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Global Biogeochemical Cycles in the Climate System

Edited by

Ernst-Detlef Schulze
Martin Heimann
Sandy Harrison
Elisabeth Holland
Jonathan Lloyd
Iain Colin Prentice
David Schimel

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Contents

Contributors	xiii
Foreword by Paul J. Crutzen	xv
Preface by David Schimel	xvii

Introduction

1 <i>Uncertainties of Global Biogeochemical Predictions</i> , E. D. Schulze , D. S. S. Schimel	3
1.1 Introduction	3
1.2 The IGBP Transect Approach	3
1.2.1 The Patagonian Transect	3
1.2.2 The Australian Transect	5
1.2.3 The European Transect	5
1.3 Variability in Processes	6
1.4 Biome Approach and Functional Types	10
1.5 New Approaches to Functional Diversity	10
1.6 Conclusions	12
References	14
2 <i>Uncertainties of Global Climate Predictions</i> , L. Bengtsson	15
2.1 Introduction	15
2.2 Observational Evidence	16
2.3 Physical Rationale	17
2.3.1 Stochastic Forcing	17
2.3.2 Solar irradiation Changes	18
2.3.3 Volcanic Effects	18
2.3.4 Anthropogenic Effects	20
2.4 Response to Forcing of the Climate System	20
2.5 Results from Climate Change Prediction Experiments	23
2.6 Summary and Conclusions	26
References	27
3 <i>Uncertainties in the Atmospheric Chemical System</i> , G. P. Brasseur , E. A. H. Holland	31
3.1 Introduction	31
3.2 Synthetic View of Chemical Processes in the Troposphere	32
3.3 The IMAGES Model	33
3.4 Changes in the Chemical Composition of the Global Troposphere	34
3.5 Concluding Remarks	39
References	39
4 <i>Inferring Biogeochemical Sources and Sinks from Atmospheric Concentrations: General Consideration and Applications in Vegetation Canopies</i> , M. Raupach	41
4.1 Introduction	41
4.2 Scalar and Isotopic Molar Balances	43
4.2.1 General Principles	43
4.2.2 Single-Point Eulerian Equations	44
4.2.3 Source Terms for CO ₂	45
4.2.4 Single-Point Lagrangian Equations	45

4.3	Inverse Methods for Inferring Scalar Sources and Sinks in Canopies	47
4.3.1	General Principles	47
4.3.2	Localized Near Field Theory	47
4.3.3	The Dispersion Matrix	48
4.3.4	Turbulent Velocity Field	49
4.3.5	Solutions for Forward, Inverse and Implicit Problems	50
4.3.6	Field Tests	52
4.4	Inverse Methods and Isotopes in Canopies	53
4.4.1	Path Integrals and Keeling Plots	53
4.4.2	Inverse Lagrangian Analysis of Isotopic Composition	54
4.5	Summary and Conclusions.	55
	Appendix A	57
	Appendix B	57
	References	58
5	<i>Biogeophysical Feedbacks and the Dynamics of Climate</i> , M. Claussen	61
5.1	Introduction	61
5.2	Synergisms	62
5.2.1	High Northern Latitudes	62
5.2.2	Subtropics	62
5.3	Multiple Equilibria	64
5.4	Transient Interaction	66
5.5	Perspectives	67
	References	69
6	<i>Land-Ocean-Atmosphere Interactions and Monsoon Climate Change: A Paleo-Perspective</i> , J. E. Kutzbach , Michael T. Coe, S. P. Harrison and M. T. Coe	73
6.1	Introduction	73
6.2	Response of the Monsoon to Orbital Forcing	75
6.3	Ocean Feedbacks on the Monsoon	76
6.4	Land-Surface Feedbacks on the Monsoon.	77
6.5	Synergies between the Land, Ocean and Atmosphere.	81
6.6	The Role of Climate Variability	81
6.7	Final Remarks.	83
	References	83
7	<i>Paleobiogeochemistry</i> , I. C. Prentice, D. Raynaud	87
7.1	Introduction	87
7.2	Methane.	89
7.3	Carbon Dioxide.	89
7.4	Mineral Dust Aerosol.	90
7.5	Scientific Challenges Posed by the Ice-Core Records	91
7.5.1	Methane.	91
7.5.2	Carbon Dioxide.	91
7.5.3	Mineral Dust Aerosol.	92
7.6	Towards an Integrated Research Strategy for Palaeobiogeochemistry	92
	References	93
8	<i>Should Phosphorus Availability Be Constraining Moist Tropical Forest Responses to Increasing CO₂ Concentrations?</i> J. Lloyd , M. I. Bird, E. M. Veenendaal and B. Kruijt	
8.1	Introduction	96
8.2	Phosphorus in the Soils of the Moist Tropics	96

8.2.1	Soil Organic Phosphorus	96
8.2.2	Soil Inorganic Phosphorus	97
8.2.3	Soil Carbon/Phosphorus Interactions	97
8.3	States and Fluxes of Phosphorus in Moist Tropical Forests	98
8.3.1	Inputs and Losses of Phosphorus Through Rainfall, Dry Deposition and Weathering: Losses Via Leaching.	98
8.3.2	Internal Phosphorus Flows in Moist Tropical Forests	100
8.3.3	Mechanisms for Enhanced Phosphorus Uptake in Low P Soils	102
8.4	Linking the Phosphorus and Carbon Cycles	103
8.4.1	To What Extent Does Phosphorus Availability Really Limit Moist Tropical Forest Productivity? . .	103
8.4.2	Tropical Plant Responses to Increases in Atmospheric CO ₂ Concentrations	104
8.4.3	Using a Simple Model to Examine CO ₂ /Phosphorus Interactions in Tropical Forests	105
	References	109
9	<i>Trees in Grasslands: Biogeochemical Consequences of Woody Plant Expansion</i> , S. Archer , T. W. Boutton and K. A. Hibbard	115
9.1	Introduction	115
9.2	Woody Plant Encroachment in Grasslands and Savannas	116
9.3	The La Copita Case Study	118
9.3.1	Biogeographical and Historical Context.	118
9.3.2	Herbaceous Retrogression and Soil Carbon Losses	118
9.3.3	Woody Plant Encroachment and Ecosystem Biogeochemistry	119
9.4	Degradation: Ecological Versus Socioeconomic	127
9.5	Implications for Ecosystem and Natural Resources Management	128
9.6	Summary	129
	References	130
10	<i>Biogeochemistry in the Arctic: Patterns, Processes and Controls</i> , S. Jonasson , F.S. Chapin, III and G. R. Shaver	
10.1	Introduction.	139
10.2	Tundra Organic Matter	139
10.2.1	Distribution of Organic Matter	139
10.2.2	Patterns and Controls of Organic Matter Turnover between Ecosystem Types.	141
10.3	Tundra Nutrients	142
10.3.1	Nutrient Distribution and Controls of Nutrient Cycling.	142
10.3.2	Nutrient Mineralization and Plant Nutrient Uptake	142
10.3.3	Are there Unaccounted Plant Sources of Limiting Nutrients?	143
10.4	Biogeochemical Responses to Experimental Ecosystem Manipulations	145
10.4.1	Applicability of Experimental Manipulations	145
10.4.2	Responses to Water Applications	145
10.4.3	Response to Nutrient Addition and Warming	145
10.4.4	Responses in Ecosystem Carbon Balance	147
10.5	Summary	148
	References	148
11	<i>Evaporation in the Boreal Zone During Summer—Physics and Vegetation</i> , F. M. Kelliher , J. Lloyd, C. Rebmann, C. Wirth and E. D. Schulze, D. D. Baldocchi	
11.1	Introduction.	151
11.2	Climate and Soil Water	152
11.3	Evaporation Theory.	156
11.4	Evaporation During Summer and Rainfall.	158
11.5	Forest Evaporation, Tree Life Form and Nitrogen.	160
11.6	Conclusions	162
	References	162

12	<i>Past and Future Forest Response to Rapid Climate Change</i> , M. B. Davis	167
12.1	Introduction	167
12.2	Long-Distance Dispersal	168
12.3	Estimating Jump Distances	170
12.4	Interactions with Resident Vegetation - Constraints on Establishment	171
12.5	Interactions with Resident Vegetation - Competition for Light and Resulting Constraints on Population Growth	172
12.6	Conclusions	173
	References	174
13	<i>Biogeochemical Models: Implicit vs. Explicit Microbiology</i> J. Schimel	177
13.1	Introduction	177
13.2	Microbiology in Biogeochemical Models	177
13.3	Dealing with Microbial Diversity in Models	178
13.4	Kinetic Effects of Microbial Population Size	178
13.5	Microbial Recovery from Stress.	180
13.6	Conclusions	181
	References	182
14	<i>The Global Soil Organic Carbon Pool</i> , M. I. Bird , H. Santrůcková, J. Lloyd and E. M. Veenendaal	185
14.1	Introduction: the Soil Carbon Pool and Global Change	185
14.2	Factors Affecting the Distribution of Soil Organic Carbon	186
14.3	Global Variations in the SOC Pool	187
14.4	The Limitations of Available Observational SOC Data	190
14.5	A Stratified Sampling Approach	191
14.6	Conclusions: Sandworld and Clayworld	197
	References	197
15	<i>Plant Compounds and Their Turnover and Stability as Soil Organic Matter</i> , G. Gleixner , C. Czimczik, C. Kramer, B. M. Lühker and M. W. I. Schmidt	
15.1	Introduction	201
15.2	Pathways of Soil Organic Matter Formation	201
15.2.1	Formation and Decomposition of Biomass.	201
15.2.2	The Influence of Environmental Conditions on SOM Formation.	206
15.2.3	Formation of Black Carbon	206
15.3	Stabilization of Soil Organic Matter	208
15.3.1	Chemical Stability of Molecules.	209
15.3.2	Stabilization of SOM by Interactions With the Soil Matrix	210
15.3.3	Biological Stabilization of Organic Matter in Soils	210
15.4	Turnover of Soil Organic Matter	211
15.5	Conclusion.	213
	References	213
16	<i>Input/Output Balances and Nitrogen Limitation in Terrestrial Ecosystems</i> , P. M. Vitousek and C. B. Field.	217
16.1	Abstract	217
16.2	Long-term Nutrient Limitation	218
16.3	A Simple Model	219
16.4	Pathways of N Loss	219
16.5	Constraints to N Fixation.	222

16.6	Conclusions	222
	References	223
17	<i>Interactions Between Hillslope Hydrochemistry, Nitrogen Dynamics and Plants in Fennoscandian Boreal Forest, P. Högberg.</i>	227
17.1	Introduction	227
17.2	A Historical Perspective	227
17.3	Nitrogen Supply and Forest Productivity in a Landscape Perspective: Hypotheses	228
17.4	Interactions Between Hydrochemistry, N Dynamics and Plants at Betsele - a Model System	230
17.5	Experimental Evidence	231
17.6	Conclusions	232
	References	232
18	<i>The Cycle of Atmospheric Molecular Oxygen and its Isotopes, M. Heimann.</i>	235
18.1	Introduction	235
18.2	Molecular Atmospheric Oxygen	235
18.2.1.	Overview	235
18.2.2.	Measurement Techniques	236
18.2.3.	Global Atmospheric Trends in CO ₂ and O ₂	237
18.2.4.	Seasonal Cycles and Mean Annual Spatial Gradients	238
18.2.5.	Continental Dilution of The Oceanic O ₂ / N ₂ Signal	239
18.3	The Stable Isotopes of Oxygen	240
18.3.1.	Overview	240
18.3.2.	¹⁸ O and CO ₂	241
18.3.3.	The Dole Effect	241
18.3.4.	¹⁷ O	242
18.4	Integrative Research Approach	242
	References	243
19	<i>Constraining the Global Carbon Budget from Global to Regional Scales - the Measurement Challenge, R. J. Francey, P. J. Rayner and C. E. Allison</i>	245
19.1	Introduction	245
19.2	Present Status of Global C-Models	245
19.3	Global CO ₂ -Measurements	247
19.4	The Global CO ₂ -Measuring Network	249
	References	252
20	<i>Carbon Isotope Discrimination of Terrestrial Ecosystems - How Well do Observed and Modeled Results Match? N. Buchmann and J. O. Kaplan</i>	
20.1	Introduction	253
20.2	Experimental and Analytical Methods	253
20.3	Description of the Model	255
20.4	¹³ C Signature of Ecosystem Respiration	255
20.5	Modeled Ecosystem Carbon Discrimination	256
20.6	Comparison of Observed and Modeled De Estimates	258
20.6.1	Differences Due to Vegetation and PFT Distribution	259
20.6.2	Differences Due to Vegetation Change	260
20.6.3	Differences Due to The Water Regime	260
20.6.4	Differences Due to Selection of Field Sites	261
20.7	Ecophysiological Information of Δe	261
20.8	Conclusions	262
	References	265

21	<i>Photosynthetic Pathways and Climate</i> , J. R. Ehleringer and T. E. Cerling	267
21.1	Introduction	267
21.2	A Physiological Basis for C3/C4 Plant Distributions	268
21.3	A Brief History of Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide Levels	268
21.4	Recognizing the Presence of C3 and C4 Ecosystems in the Paleorecord	269
21.5	The Global Expansion of C4 Ecosystems.	270
21.6	C3/C4 Dynamics During Glacial-Interglacial Periods.	272
21.7	Photosynthetic Pathway Distribution in The Modern World.	274
21.8	Photosynthetic Pathway Impacts Herbivores	274
21.9	Summary	275
	References	276
22	<i>Biological Diversity, Evolution and Biogeochemistry</i> , H. A. Mooney	279
22.1	What Do We Have and What Are We Losing?	279
22.2	Do Species Losses Matter for Biogeochemical Cycling?	279
22.2.1	From First Principles - No	279
22.2.2	From First Principles - Yes.	280
22.3	Kinds of Diversity	280
22.3.1	Structural Diversity	280
22.3.2	Chemical Diversity	280
22.3.3	Functional-Type Diversity	281
22.4	The Evolution of Functional Diversity	281
22.4.1	The Changing Atmosphere	281
22.4.2	Getting on Land	281
22.5	Cellulose	281
22.6	Evolution of Polyphenolic Compounds	281
22.7	The Build Up of Carbon and Evolution of Decomposers	282
22.7.1	The Evolution of Angiosperms and Insects	282
22.8	Analysis of the Role of Diversity and Biogeochemistry	283
22.8.1	Direct Tests	283
22.8.2	Field Inferences.	283
22.10	Summary	283
	References	182
23	<i>Atmospheric Perspectives on the Ocean Carbon Cycle</i> , P. J. Rayner	285
23.1	Introduction	285
23.2	Long-term Mean Ocean Uptake	285
23.2.1	Global and Temporal Perspective	285
23.2.2	Spatial Perspectives.	288
23.3	Interannual Variability	290
23.4	Summary and Conclusions	293
	References	293
24	<i>International Instruments for the Protection of the Climate and Their National Implementation</i> , R. Wolfrum	295
24.1	Introduction	295
24.2	Commitments of States Parties Under the Climate Change Regime	295
24.3	Implementation Measures	297
24.4	Monitoring Compliance and Enforcement	299
24.5	The Kyoto Protocol as a Learning Treaty.	300
24.6	Conclusions	300

25	<i>A New Tool to Characterizing and Managing Risks,</i>	O. Renn, A. Klinke, G. Busch, F. Beese and G. Lammel	303
25.1	Introduction		303
25.2	Risk Evaluation and Risk Classification		304
25.2.1	Main Characteristics of Risk Evaluation		304
25.2.2	Rational Risk Evaluation		304
25.2.3	Additional Criteria of Risk Evaluation		305
25.2.4	Risk Classification		305
25.3	Risk Management		306
25.3.1	Strategies and Instruments for the Risk Type "Sword of Damocles"		306
25.3.2	Strategies and Instruments for the Risk Type "Cyclop"		307
25.3.3	Strategies and Instruments for the Risk Type "Pythia"		308
25.3.4	Strategies and instruments for the Risk Type "Pandora's Box"		308
25.3.5	Strategies and Instruments for the Risk Type "Cassandra"		309
25.3.6	Strategies and Instruments for the Risk Type "Medusa"		310
25.4	Application to Environmental Risks of Substances		310
25.4.1	Global Biogeochemical Cycles are Influenced Due to Human Activity		310
25.4.2	Risk Classification of Environmental Risks of Substances		310
25.4.3	Forest Ecosystems are Influenced by Changing Biogeochemical Cycles		310
25.4.4	Changing Patterns of Nitrogen and Sulfur Deposition		311
25.4.5	Exceedance of Forest Soils Buffering Capacity		312
25.4.6	Nitrogen Deposition on Nutrient Deficient and Acid Sensitive Soils		313
25.4.7	Conclusion		313
25.5	Some Conclusions for a Deliberative Process		314
	References		314
26	<i>Contrasting Approaches: The Ozone Layer, Climate Change and Resolving The Kyoto Dilemma,</i>	R. E. Benedick	317
26.1	Introduction: Apples and Oranges?		317
26.2	Montreal: An Unlikely Success Story		318
26.3	Lessons From The Ozone Layer		319
26.4	Climate Change: The Road to Rio		320
26.5	The Framework Convention on Climate Change		321
26.6	Tortuous Targets in Kyoto		322
26.7	When Will the Kyoto Protocol Enter Into Force?		324
26.8	Unlearned Lessons		325
26.9	Time To Move on: A longer Term Perspective		326
26.10	A Technology-based Strategy For The Future: Eight Points For Action		328
	References		330
27	<i>Optimizing Long-Term Climate Management,</i>	K. Hasselmann	333
27.1	Introduction		333
27.2	Global Environment and Society Models		333
27.3	Impulse-Response Climate Models		335
27.4	Optimizing CO ₂ Emissions		339
27.5	Conclusions		342
	References		342
	Subject Index		345

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Foreword

Especially during the past century, land use changes and agricultural and industrial activities have been growing so rapidly that their effects on the environment, including the chemical composition of the global atmosphere have become clearly noticeable on all scales. The first realization of the possibility of global effects was connected with the growth of the “greenhouse” gas carbon dioxide measured by C. D. Keeling and R. Revelle, on the basis of these measurements they stated that humanity had embarked on a global geophysical experiment potentially leading to climate warming. Other human-caused global disturbances in the atmosphere were discovered thereafter. In 1971 attention was called to the possible loss of stratospheric ozone, caused by NO_x catalysts in the exhaust of supersonic aviation. The projected large fleets of aircraft were never built. However, in 1974 an already existing, but late recognized threat to the ozone layer by ClO_x radicals produced in the stratosphere by the photochemical destruction of entirely man-made chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) gases was hypothesized and later confirmed by atmospheric observations. In fact, in 1985, scientists were caught totally by surprise when researchers of the British Antarctic survey reported much larger springtime ozone depletions, than originally estimated, on the order of 30%. It was found that the ozone loss was largest at altitudes between about 12 and 22 km, exactly the height region in which, under undisturbed conditions, maximum ozone concentrations had always been measured. At this location, it had always been thought that ozone was chemically inert. Since then, the “ozone hole” has grown in area and depth, so that by this year’s spring total ozone had declined by more than 50% over a region three times the size of the United States. A couple of years of intensive research efforts showed that a chemical instability had developed, involving formation of ClO_x catalysts on ice particles under sunlit conditions, followed by rapid ozone destruction. The combination of special natural factors in early spring, cold temperatures, and availability of sunlight, together with about six times larger than natural loadings of chlorine gases, had led to this chemical instability over the Antarctic. Since 1996 the production of CFC gases on the industrial world has been forbidden. I have dwelled in this issue in some detail for two reasons. First, international political action would not have been taken without convincing scientific evidence that the CFC emissions were the cause of the heavy ozone loss. Second, it will be particularly important to determine where the world’s complex environmental system may be most vulnerable to human perturbation. For this purpose, modeling alone will be far from sufficient. Surprises are not excluded, as the ozone hole story so drastically has demonstrated.

In the 1970s the substantial impact of the biosphere on atmospheric chemistry was also realized. First, the main natural loss of stratospheric ozone occurs through reactions involving NO_x radi-

cals that derived photochemically from the oxidation of N_2O , a by-product of the biological nitrogen cycle in soils and waters. Second, it was discovered that tropospheric ozone and its photochemical by-product, hydroxyl, are much influenced by chemical chain reactions involving CH_4 and other hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide, and NO_x . All these gases have both natural and anthropogenic sources. This is of the greatest importance, as the hydroxyl radicals, also called the “detergent of the atmosphere,” to a large degree determine the chemical composition of the atmosphere by reacting with almost all gases that are emitted by natural processes and human activities.

In addition to being chemically active in the stratosphere and troposphere, several of the afore-mentioned and other gases serve as “greenhouse gases,” thereby significantly adding to the climate warming caused by CO_2 . On the other hand, aerosol particles, in particular, sulfates derived by the oxidation of largely anthropogenic SO_2 from oil and coal burning, have a cooling effect on climate.

The estimation of the impact of various kinds of human activities on atmospheric chemistry and climate clearly requires a good understanding of the natural and anthropogenic sources of large number of trace gases, as well as particulate matter, and the biological processes creating them. This research not only deals with the present and future, but also profits much from the vast amount of information regarding climate parameters and chemical composition of the atmosphere cores that is deposited in sediments and in ice. The latter data clearly show that the biosphere does not counteract climate change in some Gaian fashion. On the contrary, during earlier glacial periods all greenhouse gases were less abundant in the atmosphere than during the interglacials. This research has received special international, political attention in connection with the proposed Kyoto protocol to reduce the emissions of CO_2 caused by fossil fuel burning and deforestation. As was the case with the CFC regulations, effective CO_2 emission control measures will rely also on a strong scientific base. It was the realization of these strong needs, requiring improved knowledge especially about the biogeochemical cycles of C, N, S, P, and trace compounds such as iron, that led to the creation of a Max Planck Institute for Biogeochemistry. During the initial discussions, involving the cream of the international, biogeochemical, and climate community, the proposal received enthusiastic endorsement, emphasizing the uniqueness of the institute on the global scene. The proposal was also well received by the scientific members and the senate of the Max Planck Society. The search for directors and key scientific personnel of the institute proved highly successful, with several key recruitments coming from overseas, clearly showing the enthusiasm accompanying the creation of the institute.

The MPI for Biogeochemistry in Jena is one of several Max Planck Institutes involved in global change research. This book, based on the presentations given to celebrate the first anniversary of the institute shows many important examples of the breadth and excitement of Global Change research around the world, in-

cluding legal/political aspects. I hope that the so successful creation sets an example and promotes initiatives elsewhere to enhance biogeochemical research efforts, and its connections to ecology, climate and atmospheric chemistry. Many Happy Returns.

Dr. Paul Crutzen

Biogeochemistry: The Jena Perspective

In the late 20th century, biogeochemistry emerged as a new discipline in which the biological, physical, and human sciences collaborate (CGCR, 1999; Schlesinger, 1997). Biological, because the chemical cycles of the planet are mediated by life (Table 1). Physical, because of the strong coupling between climate and atmospheric composition so evident in the glacial–interglacial record of the ice cores (Fig. 1). And, human, because of the massive human disruption of the planet's carbon and nitrogen cycles by fossil fuel burning (which produces CO₂ and a range of volatile nitrogen compounds) (Fig. 2).

From the three figures, one gets an overview of the way in which the field of biogeochemistry has emerged. The evidence for the importance of biology in the composition of the atmosphere (Fig. 2) was deduced from geochemical measurements of air enabled by advances in analytical technology. The chemistry of the atmosphere and the discipline of atmospheric chemistry provided a view of the biosphere not accessible from “within” the discipline. The atmosphere reflects biotic processes operating over “deep” time as well as processes operating on rapid time scales (especially with respect to the oxidized N species). Some compounds, especially the hydrocarbons, may reflect plant–insect coevolution, and so to understand the atmosphere requires a deep understanding of biology. When insights into atmospheric chemistry were combined with emerging ecosystem studies of nitrogen and other elements (e.g., Vitousek and Reiners, 1977), a paradigm emerged that enriched both ecology and geophysics (Andreae and Schimel, 1989).

The realization that ecosystem biogeochemistry and climate were dynamically coupled was nascent for most of the 20th century. The ice-core records showing the coordinated rhythm of temperature, CO₂, and methane provided conclusive evidence of interactions (Fig. 2). The ice cores show coupled changes in trace gases and climate. They preserve a tantalizing body of information about leads, lags, and amplification that is not yet fully unravelled. While variations in CO₂ are strongly governed by changes in ocean circulation, mass balance considerations and isotopes suggest land-ecosystem changes as well (Indermuhle *et al.*, 1999). Climate effects on terrestrial biogeochemistry are demonstrated by the patterns in methane (produced in terrestrial wetlands and ungulate mammals) and nitrous oxide. High-resolution records showing high-frequency changes in ice cores, and detailed records of the Holocene provide information on timescales tractable, or nearly so, in analysis using today's biogeochemical models. Again, the perspective from geophysical records provides a view of ecosystem processes different from, and most strongly complementary to, the paradigms emerging from within the discipline.

The scientific community was galvanized by the Mauna Loa curve of increasing carbon dioxide and the political ramifications of

this scientific result will echo for the foreseeable future (Benedick, Chapter 26 of this volume). Geophysical measurements provide a trans-disciplinary view of human processes. Since biogeochemistry has a “basic science” character and remains concentrated in academia, the carbon and nitrogen cycles would be of far less interest without the challenges of carbon and climate change, acid rain, and tropospheric ozone increase. The Mauna Loa curve challenges both the policy-relevant and intellectual sides of biogeochemistry. The policy side is obvious—the rate of increase in atmospheric CO₂ is the index of humanity's export of carbon to the atmosphere.

Scientifically, the fraction of CO₂ released to the atmosphere that remains as CO₂ in the air (about half) is not yet explained on the basis of incontrovertible measurements. While the holy grail of explaining the “missing sink” grows asymptotically closer, the political stakes and hence the standard of proof required are growing. The interannual variability of the growth rate of CO₂ gives evidence of climate–carbon interactions. Subtle year-to-year variations in the increase in CO₂ reflect changes in land and ocean uptake. The measurement and modeling tools to understand these changes are emerging and provide a direct means of understanding how climate affects the carbon system at large scales. Changes in the carbon system are reflected also in changes in the pole-to-pole gradient of CO₂. That gradient reflects the balance of sources and sinks on large scales. Because the equilibration time (the interhemispheric transport time) is about a year, changes in the gradient are another source of information about interannual variability. The seasonal cycle of CO₂ provides information about the seasonal activity of the biosphere. Because the phase and amplitude of the seasonal cycle vary spatially (Fig. 3), they provide rich information about land ecosystems. To date, we cannot fully separate changes in carbon uptake (photosynthesis) and release (respiration) to provide unique explanations for the seasonal cycle and its variation. This remains a research challenge.

1. Research Challenges

The discipline of biogeochemistry confronts a wide array of scientific and methodological challenges, as is evident in the balance of this book. These are not limited to the cycles of carbon and nitrogen, but include the role of phosphorus, iron, calcium, aluminum, and acidity, to name just a few. In this section, I will identify four cross-cutting challenges that illustrate aspects of the science.

1.1 Large-Scale Carbon Sinks: Detection and Attribution

The problem of the terrestrial missing sink remains. Where and why is there net uptake in terrestrial systems? The two questions,

TABLE 1 Chemical Composition of the Atmosphere

Constituent	Chemical formula	Volume mixing ratio in dry air	Major sources and remarks
Nitrogen	N ₂	78.084%	Biological
Oxygen	O ₂	20.948%	Biological
Argon	Ar	0.934%	Inert
Carbon dioxide	CO ₂	360 ppmv	Combustion, ocean, biosphere
Neon	Ne	18.18 ppmv	Inert
Helium	He	5.24 ppmv	Inert
Methane	CH ₄	1.7 ppmv	Biogenic and anthropogenic
Hydrogen	H ₂	0.55 ppmv	Biogenic, anthropogenic, and photochemical
Nitrous oxide	N ₂ O	0.31 ppmv	Biogenic and anthropogenic
Carbon monoxide	CO	50–200 ppbv	Photochemical and anthropogenic
Ozone (troposphere)	O ₃	10–500 ppbv	Photochemical
Ozone (stratosphere)	O ₃	0.5–10 ppm	Photochemical
Nonmethane hydrocarbons		5–20 ppbv	Biogenic and anthropogenic
Halocarbons (as chlorine)		3.8 ppbv	85% anthropogenic
Nitrogen species	NO _x	10 ppt–1 ppm	Soils, lightning, anthropogenic
Ammonia	NH ₃	10 ppt–1 ppb	Biogenic
Particulate nitrate	NO ₃ [–]	1 ppt–10 ppb	Photochemical, anthropogenic
Particulate ammonium	NH ₄ ⁺	10 ppt–10 ppb	Photochemical, anthropogenic
Hydroxyl	OH	0.1–10 ppt	Photochemical
Peroxy	HO ₂	0.1–10 ppt	Photochemical
Hydrogen peroxide	H ₂ O ₂	0.1–10 ppb	Photochemical
Formaldehyde	CH ₂ O	0.1–1 ppb	Photochemical
Sulfur dioxide	SO ₂	10 ppt–1 ppb	Photochemical, volcanic, anthropogenic
Dimethyl sulfide	CH ₃ SCH ₃	10–100 ppt	Biogenic
Carbon disulfide	CS ₂	1–300 ppt	Biogenic, anthropogenic
Carbonyl sulfide	OCS	500 pptv	Biogenic, volcanic, anthropogenic
Hydrogen sulfide	H ₂ S	5–500 ppt	Biogenic, volcanic
Particulate sulfate	SO ₄ ^{2–}	10 ppt–10 ppb	Photochemical, anthropogenic

where and why, cannot be separated. Different parts of the world and differing ecosystem types are influenced by differing nitrogen additions, disturbance, and pollution. Answering the question “why is there a sink” requires explaining the differences between climate zones, management, and disturbance regimes and chemical climate. This is a practical problem because, in the future, there will be increasing pressure to manage carbon sinks. How can sinks best be induced and sustained? How can the effects of intentional measures be quantified and verified? What impacts does managing ecosystems for carbon storage have on other ecosystem goods and services, including diversity? Without scientific understanding, no intelligent design of management systems can emerge. Equally important is the fact that without scientific consensus there can be no political will to implement expensive management systems. Carbon science must integrate a basic understanding of process with powerful measurement techniques. Models are also required that have the credibility to be used in what-if exercises to aid in designing new management systems. Local models are crucial because sinks must be long lasting and management systems to store carbon must aim at a decadal to centennial timescale. The agronomic paradigm of “test plots” is needed but limited in utility because of timescale. Large-scale models are needed to test the global effect of an international regime, including the stability of induced ecosystem sinks to potential changes in the chemical, physical, and human environment.

1.2 New Methods for Measurement

Measurement capability has been a continual challenge to the carbon research community in accomplishing the ambitious goals. The foundation of carbon cycle research lies in stable absolute calibration, an initial priority of the Keeling Mauna Loa effort and a persistent feature of the community. New measurements, such as of stable and radio-isotopes, the O₂/N₂ ratio, and remote sensing have been developed and adopted by the community. Techniques for dealing with spatial heterogeneity are also in rapid evolution: these include ecosystems studies, local eddy covariance flux measures, mesoscale aircraft and tall-tower techniques, and continental to global inverse modeling techniques (Valentini *et al.*, 2000). As the scope of large-scale biogeochemical research expands beyond a carbon cycle and greenhouse gas focus, techniques will need to be developed for the spatial-temporal integration of a range of processes. It is likely that new techniques will be needed for the study of airborne and waterborne nutrient transport as in gas, suspended and dissolved water-borne and aerosol phases. Techniques for spatial integration of belowground processes are crucial—there still exist only rudimentary measures for root growth and soil C and N turnover at or above the plot scale (Valentini *et al.*, 2000). Continuing adoption and endogenous development of measurement and data analytical techniques is a priority for biogeochemistry.