

Letter to the Editor on Chappell et al., 2023.

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Chappell et al. (2023) recently concluded that North Africa is not the largest source of dust in the world and that the global rate of dust emission is almost two orders of magnitude smaller than estimated by numerous previous studies (e.g., 29 Tg/year versus 1200 to 9000 Tg/year in Huneus et al., 2011; Ginoux et al., 2012; Klose et al., 2021; Kok et al., 2021; Checa-Garcia et al., 2021; Gliss et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). These conclusions run counter to decades of prior research. Here we first review the data and knowledge we already have about dust, and then discuss the sources of the discrepancies between Chappell et al. (2023) and previous work.

While Chappell et al. (2023) concluded that existing dust models greatly overestimate dust emission, particularly in North Africa, their approach fails to consider the available climatological dust data, in contrast to the existing model studies and evaluations. For example, a simple back-of-the-envelope computation indicates that their estimated global annual dust emission rate is 2 orders of magnitude too small and not consistent with the known global atmospheric dust load. A relatively easily observed indicator of the atmospheric dust load is the optical depth over dust regions, which represents the amount of light that is absorbed or reflected by dust aerosols (e.g. Ridley et al., 2016). Combining their estimated

~30 Tg/year global annual emission of dust with diameter less than 10 μm (PM₁₀) with the model-estimated dust lifetime of ~3 days (e.g., Kok et al., 2017; Gliss et al., 2021), the total amount of dust in the atmosphere would be ~0.25 Tg (3 days*30 Tg/365 days). This corresponds to a global mean dust optical depth ranging from 0.0002 to 0.0005 based on a mid-visible wavelength mass extinction coefficient varying from 0.40 to 0.96 m²/g (Kok et al., 2021a), respectively. Such values are 2 orders of magnitude lower than observationally constrained values of global mean mid-visible dust optical depth varying from approximately 0.02 to 0.04 (Ridley et al., 2016; Voss and Evan, 2020; Song et al., 2021; Kok et al., 2021a; Gkikas et al., 2022). In order to explain their lower emissions over North Africa, Chappell et al. (2023) argue that North African dust is not transported away from sources, but recirculated in the regional atmosphere, allowing higher loads to build up. However, relating their low magnitude of emissions of ~30 Tg/year to the observationally constrained global mean dust optical depth would require a dust lifetime on the order of 300 days, which is clearly unphysical. Indeed, such a long lifetime is incompatible with well-documented evidence of the role of meteorological influence on dust transport - for example dust is transported from North African sources across the Atlantic on a timescale of 5-10 days (e.g. Knippertz & Todd 2012; Weinzierl et al. 2017). Furthermore, well-known documentation of North African wind patterns, trajectory analyses and also the same high-resolution (15min) SEVIRI satellite analyses used by Chappell et al. (2023) confirm that dust transport occurs on these time scales (e.g. Ryder et al., (2018), many others..), which disputes the findings of Chappell et al. (2023).

In addition to the clear underestimation of the global dust emission rate by Chappell et al. (2023), there is multiple lines of evidence at that Chappell et al. (2023) underestimated dust from North Africa the regional scale, as well as the relative contribution of North African dust to the global dust cycle. Chappell et al. (2023) found that North African dust emission is small (6 Tg/year of PM₁₀ dust) and sparsely distributed across the region. In contrast, a recent study combining model simulations with observationally informed constraints on the dust size distribution (Adebiyi and Kok, 2020), extinction efficiency, and regional dust aerosol optical depth (Ridley et al., 2016), estimated that North Africa contributes between 500 to 1600 Tg/year of PM₁₀ dust (Kok et al., 2021a). Spaceborne observations show that the highest aerosol optical depths over oceans are recorded off the western coasts of North Africa and along the Tropical Atlantic Ocean (Remer et al., 2008; Dubovik et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). Models and data assimilations that attempt to be consistent with the satellite aerosol optical depth and deposition records also show that North Africa is the world's largest sources of dust aerosols (Cakmur et al., 2006; Albani et al., 2014; Gelaro et al., 2017; Ridley et al., 2016, Kok et al, 2021a, b; Kaufman et al., 2005; Yu et al., 2019). In addition, both visibility and dust weather reports from synoptic stations show the largest amount of aerosols / dust activity in North Africa (Mahowald et al., 2007; N'Tchayi Mbourou et al., 1997; Shao et al., 2013). In-situ measurements in North Africa are also consistent with large dust sources (Marticorena et al., 2010; Mahowald et al., 2024) and downwind stations and field campaigns consistently show large amounts of dust from North Africa traveling across the North Atlantic (Reid et al., 2003; Rodríguez et al., 2015; Ryder et al., 2019). The few AERONET sites that are available near the main dust source areas also show high column aerosol optical depths that are consistent with model estimates (Obiso et al., 2024; Ginoux et al., 2001; Klose et al., 2021). Climatologically, the highest dust aerosol optical depths measured globally by AERONET are in North Africa and immediately downwind in the Cape Verde Islands (https://aeronet.gsfc.nasa.gov/new_web/climo_menu_new_v3.html). Even more surprising, from Figure 6 in Chappell et al. (2023), it appears that the Bodélé depression, long considered to be one of the most active dust sources in the world (Prospero et al., 2002; Koren et al., 2006; Washington et al., 2006; Todd et al., 2007; Warren et al., 2007; Yu et al., 2020) is weakly emitting dust. On the other hand, the Horn of Africa appears as the most active source in Chappell et al. (2023), contrary to more detailed studies (Kunkelova et al. 2024). One possible cause of these discrepancies is that dust emission from point source (DPS) identification using SEVIRI in dusty regions is challenging and predisposed towards omitting dust emission events obscured by an already-dusty atmosphere.

Several key dust papers over the last few decades have used satellite remote sensing to determine the dominant sources of dust (Prospero et al., 2002) as well as the importance of agricultural sources of dust (Ginoux et al., 2012). In contrast to Ginoux et al. (2012), Chappell et al. (2023) use a much coarser temporal (1 month versus 1 day) and spatial (1 degree versus 0.1 degree) resolution to extract the dust optical depth from aerosol optical depth. This makes the detection of dust from the Angstrom exponent using the approach proposed by Chappell et al. (2023) almost impossible because of the mixing of different kinds of aerosols at these coarse temporal and spatial scales: the details of the approach matter greatly to adequately determine which events are dust events. For example, Chappell et al. (2023) shows a poor relationship between MODIS dust optical depth and DPS frequency data (Chappell et al., 2023; Figure 5a). This result contradicts the more detailed analysis (done at higher spatial and temporal resolution) of Baddock et al. (2016), which showed the close relationship between the satellite-defined dust sources from Ginoux et al. (2012) and geomorphological features on the ground.

Other studies using the Chappell et al. (2023) approach use comparisons to dust point source data to demonstrate applicability of the method (e.g. Chappell et al., 2024). This highlights that dust point source data alone do not provide the best evaluations of the modeled dust cycle, since these comparisons do not show the problems with the more robust and important climatological data highlighted here based on remote sensing, in situ data and deposition data (e.g. Kok et al., 2021a).

Chappell et al. (2023) arrived at their controversial conclusions by combining a compilation of satellite observations of dust emission point sources (DPS; e.g., Schepanski et al., 2007; Hennen et al., 2019) with a dust emission scheme proposed by Hennen et al. (2022, 2023) that incorporates an albedo-based drag partition scheme developed by Chappell and Webb (2016; CW16 hereafter). For the DPS method, analysts typically track and record the location of dust plume origins through the subjective interpretation of imagery processed through dust-enhancement algorithms. The CW16 method infers surface roughness effects on wind friction speed and dust entrainment from shadows cast by subgrid-scale roughness elements derived using MODIS albedo data.

Although this is a novel approach, the CW16 and DPS methodologies upon which the new results by Chappell et al (2023) are based, have documented issues. In particular, Okin (2023) recently demonstrated through geometric-optical modeling that there is little relation between the MODIS albedo data used by Chappell et al. (e.g., Chappell and Webb (2016), Chappell et al (2018), and Ziegler et al. (2020)) and surface roughness. Indeed, Okin (2023) showed that the brightness of the underlying soil, rather than the amount of roughness, was, by far, the strongest predictor of the diagnostic parameter used by CW16 to determine an area's normalized proportion of shadow. In addition, ultrasonic anemometer-based field measurements (Zhou et al. 2024, Figure 4) show minimal support for the albedo-based approach to correctly represent the temporal-spatial variations in surface friction velocity across various landscapes. Furthermore, a study by LeGrand et al. (2023), reviewing a weather modeling application of the CW16 method, reported concerns with the foundational theory, noting unrealistic results over forested areas, while also noting that the CW16 approach performed no better than a simple tuning constant. Finally, besides DPS, Chappell et al. (2023) did not provide an evaluation of the calculated horizontal sediment flux and vertical dust emission flux. While the DPS approach has great utility in understanding the sources and timing of dust emissions (e.g., Schepanski et al., 2009), this technique is well-known to underestimate dust sources (Sinclair and LeGrand, 2019, Baddock et al. 2021).

Because of the large biases and uncertainties inherent in the modeling approach of Chappell et al. (2023), but also in other dust emission schemes (Marticorena and Bergametti 1995; Shao, 2001; Kok et al., 2014), it is imperative that any conclusions drawn from modeling are scrutinized against a battery of independent observational data sets. This is especially the case when conclusions are drawn that run counter to a large body of prior work. Unfortunately, this was not done in Chappell et al. (2023), resulting in conclusions that are inconsistent with several lines of observational evidence. In arguing that the existing body of

hundreds of papers on desert dust is incorrect, the authors of Chappell et al. (2023) set a high bar in order to make a convincing argument. Unfortunately, the authors do not engage with most of the evidence, and thus their argument of low dust emissions from North Africa and the world cannot be considered compelling.

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