The sunspot number is “arguably the most intensively studied time series in astrophysics” [Charbonneau, 2010]. There is a problem with the sunspot number, however. There are two of them, and they differ widely before about 1885 (Figure 1a). The international sunspot number, designated $R_i$, was developed by Rudolf Wolf during the second half of the nineteenth century. It has the formula

$$R_i = (10 \times G) + S$$

where $G$ is the number of sunspot groups and $S$ is the number of individual spots. During the 1990s, Hoyt and Schatten [1998a, 1998b] developed the group sunspot number ($R_G$) which is based only on group counts, in part because this was all that was available for many early observations. As a result they were able to extend $R_G$ back to the first telescopic sunspot observations in 1610 and encompass the Maunder Minimum. Hoyt and Schatten scaled their group counts to $R_i$ for the interval from 1874 to 1976 to produce $R_G$.

No consensus has developed on which of the two sunspot numbers to use and, as a result, the sunspot number has become a soft parameter, with $R_i$ or $R_G$ able to provide support or underpinning for quite different conclusions. To address this undesirable situation, we organized a series of four community-wide sunspot number workshops from 2011 to 2014 to recalibrate the sunspot numbers [Cliver et al., 2013, 2015].

This recalibration effort has now been completed and the two revised time series, designated $S_N$ and $G_N$ to indicate the break from the past, are posted on the Sunspot Index and Long-term Solar Observations website (http://sidc.oma.be/silso/). During the last 4 years we found that both $R_i$ and $R_G$ contained inhomogeneities.

Figure 1. (a) Comparison of the international ($R_i$) and group ($R_G$) sunspot number time series (reprinted from Cliver et al. [2015] by permission of Central European Astrophysical Bulletin). (b) Comparison of the successor $S_N$ and $G_N$ time series. The scaling difference between the time series in Figures 1a and 1b is primarily due to removal of an artifact in $R_i$ that stemmed from differences in telescope aperture and spot counting procedure between Wolf and his successor Wolfer. The right-hand scale in Figure 1b gives the group count ($G_N$).
and artifacts. Figure 1b shows that correction of these flaws results in two series \( S_N \) and \( G_N \) that track each other much more closely than their predecessors, although both more closely resemble \( R_I \) than \( R_G \). Just as \( R_I \) and \( R_G \) were not perfect, we anticipate possible future revisions of \( S_N \) and \( G_N \) as new historical data are uncovered and we gain better understanding of the sunspot number.

The revised sunspot time series have implications, yet to be explored, for the solar dynamo, space climate, and terrestrial climate change. They provide a surer bridge to the millennia of the solar activity record written in cosmogenic nuclide concentrations in ice cores and tree rings.

Details of the sunspot number recalibration are given in Svalgaard [2013], Clette et al. [2014], F. Clette et al. (A fully updated sunspot number: Assembling all corrections, submitted to Solar Physics, 2015), and Svalgaard and Schatten [2015]. The two 2015 papers will appear with related work in a forthcoming Topical Issue of Solar Physics.

References

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