Paleoclimate: Toward solving the UV puzzle

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face-dwelling marine calcifying organism: the coccolithophores (see the first figure), perhaps the largest contributors to global marine calcium carbonate precipitation. In laboratory experiments, Zondervan et al. have shown that the ratio of calcium carbonate to organic matter decreased with increasing CO$_2$ (3). This is logical: Increased CO$_2$ is accompanied by decreased CO$_2$$_{eq}$. But the implications of this observation are potentially very important, because of the second component of the biological carbon pump in the oceans.

As discussed earlier, the ocean’s organic carbon pump provides a sink for CO$_2$. The calcium carbonate pump transports inorganic carbon from the surface ocean to the deep-sea floor, but calcification uses carbon dissolved in seawater as HCO$_3^-$.

The calcium carbonate pump transports inorganic carbon from the surface ocean to the deep-sea floor, but calcification uses carbon dissolved in seawater as HCO$_3^-$ ions. Two moles of HCO$_3^-$ react with 1 mole of Ca$^{2+}$ to precipitate 1 mole of calcium carbonate, releasing the extra mole of carbon as CO$_2$. Thus, biogenic calcification is a potential source of CO$_2$ to the atmosphere, rather than a carbon sink.

This seemingly counterintuitive observation is important for marine calcification. We imagine that the carbonate accumulation that drape the deep-sea floor or form the White Cliffs of Dover provide a sink for CO$_2$, which they do—but only on long time scales. The HCO$_3^-$ used in calcification is indeed originally from the atmosphere. But it is delivered to the ocean from the weathering of continents and is buried as carbonates on long time scales, relative to the surface-ocean process that exchanges CO$_2$ with the atmospheric reservoir on time scales shorter than 1000 years.

The most interesting part of the work by Zondervan et al. is that the decrease in calcification associated with increased CO$_2$ exerts a negative feedback on rising atmospheric CO$_2$. Higher CO$_2$ leads to less calcification and hence less CO$_2$ release, counteracting the decreased buffer capacity of the anthropogenic carbon world. However, this should not lead to complacency. Decreased calcification might have major effects on ecosystems [calculations (9) and biosphere experiments (10) suggest that corals will be affected]. It may inhibit sinking of organic carbon from surface waters and lower the ocean’s ability to take up CO$_2$.

To counteract the rising levels of atmospheric CO$_2$, the strategy of carbon sequestration, or carbon fixation, is receiving increased attention. The goal is to capture the CO$_2$ produced by fossil fuel burning and put it out of harm’s way. Some are looking at ways to help the oceans sequester more carbon. It is clear that we have a lot to learn about how this process works, even without human enhancement. Certainly, the influence of manmade or glacial-interglacial shifts in atmospheric CO$_2$ on oceanic carbon sequestration remains unclear.

**References**


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**Perspectives: Paleoclimate**

**Toward Solving the UV Puzzle**

Jelte Rozema, Bas van Geel, Lars Olof Björn, Judith Lean, Sasha Madronich

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pringtime depletion of the ozone layer above the Antarctic was first observed by ground-based measurements from Halley Bay from 1979 to 1984 (1). Ever since, there has been great concern about ozone depletion and its consequences for the biosphere, because lower ozone concentrations lead to increased exposure to harmful solar ultraviolet radiation from 280 to 315 nm (called UV-B).

Today’s ozone depletion and increased UV-B levels are mainly caused by human-made chemicals, especially chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). But both ozone and UV-B also vary naturally. Knowledge of past stratospheric ozone concentrations and surface UV-B radiation is rudimentary, but recent research is beginning to shed light on how they have varied on time scales of tens of hundreds of years.

At wavelengths shorter than 242 nm, UV light dissociates molecular oxygen to form oxygen atoms, which combine with additional O$_2$ to produce ozone. The ozone absorbs solar radiation at UV wavelengths of 200 to 340 nm and in the visible spectrum. This absorption of UV light by ozone is the primary energy input to the stratosphere.

Variations in ozone concentration modulate the stratospheric temperature, leading to changes in atmospheric circulation that may propagate to Earth’s surface and influence atmospheric circulation patterns worldwide (2–4). Ozone changes directly alter UV-B received at the surface. However, relating surface UV-B levels to the overhead ozone concentration has proven difficult because ozone variability has multiple causes, the ground-based database is generally poor, and changes in cloud cover and other climate parameters can further alter the surface UV-B.

Systematic instrumental measurements of stratospheric ozone over the Antarctic started only in 1957. Solar UV-B measurements began even later, and systematic ground-
Since the Maunder Minimum, ozone thickness may thus have increased by double the amount of solar cycle variations. On the basis of the ~2 to 6% changes of total ozone and a radiation amplification factor (indicating the increase of radiation damage with 1% ozone depletion) of 2.1 for DNA damage (15), the dose of surface UV-B should be ~4 to 13% lower at maximum of the 11-year solar cycle (16), and surface UV-B should have changed by ~9 to 27% from the Maunder Minimum to today. These changes are comparable to and may even exceed those caused by CFCs.

Biological proxies—indirect records of past changes of UV-B radiation (and hence stratospheric ozone)—can be used to reconstruct historical levels of UV-B on Earth. Recent research (17, 18) shows that plants exposed to elevated UV-B radiation levels, simulating 10 to 50% ozone depletion, generally develop UV-B–protective pigments. These UV-B–absorbing compounds often consist of simple phenolic acids (such as ferulic and coumaric acid), or more complex (poly)phenolic compounds such as flavonoids. They are chemically relatively stable and are preserved well under special environmental conditions (frost, waterlogging, high acidity). Soil cores and lake sediments in the Arctic and Antarctic therefore represent unique archives of past UV climates.

Evidence for increased UV-B radiation during an epoch of reduced solar activity comes from a recent analysis of UV-B–absorbing pigments (scytonemin) of cyanobacteria in shallow Antarctic lake sediments (14, 19). Similarly, flavonoid levels of leaves of the terrestrial moss Bryum argenteum collected between 1957 and 1989 from the Ross Sea area of continental Antarctica (20) show that when Antarctic stratospheric ozone concentrations decreased from 1971 to 1980, both UV-B absorbance and relative flavonoid levels increased.

UV-B–induced aromatic groups such as (soluble) flavonoids in pollen and coumaric acid in sporopollenin are particularly promising candidates for reconstructing historic solar UV-B levels. The UV-B–absorbing compound p-coumaric acid was found to be a monomeric building block of the highly bioresistant sporopollenin (21), the part of pollen grains that is particularly well preserved in the fossil record.

Reconstructions of past UV-B radiation should be based on the dose-response relation between solar UV-B and the content of UV-B–absorbing compounds in plants. The p-coumaric acid content of pollen grains of plants exposed to UV-B levels simulating 15% and 30% ozone depletion has been found to increase substantially (17, 18).

Highly sensitive pyrolysis gas chromatography–mass spectrometry allows the quantitative analysis of p-coumaric acid content of small numbers of pollen grains or spores (17, 18). This offers the possibility of tracking changes in surface UV-B during 11-year cycles as well as periods characterized by a longer term decline of solar activity. Frozen moss peat banks in the Antarctic, radiocarbon-dated to be 3000 to 5000 years old, are a particularly well-preserved archive. Dry-stored and dated pollen grains from old herbarium specimens may also be analyzed for their flavonoid and coumaric acid content.

The use of biological proxies to reconstruct UV-B on Earth and infer stratospheric ozone variations may help to test and validate relations among solar irradiance, ozone, and climate change during past centuries. The anticorrelation between surface UV-B and solar activity may amplify or mitigate the human impact on climate change. For example, an increase of total ozone caused by increased solar UV-C may counteract CFC-related ozone depletion, whereas a decrease of total ozone caused by lower solar UV-C may exacerbate it. Better knowledge of long-term solar radiation–ozone relations may help to elucidate the resulting climate change processes (2).