

Geology

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Geology 1997;25:259-262

doi: 10.1130/0091-7613(1997)025<0259:ABOGIT>2.3.CO;2

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Notes

A blast of gas in the latest Paleocene: Simulating first-order effects of massive dissociation of oceanic methane hydrate

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ABSTRACT

Carbonate and organic matter deposited during the latest Paleocene thermal maximum is characterized by a remarkable -2.5% excursion in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ that occurred over $\sim 10^4$ yr and returned to near initial values in an exponential pattern over $\sim 2 \times 10^5$ yr. It has been hypothesized that this excursion signifies transfer of 1.4 to 2.8×10^{18} g of CH_4 from oceanic hydrates to the combined ocean-atmosphere inorganic carbon reservoir. A scenario with 1.12×10^{18} g of CH_4 is numerically simulated here within the framework of the present-day global carbon cycle to test the plausibility of the hypothesis. We find that (1) the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of the deep ocean, shallow ocean, and atmosphere decreases by -2.3% over 10^4 yr and returns to initial values in an exponential pattern over $\sim 2 \times 10^5$ yr; (2) the depth of the lysocline shoals by up to 400 m over 10^4 yr, and this rise is most pronounced in one ocean region; and (3) global surface temperature increases by $\sim 2^\circ\text{C}$ over 10^4 yr and returns to initial values over $\sim 2 \times 10^6$ yr. The first effect is quantitatively consistent with the geologic record; the latter two effects are qualitatively consistent with observations. Thus, significant CH_4 release from oceanic hydrates is a plausible explanation for observed carbon cycle perturbations during the thermal maximum. This conclusion is of broad interest because the flux of CH_4 invoked during the maximum is of similar magnitude to that released to the atmosphere from present-day anthropogenic CH_4 sources.

INTRODUCTION

The latest Paleocene thermal maximum (LPTM) was a time interval ca. 55.5 Ma when temperatures at high-latitude locations and in the deep ocean increased by $>4^\circ\text{C}$ over $<10^4$ yr (Kennett and Stott, 1991; Zachos et al., 1993). Primary evidence for this warming is a -2% to -3% excursion in $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ of benthic foraminifera of all oceans and planktic foraminifera at high-latitude locations (Kennett and Stott, 1991; Bralower et al., 1995; Thomas and Shackleton, 1996; Schmitz et al., 1996). Likely ancillary support for the warming includes an extraordinary high-latitude interchange of terrestrial mammalian orders (Maas et al., 1995; Hooker, 1996), a prominent extinction of benthic fauna in neritic to abyssal environments (Kaiho et al., 1996; Steinbeck and Thomas, 1996; Thomas, 1996), and an input to the ocean of clay minerals indicative of humid conditions (Robert and Kennett, 1994; Kaiho et al., 1996). Cause of rapid warming during the LPTM remains unclear but probably involves changes in tectonism, thermohaline circulation, and atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$.

Nearly coeval with evidence for LPTM warming is a $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion in carbonate and organic matter that, in high-resolution open-ocean ben-

thic foraminifera records, can be described as a rapid decrease of $\sim -2.5\%$ over 10^4 yr followed by a return to near initial values in a roughly exponential pattern over $\sim 2 \times 10^5$ yr (Fig. 1). This $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion has been documented in planktic and benthic foraminifera in sediment of all oceans (Kennett and Stott, 1991; Bralower et al., 1995; Thomas and Shackleton, 1996; Stott et al., 1996; Schmitz et al., 1996), in fossil tooth enamel and carbonate concretions in terrestrial sequences of North America (Koch et al., 1995), and in terrestrial organic carbon in sediment from Europe and New Zealand (Stott et al., 1996; Kaiho et al., 1996).

The magnitude, timing, and global nature of the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion imply that an immense quantity of carbon greatly enriched in ^{12}C was rapidly added to the combined ocean-atmosphere inorganic carbon reservoir (Zachos et al., 1993; Dickens et al., 1995; Thomas and Shackleton, 1996). However, the two conventional hypotheses for rapidly decreasing the mean $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of the ocean-atmosphere inorganic carbon reservoir (addition of volcanogenic CO_2 ; transfer of terrestrial biomass) are untenable explanations for the observed excursion (Dickens et al., 1995; Thomas and Shackleton, 1996). Mantle CO_2 is not sufficiently enriched in ^{12}C ; the terrestrial biomass is not sufficiently large.

Clathrate hydrates of CH_4 (methane hydrates) are solids composed of water and CH_4 that occur

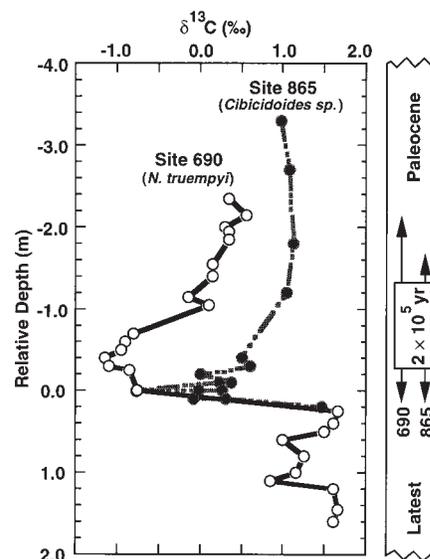


Figure 1. High-resolution carbon isotope records in benthic foraminifera at Ocean Drilling Program (ODP) Site 690 on Maud Rise in South Atlantic (Kennett and Stott, 1991), and Site 865 on Allison Guyot in Equatorial Pacific (Bralower et al., 1995). Both records have been placed on common depth scale; 0.0 m placed at $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ minimum. Entire $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion (rapid decrease and return to near initial values) occurs within 2 m at both sites. This stratigraphy constrains duration of excursion to within 2×10^5 yr (Kennett and Stott, 1991; Bralower et al., 1995).

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naturally in pore space of certain marine sediment sequences (Kvenvolden, 1993). The stability of these hydrates depends on temperature. Because current estimates for the mass (11×10^{18} g of C) and isotopic composition ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of -60‰) of oceanic CH_4 hydrates (Kvenvolden, 1993) make this a reservoir that can potentially transfer immense quantities of carbon greatly enriched in ^{12}C to the combined ocean-atmosphere inorganic carbon reservoir over short ($<10^4$ yr) time scales, a default hypothesis for the LPTM $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion has been proposed (Dickens et al., 1995): abrupt deep sea warming induced a shift in sediment geotherms and release of CH_4 from oceanic hydrates.

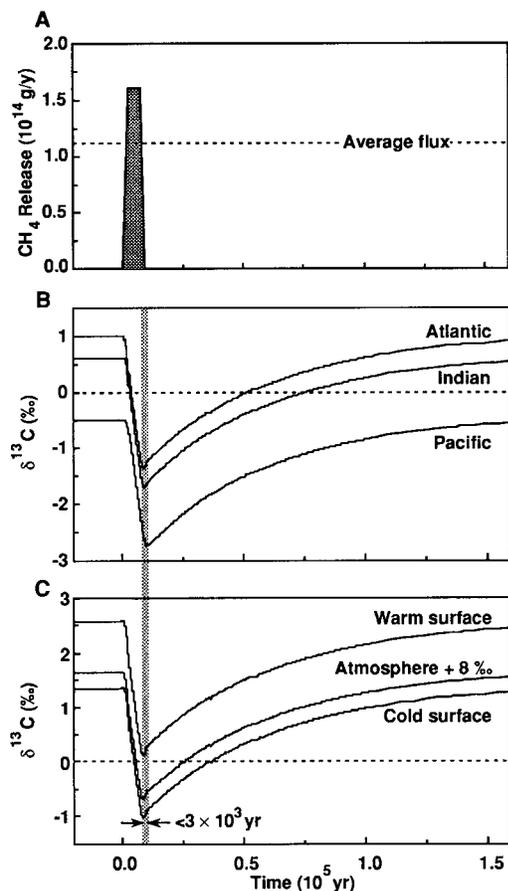
Mass-balance calculations suggest that transfer of 1.4 to 2.8×10^{18} g of CH_4 from oceanic hydrates to the combined ocean-atmosphere inorganic reservoir would explain the observed $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion during the LPTM (Dickens et al., 1995). However, the plausibility of this suggestion has not been evaluated with a well-documented model of the carbon cycle. Here we numerically simulate the CH_4 transfer scenario within the framework of the present-day global carbon cycle to show that the LPTM $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion can be explained by addition of $\sim 1.12 \times 10^{18}$ g of CH_4 with a $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of -60‰ . We further demonstrate that such a simulation necessitates first-order changes in CaCO_3 dissolution and global surface temperature that are consistent with geologic observations of the LPTM.

CARBON MODEL FRAMEWORK

The model chosen to evaluate first-order effects of CH_4 release during the LPTM was developed by Walker and Kasting (1992) to simulate the response of the present-day carbon cycle to variable inputs of CO_2 over time intervals $<10^7$ yr. The ocean is characterized by warm and cold shallow-water reservoirs, a thermocline reservoir, and deep Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific reservoirs, and the atmosphere and biomass are represented by single reservoirs. The model includes exchange with the rock cycle, distinguishes between shelf and pelagic carbonate precipitation, and has distinct lysocline depths in the three deep ocean reservoirs. Exchange fluxes between various reservoirs were determined (here and by Walker and Kasting, 1992) by tuning the model to reproduce the distribution of dissolved phosphate and total dissolved carbon between the ocean reservoirs and the distribution of ^{13}C and ^{14}C in the ocean and atmosphere (including radiocarbon from atomic weapons testing).

After tuning, the model can be used to simulate responses of initial values of carbon isotopes, lysocline depths, atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$, and global average surface temperature to a given input of CO_2 . Initial values used here are those for the preindustrial steady-state and were given by Walker and Kasting (1992). Equations linking atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$ and global surface temperature were also given by Walker and Kasting (1992).

Figure 2. Effect of releasing 1.12×10^{18} g of CH_4 with $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of -60‰ over 10^4 yr on $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ value of present-day preindustrial carbon reservoirs. **A:** Assumed release of CH_4 at average rate of 1.12×10^{14} g of CH_4/yr over 10^4 yr. **B:** Response of $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ in deep water of Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Initial values are 0.996‰ , 0.620‰ , and -0.508‰ , respectively. **C:** Response of $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ in warm surface water, cold surface water, and atmosphere (shifted by $+8\text{‰}$). Initial values are 2.577‰ , 1.355‰ , and -6.367‰ , respectively.



We assume that the model provides a reasonable representation of how preindustrial steady-state conditions will be perturbed with a given input of CO_2 (see discussion by Walker and Kasting, 1992). Indeed, Walker and Kasting (1992) demonstrated that the tuned model with initial conditions used here will reproduce observed records of atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$, ^{13}C , and ^{14}C caused by anthropogenic CO_2 inputs and forest clearance.

The LPTM hydrate dissociation hypothesis was simulated here by adding CO_2 with a $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of -60‰ to the atmosphere at an average rate of 3.08×10^{14} g of CO_2/yr (1.12×10^{14} g of CH_4/yr) over 10^4 yr (Fig. 2). Justification for this approach is that CH_4 in oceanic hydrates has an average $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of $\sim -60\text{‰}$ (Kvenvolden, 1993), CH_4 is rapidly (<10 yr) oxidized to CO_2 in the atmosphere and ocean (Ward et al., 1987; Khalil and Shearer, 1993), and isotopic and stratigraphic records (Fig. 1) constrain the duration of carbon release to $\sim 10^4$ yr. A stepped release of CH_4 with time (Fig. 2) and an input into the atmosphere (rather than into one of the ocean reservoirs) were assumed for the sake of modeling because information concerning these parameters is inconclusive or absent in the literature. Effects of CH_4 (or CO_2) release over 10^4 yr upon carbonate dissolution, atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$ and surface temperature are expected to be qualitatively similar regardless of which reservoir receives the additional carbon because carbon exchange fluxes between various

reservoirs are relatively large compared to carbon masses of each reservoir (e.g., Walker and Kasting, 1992). However, oxidation of a fraction of the CH_4 in one or more of the ocean reservoirs should amplify effects on deep sea carbonate dissolution and dampen effects on atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$ and temperature.

Addition of significant CO_2 to the atmosphere or ocean should dissolve some quantity of previously deposited CaCO_3 in the ocean (Broecker and Peng, 1982; Walker and Kasting, 1992). The LPTM hydrate dissociation hypothesis was simulated here with and without dissolution of previously deposited CaCO_3 . The simulation with dissolution of previously deposited CaCO_3 involved CaCO_3 dissolution in the top 30 cm of sediment over an area of sea floor above the lysocline (see Walker and Kasting, 1992). Global carbon system recovery was then evaluated for 5 m.y. after the initial 10^4 yr release of CH_4 in both of these scenarios.

RESULTS

Although initial $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values are different in warm surface water, cold surface water, deep ocean water, and the atmosphere (because of fractionation effects and the biological pump), the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of carbon in each of these reservoirs responds similarly to the given input of CH_4 over 10^4 yr. The model simulation results in a -2.2‰ to -2.4‰ $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion in each reservoir over

10^4 yr (Fig. 2). After the initial 10^4 yr input of carbon, the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of each reservoir recovers to initial values in a roughly exponential pattern over $\sim 2 \times 10^5$ yr (Fig. 2). This effect on the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of various reservoirs is nearly independent of the amount of previously deposited carbonate that is dissolved upon addition of CH_4 .

Addition of significant CO_2 (or oxidized CH_4) to the atmosphere or ocean should result in shoaling of lysocline depths followed by deepening of lysocline depths and gradual return to initial values (Broecker and Peng, 1982; Walker and Kasting, 1992). This effect on the lysocline is strongly dependent on the amount of previously deposited carbonate that is dissolved upon carbon addition, the location along deep ocean advective flow, and the relative sizes of deep ocean reservoirs (Broecker and Peng, 1982; Walker and Kasting, 1992). In the simulation without dissolution of previously deposited carbonate, lysocline depths shoal by ~ 420 m in the Atlantic Ocean, ~ 300 m in the Indian Ocean, and ~ 110 m in the Pacific Ocean over 10^4 yr (Fig. 3). Lysocline depths then deepen over $\sim 2 \times 10^5$ yr such that lysocline depths are deeper than initial values by ~ 200 m in the Atlantic Ocean, ~ 140 m in the Indian Ocean, and ~ 110 m in the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 3). In the simulation with dissolution of previously deposited carbonate, lysocline depths shoal by ~ 160 m in the Atlantic Ocean, ~ 50 m in the Indian Ocean, and ~ 15 m in the Pacific Ocean over 10^4 yr (Fig. 3). Lysocline depths then deepen over $\sim 2 \times 10^5$ yr such that lysocline depths are deeper than initial values by ~ 180 m in the Atlantic Ocean, ~ 130 m in the Indian Ocean, and ~ 80 m in the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 4). Lysocline depths return to initial values over $\sim 5 \times 10^6$ yr in both simulations.

Atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$ will rise with addition of oxidized CH_4 to the atmosphere or ocean. An expected effect of this elevated $p\text{CO}_2$ will be a decrease in the outgoing flux of long-wave infrared radiation from the Earth and an increase in global surface temperature (Walker and Kasting, 1992). The model simulation results in a 70 to 85 ppmv (ppm by volume) rise in atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$ over 10^4 yr followed by a return to initial conditions over $\sim 2 \times 10^6$ yr. The rise in $p\text{CO}_2$ results in a 1.7 to 1.9 °C increase in global surface temperature over 10^4 yr (Fig. 4). A range in values exists because expected changes in atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$ depend on the amount of previously deposited CaCO_3 that is dissolved upon addition of oxidized CH_4 .

DISCUSSION

A rapid negative excursion in the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of global records of carbonate and organic matter implies that a mass of carbon enriched in ^{12}C was added to the combined ocean-atmosphere inorganic carbon reservoir. The magnitude and duration of such an excursion depend on mass and isotope composition of carbon input, sizes of var-

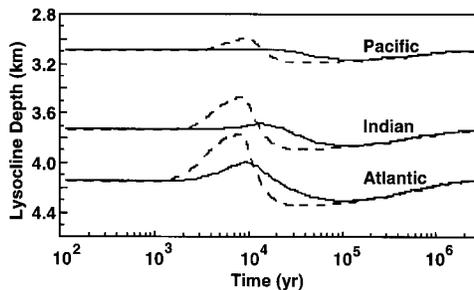


Figure 3. Response of present-day lysocline depths in Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans to CH_4 release shown in Figure 2A. Dashed curves show response without dissolution of previously deposited CaCO_3 . Solid curves show response when CaCO_3 in upper 30 cm of sediment is dissolved upon addition of CH_4 and introduction of newly corrosive water (Walker and Kasting, 1992). Initial values are 4.14, 3.73, and 3.09 km, respectively. Time scale is logarithmic.

ious global carbon reservoirs, and exchange fluxes between these reservoirs (Broecker and Peng, 1982; Walker and Kasting, 1992).

The pronounced and rapid -2.5% excursion in global $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ records across the LPTM has been interpreted as representing release and oxidation of 1.4 to 2.8×10^{18} g of CH_4 from oceanic hydrates (Dickens et al., 1995). Modeling results presented here support the plausibility of this hypothesis inasmuch as the observed $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion (Fig. 1) can be closely simulated within the framework of the present-day carbon cycle with addition of 1.12×10^{18} g of CH_4 with a $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of -60% (Fig. 2).

Addition of 1.12×10^{18} g of CH_4 is also plausible considering the size of the oceanic CH_4 hydrate reservoir and the inferred >4 °C increase in bottom water temperature. A 4 °C increase in deep ocean temperature should shift sediment geotherms such that at least 14% of the present-day oceanic hydrate reservoir would be thermally dissociated and available for transfer to the atmosphere and ocean (Dickens et al., 1995). The simulation requires $<8\%$ of the estimated 11×10^{18} g of C in the present-day oceanic hydrate reservoir.

Workers (Koch et al., 1995; Bralower et al., 1995; Thomas and Shackleton, 1996; Stott et al., 1996; Schmitz et al., 1996; Kaiho et al., 1996) have argued that the LPTM $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ excursion is time coincident and of similar magnitude (although offset by fractionation) in terrestrial and marine records. This suggestion implies that the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of the atmosphere and all ocean reservoirs respond simultaneously to a major input of carbon during the LPTM. Release and oxidation of 1.12×10^{18} g of CH_4 over 10^4 yr provide a nearly simultaneous $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ response (within 3×10^3 yr) in all carbon reservoirs (Fig. 2).

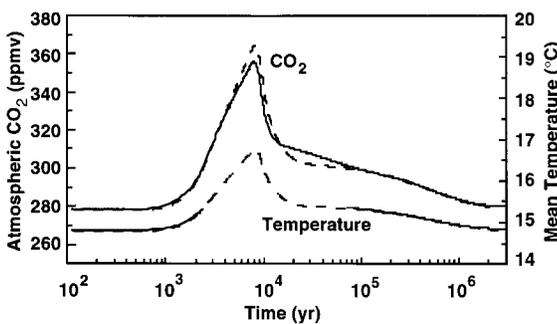


Figure 4. Response of present-day atmospheric $p\text{CO}_2$ and global average surface temperature to CH_4 release shown in Figure 2A. Dashed curves show response without dissolution of previously deposited CaCO_3 . Solid curves show response when CaCO_3 in upper 30 cm of sediment is dissolved upon addition of CH_4 and introduction of newly corrosive water (Walker and Kasting, 1992). Initial values are 279.25 ppmv and 14.84 °C, respectively. Time scale is logarithmic.

explain preferential warming at high latitudes (Sloan et al., 1992).

The simulation necessitates removal of 4.5×10^{18} g of O_2 via oxidation of CH_4 . Because terrestrial vertebrates and flora underwent high species origination in the latest Paleocene (Koch et al., 1995; Maas et al., 1995; Hooker, 1996; Thomas and Shackleton, 1996), any explanation for the LPTM $\delta^{13}C$ excursion that results in appreciable depletion of atmospheric O_2 would be inconsistent with the geologic record. Present-day atmospheric and combined ocean reservoirs contain $\sim 1.2 \times 10^{21}$ g and $\sim 6.8 \times 10^{18}$ g of O_2 , respectively (Walker, 1980). Thus, addition of 1.4×10^{18} g of CH_4 to the atmosphere or ocean would not significantly decrease the O_2 content of the atmosphere. However, because O_2 exchange fluxes between the deep ocean and atmosphere take on the order of 10^3 yr, if a substantial fraction of the CH_4 was oxidized in the ocean, there should have been a brief time interval of significant oceanwide O_2 depletion during the LPTM. Investigations of microfossil assemblages (Kaiho et al., 1996; Thomas, 1996) suggest that such O_2 deficiency occurred during the LPTM, although this change might be related to other variables (e.g., decreased O_2 solubility in warmer water, Kennett and Stott, 1991).

Although the LPTM hydrate dissociation hypothesis is modeled here with oxidation of CH_4 in the atmosphere, alternatives involving substantial oxidation of CH_4 in one or more ocean reservoirs are plausible with current assessments for latest Paleocene carbonate dissolution, atmospheric pCO_2 , global surface temperature, and dissolved O_2 in the ocean. Indeed, rigorous quantification of these variables may provide fundamental constraints on the location of CH_4 oxidation as well as the viability of the overall hypothesis.

The LPTM hydrate dissociation hypothesis invokes three fundamental assumptions (Dickens et al., 1995): the estimated mass of the present-day oceanic hydrate reservoir (11×10^{18} g of C) is the correct order of magnitude; processes controlling hydrate formation and distribution were the same in the Paleocene and present day; and carbon transfer can occur between oceanic hydrates and the ocean-atmosphere inorganic carbon reservoir during deep sea warming. None of these assumptions can be rigorously evaluated with current information. However, within the framework of the present-day carbon cycle, the hypothesis involving $\sim 1.12 \times 10^{18}$ g of CH_4 is the only hypothesis forwarded to date that (1) can explain the observed $\delta^{13}C$ excursion in global carbon isotope records, and (2) is consistent with a series of observations concerning deep sea carbonate dissolution and global temperature. The importance of the hypothesis (if correct) is that it

necessitates a mean annual flux of CH_4 to the ocean-atmosphere inorganic carbon reservoir during a brief time interval of rapid biotic and chemical change of a magnitude similar to present-day anthropogenic inputs of CH_4 to the atmosphere (3.6×10^{14} g of CH_4 /yr; Khalil and Shearer, 1993). To some degree the LPTM may represent a past analog for certain future effects on global biogeochemical cycles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding for Dickens was furnished by the Department of Energy through the Graduate Fellowships for Global Change Program. Funding for Walker was supported in part by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration grant NAGW-176. J. Zachos and an anonymous reviewer contributed insightful comments. This paper is a contribution of IGCP Project 386.

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Manuscript received August 23, 1996

Revised manuscript received December 2, 1996

Manuscript accepted December 10, 1996