

ROMS-Tools: Reproducible Preprocessing and Analysis for Regional Ocean Modeling with ROMS

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Summary

The ocean regulates Earth's climate and sustains marine ecosystems by circulating and storing heat, carbon, oxygen, and nutrients, while exchanging heat and gases with the atmosphere. Scientists study these processes using ocean models, which simulate the ocean on a grid. **Regional ocean models** focus computational resources on a limited geographical area with fine grid spacing, and can resolve fine-scale phenomena such as mesoscale and submesoscale features, tidal dynamics, coastal currents, upwelling, and detailed biogeochemical (BGC) processes. A widely used regional ocean model is the **Regional Ocean Modeling System (ROMS)** (Shchepetkin & McWilliams, 2005). ROMS has been coupled to the Marine Biogeochemistry Library (MARBL) (Long et al., 2021; Molemaker & contributors, 2025a) to link physical and BGC processes. ROMS-MARBL supports research on environmental management, fisheries, regional climate impacts, and ocean-based carbon dioxide removal (CDR) strategies.

ROMS-Tools is a Python package that streamlines the **preparation and analysis of ROMS-MARBL simulations** by enabling users to generate regional grids, prepare model inputs efficiently, and analyze model outputs. By providing a modern, user-friendly interface, ROMS-Tools lowers technical barriers, improves reproducibility, and allows scientists to focus on research rather than data preparation. The package is installable via Conda or PyPI and can be run interactively in Jupyter notebooks.

Statement of Need

Regional ocean models are essential tools for research in marine ecosystems, climate dynamics, and ocean-based CDR. However, configuring a regional ocean model like ROMS-MARBL is technically demanding. Model setup requires initialization and time-dependent forcing from oceanic and atmospheric datasets, drawn from multiple external sources in diverse formats. These global source datasets can span petabytes and must be subsetting, processed, and mapped onto the target model grid, producing 10–100 terabytes of input data for large regional domains. Generating these input files is time-consuming, error-prone, and difficult to reproduce. These challenges create a bottleneck for both new and experienced users, slow down science, and limit collaboration across groups.

Existing tools within the ocean modeling ecosystem do not fully address these challenges for ROMS-MARBL or ROMS users. While legacy MATLAB-based scripts developed at UCLA (Molemaker, 2024) and Python packages such as pyroms (Hedstrom & contributors, 2023) provide critical functionality, both rely on low-level, manually coordinated steps that

41 limit reproducibility, maintainability, and accessibility. In contrast, frameworks developed for
42 other ocean models (e.g., MOM6) cannot be directly applied to ROMS due to fundamental
43 differences in grid geometry, vertical coordinates, and model input data requirements. As a
44 result, users lack a modern, integrated framework for reproducible model setup and analysis
45 that is specifically designed for ROMS and ROMS-MARBL.

46 ROMS-Tools was developed to fill this gap. It is an open-source Python framework designed for
47 researchers and practitioners who run ROMS or ROMS-MARBL regional ocean simulations,
48 including users in physical oceanography, marine biogeochemistry, and ocean-based CDR
49 applications. Current capabilities are fully compatible with UCLA-ROMS (Molemaker &
50 contributors, 2025a, 2025b), with potential support for other ROMS implementations, such as
51 Rutgers ROMS (Arango & contributors, 2024), in the future. The package provides high-level
52 APIs that automate and standardize preprocessing workflows and manage complex model
53 configuration states via YAML, supporting reproducible simulation setup. ROMS-Tools supports
54 large input and output datasets via parallel computation with dask (Dask Development Team,
55 2016), making workflows scalable from laptops to high-performance computing clusters. By
56 lowering technical barriers and improving transparency and reproducibility, ROMS-Tools enables
57 more efficient model development, facilitates scientific collaboration, and supports applications
58 such as verification of marine carbon removal strategies and carbon credit assessment.

59 State of the Field

60 Historically, setting up a regional ocean model required a patchwork of custom scripts and
61 lab-specific workflows, resulting in error-prone and difficult-to-reproduce processes. Within
62 the ROMS community, tools like pyroms (Hedstrom & contributors, 2023) addressed some
63 of these issues by providing low-level Python utilities for preprocessing ROMS model inputs.
64 However, pyroms has several limitations: installation is cumbersome due to Python/Fortran
65 dependencies, the API is inconsistent, and documentation and tests are missing. The package
66 does not support modern tools such as xarray (Hoyer & Hamman, 2017), nor reproducible
67 workflows. Active development has ceased, and maintenance (including compatibility with
68 newer Python versions) is no longer provided, making it very difficult to add new features,
69 such as support for BGC and CDR applications.

70 Tools from other modeling communities cannot be directly applied to ROMS because each
71 model has distinct structural requirements and input conventions. For example, the regional-
72 mom6 package (Barnes et al., 2024), developed for regional configurations of the Modular
73 Ocean Model v6 (MOM6) (Adcroft et al., 2019), cannot generate ROMS inputs. ROMS uses a
74 terrain-following vertical coordinate system that requires specialized vertical regridding, whereas
75 MOM6 accepts inputs on arbitrary depth levels and does not require vertical regridding at all.
76 While ROMS and MOM6 differ in fundamental ways, regional-mom6 represents the closest
77 comparable tool to ROMS-Tools in the wider modeling ecosystem. Notably, the development
78 cycles of regional-mom6 and ROMS-Tools overlapped (regional-mom6: 2023–2024; ROMS-
79 Tools: 2024–2025, based on public GitHub commits). Had the developers been aware of each
80 other, a shared framework could potentially have been created, with model-specific adaptations
81 layered on top. Adapting one framework to the other now would require extensive architectural
82 changes.

83 Legacy MATLAB preprocessing scripts developed at UCLA (Molemaker, 2024) encapsulate
84 decades of expertise in configuring regional ocean models, but require users to edit source code
85 directly, making workflows error-prone, difficult to reproduce, and challenging to extend to new
86 datasets or applications. ROMS-Tools provides a modern, open-source Python implementation
87 of these scripts, retaining core algorithms while offering high-level APIs, automated intermediate
88 steps, and explicit workflow state management via YAML. This object-oriented design improves
89 reproducibility, reduces user errors, and supports extensibility, while leveraging modern Python
90 tools such as xarray and dask. In some cases, ROMS-Tools diverges from the original MATLAB
91 implementation to incorporate improved methods or better integrate with the Python ecosystem.

Overview of ROMS-Tools Functionality

ROMS-Tools provides a comprehensive workflow for generating, processing, and analyzing ROMS-MARBL model inputs and outputs, as detailed below.

Input Data and Preprocessing

ROMS-Tools generates the following input files for ROMS-MARBL:

1. **Model Grid:** Customizable, curvilinear, and orthogonal grid designed to maintain a nearly uniform horizontal resolution across the domain. The grid is rotatable to align with coastlines and features a terrain-following vertical coordinate.
2. **Bathymetry:** Derived from **SRTM15** (Tozer et al., 2019).
3. **Land Mask:** Inferred from coastlines provided by **Natural Earth** or the Global Self-consistent, Hierarchical, High-resolution Geography (**GSHHG**) Database (Wessel & Smith, 1996).
4. **Physical Ocean Conditions:** Initial and open boundary conditions for sea surface height, temperature, salinity, and velocities derived from the 1/12° Global Ocean Physics Reanalysis (**GLORYS**) (Lellouche et al., 2021).
5. **BGC Ocean Conditions:** Initial and open boundary conditions for dissolved inorganic carbon, alkalinity, and other biogeochemical tracers from Community Earth System Model (**CESM**) output (Yeager et al., 2022) or hybrid observational-model sources (Garcia et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2022; Lauvset et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2020; Yeager et al., 2022).
6. **Meteorological forcing:** Wind, radiation, precipitation, and air temperature/humidity processed from the global 1/4° ECMWF Reanalysis v5 (**ERA5**) (Hersbach et al., 2020) with optional corrections for radiation bias and coastal wind.
7. **BGC surface forcing:** Partial pressure of carbon dioxide, as well as iron, dust, and nitrogen deposition from **CESM** output (Yeager et al., 2022) or hybrid observational-model sources (Hamilton et al., 2022; Kok et al., 2021; Landschützer et al., 2016; Yeager et al., 2022).
8. **Tidal Forcing:** Tidal potential, elevation, and velocities derived from **TPXO** (Egbert & Erofeeva, 2002) including self-attraction and loading (SAL) corrections.
9. **River Forcing:** Freshwater runoff derived from **Dai & Trenberth** (Dai & Trenberth, 2002) or user-provided custom files.
10. **CDR Forcing:** User-defined interventions that inject BGC tracers at point sources or as larger-scale Gaussian perturbations to simulate CDR interventions. The CDR forcing is prescribed as volume and tracer fluxes (e.g., alkalinity for ocean alkalinity enhancement, iron for iron fertilization, or other BGC constituents). Users can control the magnitude, spatial footprint, and temporal evolution, allowing flexible representation of CDR interventions.

Some source datasets are accessed automatically by ROMS-Tools, including Natural Earth, Dai & Trenberth runoff, and ERA5 meteorology, while users must manually download SRTM15, GSHHG, GLORYS, the BGC datasets, and TPXO tidal files. Although these are the datasets currently supported, the modular design of ROMS-Tools makes it straightforward to add new source datasets in the future.

To generate the model inputs, ROMS-Tools automates several intermediate processing steps, including:

- **Bathymetry processing:** The bathymetry is smoothed in two stages, first across the entire model domain and then locally in areas with steep slopes, to ensure local steepness ratios do not exceed a prescribed threshold in order to reduce pressure-gradient errors. A minimum depth is enforced to prevent water levels from becoming negative during large tidal excursions.

- 141 ■ **Mask definition:** The land-sea mask is generated by comparing the ROMS grid's
142 horizontal coordinates with a coastline dataset using the regionmask package (Hauser
143 et al., 2024). Enclosed basins are subsequently filled with land.
- 144 ■ **Land value handling:** Land values are filled via an algebraic multigrid method using pyamg
145 (Bell et al., 2023) prior to horizontal regridding. This extends ocean values into land
146 areas to reconcile discrepancies between source data and ROMS land masks, ensuring
147 that no NaNs or land-originating values contaminate ocean grid cells.
- 148 ■ **Regridding:** Ocean and atmospheric fields are horizontally and vertically regridded from
149 standard latitude-longitude-depth grids to the model's curvilinear grid with a terrain-
150 following vertical coordinate using xarray (Hoyer & Hamman, 2017) and xgcm (Busecke
151 & contributors, 2025). Velocities are rotated to align with the curvilinear ROMS grid.
- 152 ■ **Longitude conventions:** ROMS-Tools handles differences in longitude conventions,
153 converting between $[-180^\circ, 180^\circ]$ and $[0^\circ, 360^\circ]$ as needed.
- 154 ■ **River locations:** Rivers that fall within the model domain are automatically identified
155 and relocated to the nearest coastal grid cell. Rivers that need to be shifted manually or
156 span multiple cells can be configured by the user.
- 157 ■ **Data streaming:** ERA5 atmospheric data can be accessed directly from the cloud,
158 removing the need for users to pre-download large datasets locally. Similar streaming
159 capabilities may be implemented for other datasets in the future.

160 Users can quickly design and visualize regional grids and inspect all input fields with built-in
161 plotting utilities. An example of surface initial conditions generated for a California Current
162 System simulation at 5 km horizontal grid spacing is shown in Figure 1.

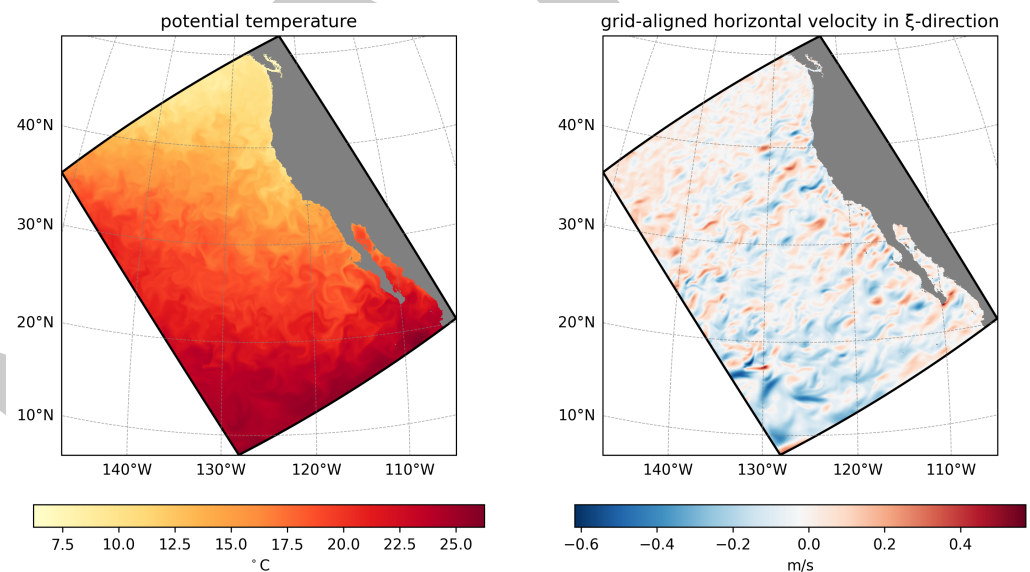


Figure 1: Surface initial conditions for the California Current System created with ROMS-Tools from GLORYS. Left: potential temperature. Right: grid-aligned horizontal velocity in ξ -direction. Shown for January 1, 2000.

163 Postprocessing and Analysis

164 ROMS-Tools supports postprocessing and analysis of ROMS-MARBL output, including
165 regridding from the native curvilinear, terrain-following grid to a standard latitude-longitude-
166 depth grid using xesmf (Zhuang et al., 2023), with built-in plotting for both grid types. The
167 analysis layer also includes specialized utilities for evaluating carbon dioxide removal (CDR)
168 interventions, such as generating carbon uptake and efficiency curves.

169 Software Design

170 ROMS-Tools is designed to balance **ease of use, flexibility, reproducibility, and scalability** by
171 combining high-level user interfaces with a modular, extensible architecture.

172 Lessons from MATLAB Tools

173 The legacy MATLAB preprocessing scripts were powerful but required users to edit source
174 code directly to configure simulations. This workflow led to frequent errors for new users,
175 made it difficult to track completed steps, and limited reproducibility. ROMS-Tools addresses
176 these issues with **high-level API calls**, automated error-prone steps, and explicit workflow state
177 management via YAML.

178 Design Trade-Offs

179 A central design trade-off in ROMS-Tools is between **user control** and **automation**. Rather
180 than enforcing a fixed workflow, the package exposes key choices such as physical options
181 (e.g., corrections for radiation or wind), interpolation and fill methods, and computational
182 backends. This approach contrasts with opinionated frameworks that fix defaults and directory
183 structures to maximize automation. While users must make explicit decisions, some steps remain
184 automated to prevent errors. For example, bathymetry smoothing is applied automatically using
185 a fixed, non-tunable parameter, since insufficient or omitted smoothing can crash simulations
186 due to pressure gradient errors. This design choice directly addresses issues new users faced in
187 the MATLAB scripts, and balances **flexibility** and **safety**, enabling transparent experimentation
188 without exposing users to avoidable pitfalls.

189 Another key design consideration is balancing **modular, incremental workflow steps**
190 with **reproducibility**. ROMS-Tools organizes tasks (such as creating InitialConditions,
191 BoundaryForcing, and SurfaceForcing) into small, composable components that can be
192 executed, saved, and revisited independently, rather than following a monolithic, fixed
193 workflow. All components depend on the Grid, but once it is created, the remaining objects
194 are independent. This modular approach avoids unnecessary recomputation when only some
195 inputs change but requires careful tracking of workflow state. To ensure reproducibility,
196 all configuration choices are stored in compact, text-based YAML files. These files are
197 version-controllable, easy to share, and eliminate the need to transfer large model input
198 NetCDF datasets. By explicitly tracking workflow state, this design overcomes a key limitation
199 of the MATLAB scripts and helps users manage experiments more reliably.

200 Architecture

201 At the user-facing level, ROMS-Tools provides high-level objects such as Grid, InitialConditions,
202 and BoundaryForcing. Each object exposes a consistent interface (`.ds`, `.plot()`, `.save()`,
203 `.to_yaml()`), allowing users to call the same methods in sequence and inspect attributes that
204 are always present. This design reduces cognitive overhead and makes workflows predictable.

205 Internally, ROMS-Tools follows a **layered, modular architecture**. Low-level classes
206 (`LatLonDataset`, `ROMSDataset`) handle data ingestion and preprocessing, including common
207 operations such as subdomain selection and lateral land filling. Source-specific datasets
208 (e.g., `ERA5Dataset`, `GLORYSDataset`, `SRTMDataset`) inherit from these base classes and
209 encode dataset-specific conventions like variable names, coordinates, and masking. Adding
210 support for a new data source typically requires only a small subclass to define variable
211 mappings while reusing existing logic, minimizing changes to the core code. High-level classes
212 (`Grid`, `InitialConditions`, `BoundaryForcing`) build on these low-level datasets to produce
213 ready-to-use modeling inputs, performing tasks such as regridding and final assembly. This
214 layered design enhances **extensibility and maintainability**, avoiding the pitfalls of the monolithic
215 MATLAB scripts.

216 Computational and Data Model Choices

217 ROMS-Tools is built on xarray, which provides a clear, consistent interface for exploring and
218 inspecting labeled, multi-dimensional geophysical datasets. Users can take advantage of
219 xarray's intuitive indexing, plotting, and metadata handling. Optional dask enables parallel
220 and out-of-core computation for very large input and output datasets.

221 Research Impact Statement

222 ROMS-Tools is used by two primary research communities. First, regional ocean modelers
223 use it to generate reproducible input datasets for ROMS simulations; external users include
224 researchers at **PNNL**, **WHOI**, and **UCLA**. Second, researchers in the ocean-based carbon
225 dioxide removal (CDR) community use ROMS-Tools to configure reproducible ROMS-MARBL
226 simulations of climate intervention scenarios, with adopters including **[C]Worthy**, **Carbon to**
227 **Sea**, **Ebb Carbon**, and **SCCWRP**. All of these groups have contacted the developers directly
228 or engaged with the project through GitHub or offline discussions. Several manuscripts from
229 these communities are currently in preparation.

230 Beyond standalone use, ROMS-Tools is integrated into broader scientific workflows, including
231 C-Star ([Stephenson & contributors, 2025](#)), an open-source platform under development to
232 provide scientifically credible monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) for the emerging
233 marine carbon market.

234 Additional evidence of community uptake comes from public usage metrics. At the time of
235 writing, the GitHub repository shows **119 unique cloners in the past 14 days**, with stars
236 from users at institutions including the University of Waikato, NCAR, University of Maryland,
237 National Oceanography Centre, McGill University, UC Santa Cruz, and others. Distribution
238 statistics indicate **over 3,100 conda-forge downloads in the past six months**, including **68**
239 **downloads of the most recent release (v3.3.0)**, and **more than 48,000 total PyPI downloads**.
240 PyPI counts include automated continuous integration (CI) usage by ROMS-Tools, in addition
241 to direct user installations. In contrast, conda-forge downloads of v3.3.0 reflect exclusively
242 human-initiated installs, as C-Star's CI workflows currently pin pre-v3.3.0 releases of ROMS-
243 Tools.

244 AI Usage Disclosure

245 Generative AI tools were used to help write docstrings, develop tests, and improve the clarity
246 and readability of both the ROMS-Tools documentation and manuscript text. All AI-assisted
247 content was reviewed and verified by the authors for technical accuracy and correctness.

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