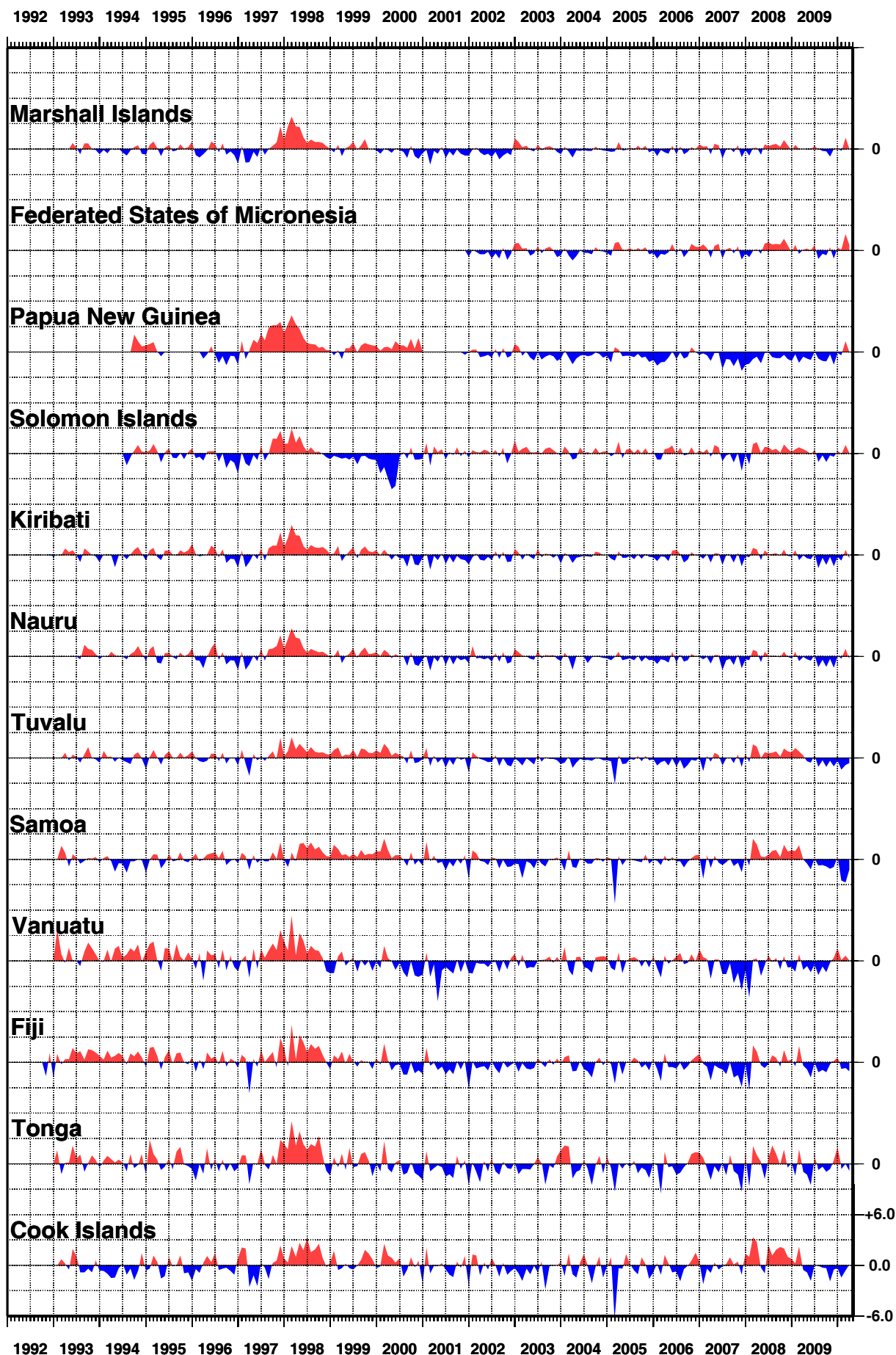


Figure 15
**WATER TEMPERATURE ANOMALIES
 THROUGH MARCH 2010 (°C)**

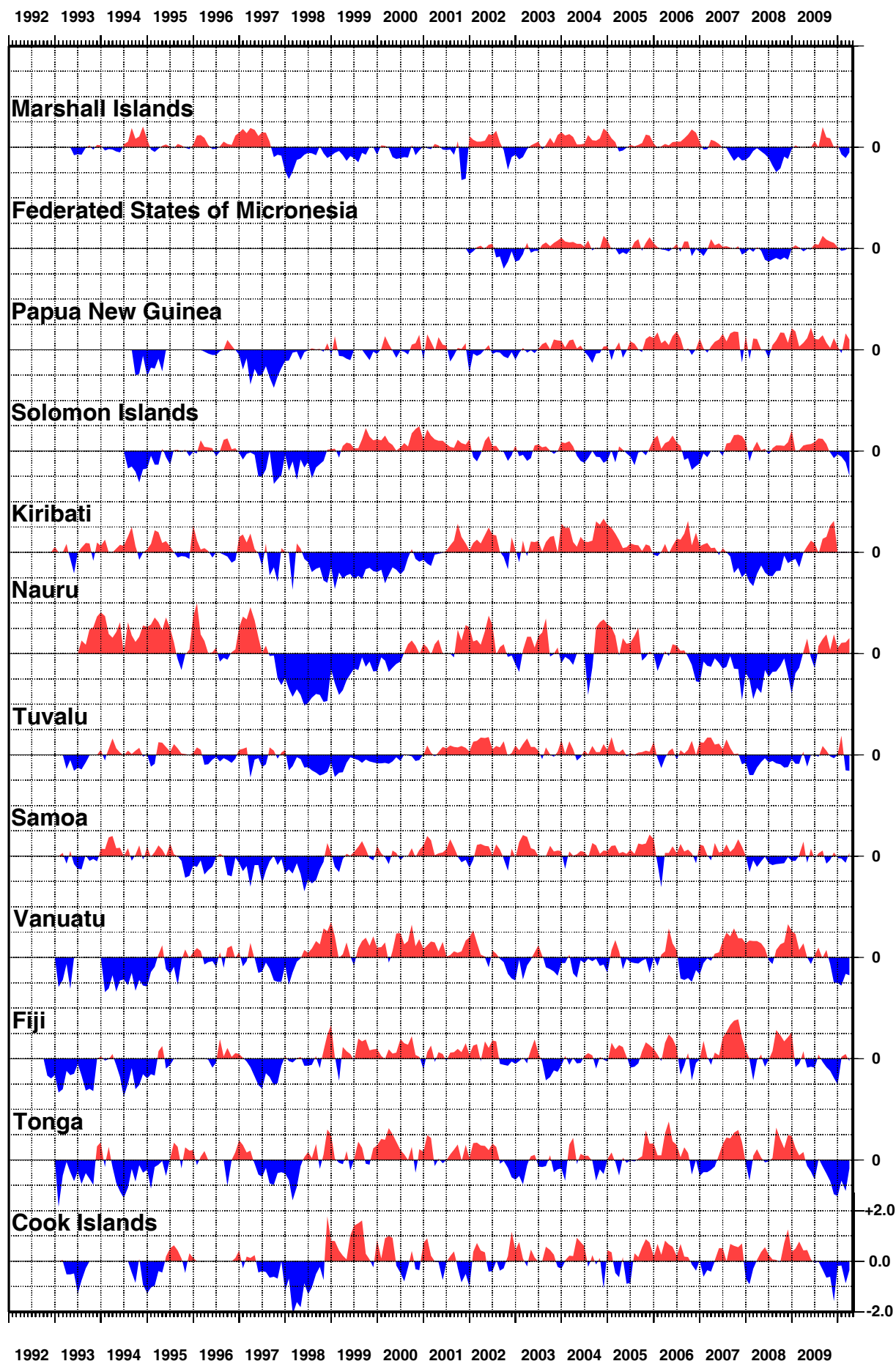


Figure 16
**AIR TEMPERATURE ANOMALIES
 THROUGH MARCH 2010 (°C)**

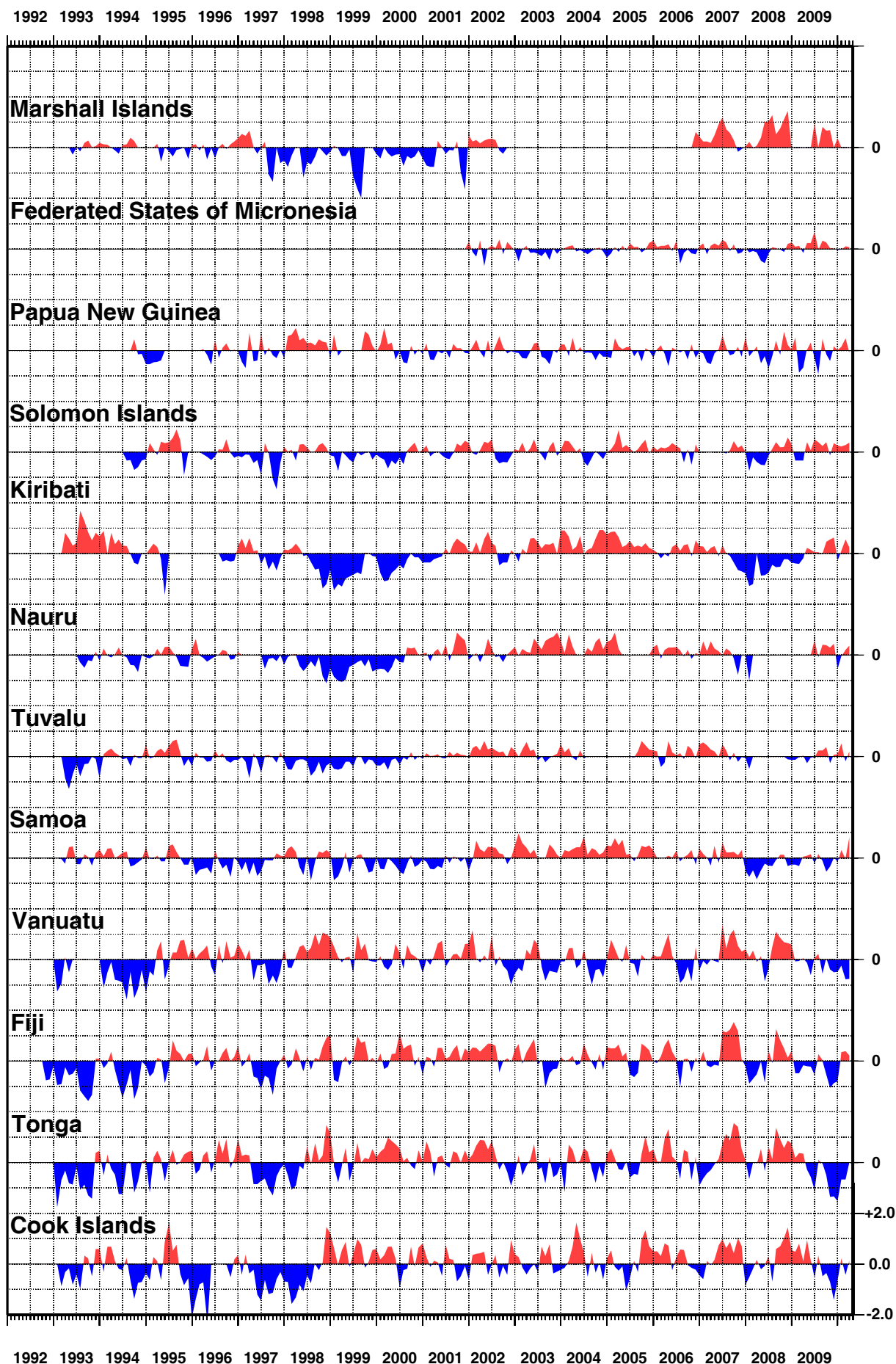


Figure 17

SEA LEVEL DATA RETURN

THE NUMBER OF DAYS OF GAP ARE INDICATED

GAPS INCLUDE TRANSMISSION, POWER AND LOGGER FAILURE

* Patchy record

