Computation of the life supporting zone

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Abstract

A radiative convective model to calculate the width and the location of the life supporting zone (LSZ) for different, alternative solvents (i.e. other than water) is presented. Cloud droplet formation and growth are investigated in the atmosphere of exoplanets as well as hypothetical Earth-like exoplanets using a cloud parcel model. Clouds are incorporated into the radiative transfer calculations.

1. Introduction

Energy balance calculations show that the widths and the locations of habitable zones for alternative solvents [7] are quite different from those for the classical habitable zone [6] because of the different temperature ranges for liquid alternative solvents. To calculate the LSZ (i.e. the zone consisting of all the habitable zones belonging to the considered solvents) a radiative convective model for planetary atmospheres was further developed. As clouds dominate the radiative transfer when they are present, clouds are incorporated in this model.

2. Model description

Two models are used: a cloud model and a radiative convective model. The cloud model is used to calculate cloud droplet distributions. The optical properties of these droplet distributions are computed using Mie theory [1] and used as an input for the radiative convective model. These optical properties depend on the refractive indices of the solvents, which will be taken from literature where available. The radiative convective model then yields the surface temperature of exoplanets.

2.1 Cloud model

A cloud model developed for terrestrial water clouds by D. Neubauer at the University of Vienna [11] is used to investigate cloud droplet formation and growth. Physico-chemical constants for the alternative solvents available in the literature are used for the computations. As nothing is known about possible cloud condensation nuclei (CCN) in the atmosphere of exoplanets, we assume that aerosol formation processes follow the same physical principles of nucleation from the gas phase and erosion of bulk material as on Earth and assume the presence of soluble or at least wettable CCN. The model used is a cloud parcel model which describes an ascending air parcel containing the droplets (following [3], [5], [12]). The model includes the microphysical processes of nucleation, condensation and coagulation and radiative effects [2]. Turbulent diffusion is also considered [10]. The cloud model provides cloud droplet size distributions for different cloud liquid solvent content (e.g. cloud liquid water content) which are stored in a database.

2.2 Radiative convective model

The equilibrium temperature profile of the atmosphere and the surface temperature of exoplanets are obtained with a model based on [8] and [9] which was further developed for our purposes. The atmospheric lapse rate calculated for radiative equilibrium is adjusted (i.e. convective adjustment) not to exceed a given lapse rate (e.g. the applicable dry or moist adiabatic lapse rate). The model computes the horizontally and annually averaged global surface and atmospheric temperatures. Besides the spectral class of the star and the distance between the star and the exoplanets, the surface temperature strongly depends on the amount of atmospheric gases (in particular greenhouse gases), aerosol particles, clouds and surface albedo. Different scenarios (e.g. varying cloud amount, surface albedo, amount of atmospheric gases, etc.) are investigated for each solvent to calculate the width and the location of the habitable zone belonging to the solvent.

For radiative transfer calculations a modified version of the public domain program 'Streamer' [4] is used. 'Streamer' accounts for scattering and absorption of radiation in the whole spectral region by gases and particles. Built-in types of surface albedo as well as other values can be chosen. The radiative transfer equation can be solved by two different numerical methods to increase the precision of the calculation [13], [14]. The cloud optical properties calculated by the cloud model and Mie theory [1] are used as an input for 'Streamer'. Besides H_2O, CO_2, O_2 and O_3 other atmospheric gases are included such as CH_4, NH_3, CO, SO_2 and others.

Test runs for Earth and Mars with typical gas amounts, a surface albedo of 0.1 for Earth and 0.15 for Mars and an average cloud cover for Earth showed a good agreement of the atmospheric temperature profiles and surface temperatures with observed values. In a scenario with an Earth-like planet and a G2V star, the LSZ for water (i.e. the classical habitable zone) is located for a scenario without clouds at a distance of 0.57 to 1.08 AU from the star and with the inclusion of low level water clouds at 0.58 to 1.11 AU.

3. Summary

A radiative convective model was further developed to compute the width and the location of the LSZ for different, alternative solvents around the Sun and other main sequence stars. The formation and growth of cloud droplets are investigated for the different solvents. Clouds are included in the calculation of the width and the location of the LSZ.

Acknowledgements

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