

CARBON SEQUESTRATION VIA DIRECT INJECTION

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INTRODUCTION

The build-up of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere has caused concern about possible global climate change. As a result, international negotiations have produced the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), completed during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The treaty, which the United States has ratified, calls for the "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system."

The primary greenhouse gas is CO₂, which is estimated to contribute to over two-thirds of any climate change. The primary source of CO₂ is the burning of fossil fuels, specifically gas, oil, and coal. Therefore, efforts are being made to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels through improved efficiency and the introduction of non-fossil energy sources like solar and nuclear. However, it is becoming clear that while these strategies may slow the build-up of atmospheric CO₂, they will not reduce emissions to the level required by the FCCC. In other words, the fossil fuels, which currently supply over 85% of the world's energy needs, are likely to remain our primary energy source for the foreseeable future. This has led to increased interest in a new strategy termed carbon management and sequestration.

Carbon sequestration is often associated with the planting of trees. As they mature, the trees remove carbon from the atmosphere. As long as the forest remains in place, the carbon is effectively sequestered. Another type of sequestration involves capturing CO₂ from large, stationary sources, such as a power plant or chemical factory, and storing the CO₂ in underground reservoirs or the deep ocean. This article explores the applicability of the deep ocean as a sink for atmospheric carbon.

Why is the ocean of interest as a sink for anthropogenic CO₂? The ocean already contains an estimated 40,000 GtC (billion tonnes of carbon) compared with 750 GtC in the atmosphere and 2,200 GtC in the terrestrial biosphere. As a result, the amount of carbon that would cause a doubling of the atmospheric concentration would change the ocean concentration by less than 2%. In addition, discharging CO₂ directly to the ocean would accelerate the ongoing, but slow, natural processes by which almost 85% of present-day emissions will ultimately enter the ocean *indirectly*, thus reducing both peak atmospheric CO₂ concentrations and their rate of increase.

Ocean sequestration of CO₂ by direct injection assumes a relatively pure CO₂ stream has been generated at a power plant or chemical factory. To better understand the role the ocean can play, we address the capacity of the ocean to sequester CO₂, its effectiveness at reducing atmospheric CO₂ levels, how to inject the CO₂, and possible environmental consequences.

CAPACITY

How much carbon can the ocean sequester? Based on physical chemistry, a large quantity of CO₂ (far exceeding the estimated available fossil energy resources of 5,000 – 10,000 GtC) may be dissolved in deep ocean waters. However, a more realistic criterion needs to be based on an understanding of ocean biogeochemistry.

After some time, injected carbon would be distributed widely in the oceans and any far-field impact of the injected CO₂ on the oceans would be similar to the impact of anthropogenic CO₂ absorbed from the atmosphere. It is thought that, at the CO₂ concentrations that would be typical of the far field, the primary environmental impacts would be associated with changes in ocean pH and carbonate-ion concentration.

As points of reference, the pH of the surface ocean has been reduced by about 0.1 units in since pre-industrial times. Adding 1300 GtC (about 200 years of current emissions) to the ocean would decrease average ocean pH by about 0.3 units.

The impacts of such change are poorly understood. The deep ocean environment has probably been quite stable and it is unknown to what extent changes in ocean pH would affect these organisms or their ecosystems. But it is important to recognize that the far-field changes in ocean pH would ultimately be much the same whether the CO₂ is released into the atmosphere or the deep-ocean. Moreover, in the shorter-term, releasing the CO₂ in the deep ocean will diminish the pH change in the near-surface ocean, where marine biota are most plentiful. Light is plentiful in the near-surface ocean, so the microscopic plants that form the base of the food chain grow, supporting vigorous ecosystems. Thus, direct injection of CO₂ into the deep ocean could actually reduce adverse pH impacts presently occurring in the surface ocean.

EFFECTIVENESS

Carbon dioxide is constantly exchanged between the ocean and atmosphere. Each year the ocean and atmosphere exchange about 90 GtC, with a net ocean uptake currently about 2 GtC. Because of this exchange, questions arise as to how effective ocean sequestration will be at keeping the CO₂ out of the atmosphere. Specifically, is the sequestration permanent and, if not, how fast does the CO₂ leak back to the atmosphere. Because there has been no long-term CO₂ direct-injection experiment in the ocean, the long-term effectiveness of direct CO₂ injection must be predicted based on observations of other oceanic tracers (e.g., radiocarbon) and on computer models of ocean circulation and chemistry. In this section we will show that about 80% of the CO₂ will be sequestered permanently, with the rest taking several hundred years to return to the atmosphere.

The fraction of injected carbon that is permanently sequestered depends on the atmospheric CO₂ concentration, through the effect of atmospheric CO₂ on surface-ocean chemistry (see Figure 1). The

concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere today is about 370 ppm, meaning that over 80% of any carbon sequestered in the ocean today would be permanent. Even at an atmospheric concentration of 550 ppm (double pre-industrial levels), just under 80% of CO₂ injected into the ocean would be permanently isolated from the atmosphere.

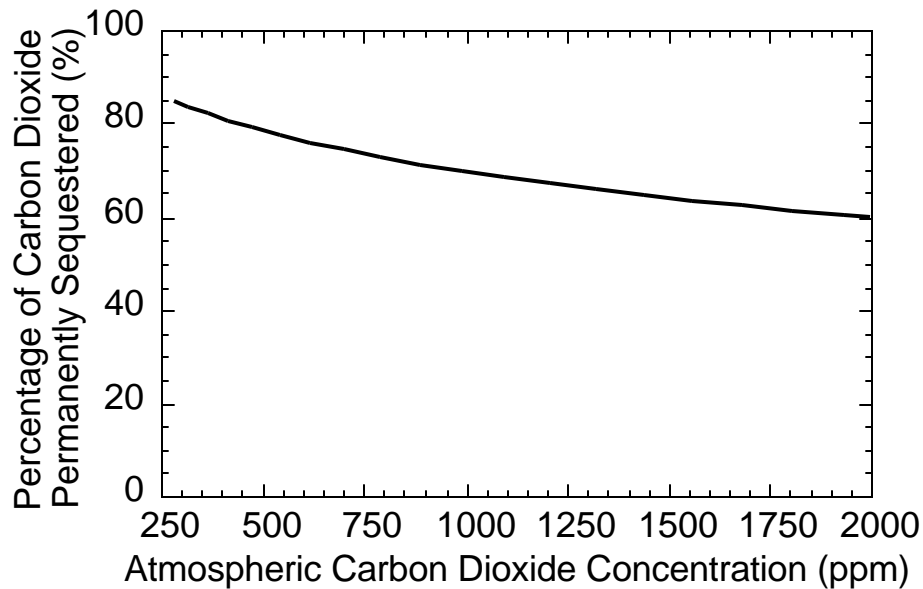


Figure 1. *Percent of injected CO₂ that is permanently sequestered from the atmosphere as a function of the atmospheric concentration of CO₂ calculated from one-dimensional ocean models at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere today is about 370 ppm, while an atmospheric concentration of 550 ppm represents a doubling of pre-industrial levels.*

The amount of time over which the remaining 20% of the injected CO₂ would leak depends on the location and depth of the injection. Figure 2 shows the effect of injection depth on leakage for an ocean site with typical temperature and salinity profiles and no major upwelling or downwelling currents. It can be seen that the deeper the injection, the longer it takes for the 20% of the CO₂ to return to the atmosphere. Also, to make sure the leakage does not significantly exceed the long-term value of 20% in the shorter-term, injection depths should be greater than 1000 m. This is because the 1000 m depth is roughly the bottom of the thermocline, which is the layer of the ocean that is stably stratified by large temperature and density gradients, thus inhibiting vertical mixing and slowing the leakage of CO₂. Beyond injecting CO₂ deeper, the amount of leakage could potentially be minimized by injecting the CO₂ in a way that would maximize interaction with carbonate sediments or by purposefully enhancing the dissolution of carbonate minerals.

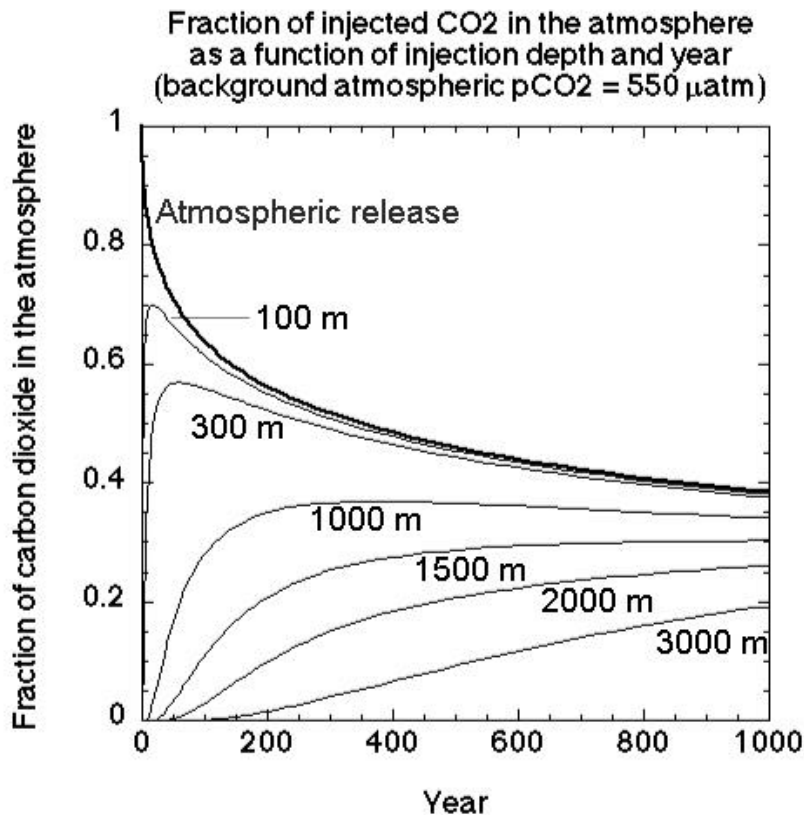


Figure 2. The percent of injected CO₂ that would leak back to the atmosphere as a function of time. Calculated from one-dimensional ocean models at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory for an atmospheric concentration of 350 ppm (similar to today's level). The results suggest that injection should be below the thermocline at depths over 1000 m.

The time that it would take for carbon to mix from the deep ocean to the atmosphere is roughly equal to the time required for carbon to mix from the atmosphere to the deep ocean. This can be estimated through observations of radiocarbon (carbon-14) in the oceans. Radiocarbon is an isotope of carbon with a half-life of 5730 years, produced in the stratosphere by the bombardment of nitrogen by cosmic rays. Radiocarbon mixes through the atmosphere, is absorbed by the oceans, and is transported to the deep sea, undergoing radioactive decay as it ages. About 24% of the original radiocarbon has decayed in the mid-depth waters of the North Pacific, indicating that these are the oldest waters in today's ocean. Taken at face value, this would indicate isolation from the atmosphere for over 2200 years. However, this is an overestimate because the source of this water is from Southern Ocean waters which have not equilibrated isotopically with the atmosphere. Considering this, the age of North Pacific deep water is in the range of 700 to 1000 years. Other basins, such as the North Atlantic, have characteristic over-turning times of 300 years or more. Collectively, these data suggest that outgassing of the 20% of injected carbon would occur on a time-scale of 300 to 1000 years.

The issue of how much carbon will be permanently sequestered away from the atmosphere and how long it will take the remaining fraction to return to the atmosphere has been explored in several modeling

studies. The first studies used relatively simple one-dimensional models. These models are valuable tools for exploring problems that do not depend on geographical particulars. Later, three-dimensional studies have used ocean general circulation models (OGCMs) from the Max Planck Institut für Meteorologie in Hamburg (MPI), the Institut Pierre Simon Laplace (IPSL), and elsewhere. Results of a simulation made at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory are shown in Figure 3. These modeling studies generally confirm inferences based on considerations of ocean chemistry and radiocarbon decay rates. However, the three-dimensional models yield information that is not directly accessible from other sources. For example, model results indicate that for injection at 1500 m depth, the time scale of the partial CO_2 degassing are very sensitive to the location of the injection, but results at 3000 m are relatively insensitive to injection location. Furthermore, present-day models disagree as to the degassing time scale for particular locations. For example, the MPI model predicts that Tokyo would be a better injection site than New York, whereas the IPSL model predicts the opposite. Clearly, three-dimensional models must be improved and carefully evaluated if they are to be useful in siting direct injection facilities.

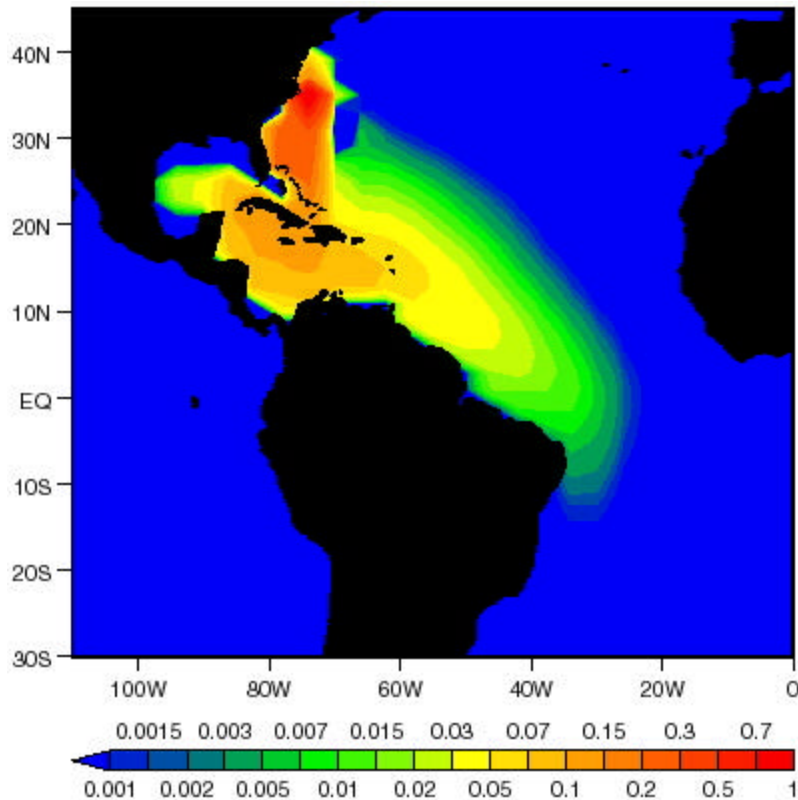


Figure 3. Simulated CO_2 injection at 1750 m depth off the East coast of the United States using a three-dimensional Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory ocean model. The contours represent the concentration of the injected carbon relative to the concentration in the grid cell containing the injection point. Results are for 20 years after the start of injection and at the injection depth, showing the CO_2 is advected southward with the countercurrent running beneath the Gulf Stream.

INJECTION METHODS

Most methods suggested to inject CO₂ into the ocean involve producing relatively pure CO₂ at its source and transporting it to the injection point. Several specific injection strategies that have been suggested are (see Figure 4):

1. **Droplet Plume** - liquid CO₂ injected below 1000 m from a manifold lying on the ocean bottom and forming a rising droplet plume.
2. **Dense Plume** - a dense CO₂-seawater mixture created at a depth of between 500 and 1000 m forming a sinking bottom gravity current.
3. **Dry Ice** - dry ice released at the ocean surface from a ship.
4. **Towed Pipe** - liquid CO₂ injected below 1000 m from a pipe towed by a moving ship and forming a rising droplet plume.
5. **CO₂ Lake** - liquid CO₂ introduced to a sea floor depression forming a stable "deep lake" at a depth of about 4000 m.

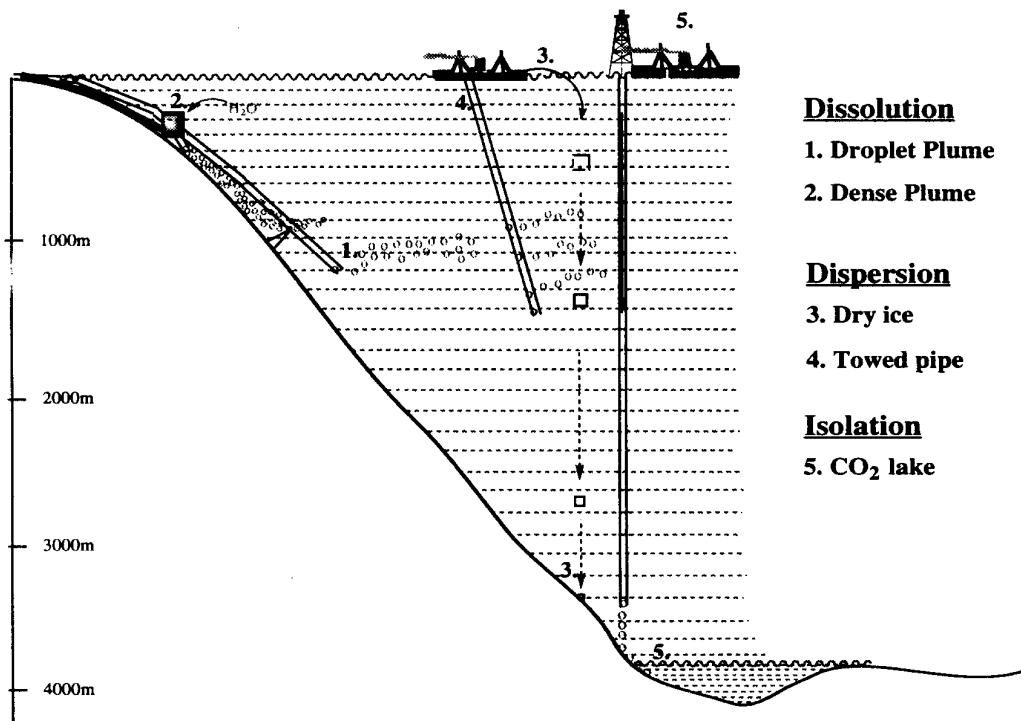


Figure 4. Five suggested methods to inject CO₂ into the deep ocean. Goals are to minimize costs, leakage, and environmental impacts.

To better understand these methods, some background information is required on the CO₂-seawater system. At typical pressures and temperatures that exist in the ocean, pure CO₂ would be a gas above approximately 500 m and a liquid below that depth. In seawater, the liquid would be positively buoyant (i.e., it will rise) down to about 3000 m, but negatively buoyant (i.e., it will sink) below that depth. At about 3700 m, the liquid becomes negatively buoyant compared to seawater saturated with CO₂. In seawater-CO₂ systems, CO₂ hydrate (CO₂•nH₂O, 6<n<8) can form below about 500 m depth depending on the relative compositions of CO₂ and H₂O. CO₂ hydrate is a solid with a density about 10% greater than that of seawater.

The droplet plume and towed pipe methods are probably the most viable in the short-term. Both methods rely on commercially available technology and inject the CO₂ below the thermocline for effective sequestration. In addition, the resulting plumes can be made to have high dilution to minimize any local environmental impacts due to increased CO₂ concentration or reduced pH. Researchers in the US are looking more closely at pipe transport, while Japanese researchers examine ship transport more closely. Although the means of delivery are different, the plumes resulting from these two options would be quite similar.

Figure 5 shows a sketch of two droplet plumes that would result from discharging CO₂ from adjacent ports of a bottom-mounted manifold. Proper design would call for separating the ports so as to minimize interaction between adjacent plumes, illustrated here for conditions with little or no ambient current. Each plume consists of a core of buoyant CO₂ droplets that dissolve as they rise. As the droplets rise, they entrain seawater into the plume. The dissolved CO₂, combined with ambient density stratification, increases the density of the plume water, until it ultimately peels away from the droplets, sinks, and then intrudes into the ambient at a level of neutral buoyancy. The maximum height of rise, the level of intrusion and the concentrations of dissolved CO₂ depend strongly on the flow rate of CO₂ per port, the initial droplet size, and the extent to which hydrates, formed on the droplet-seawater interface, impede mass transfer. The dynamics of hydrate formation are not completely understood, and represent an area of intense current study.

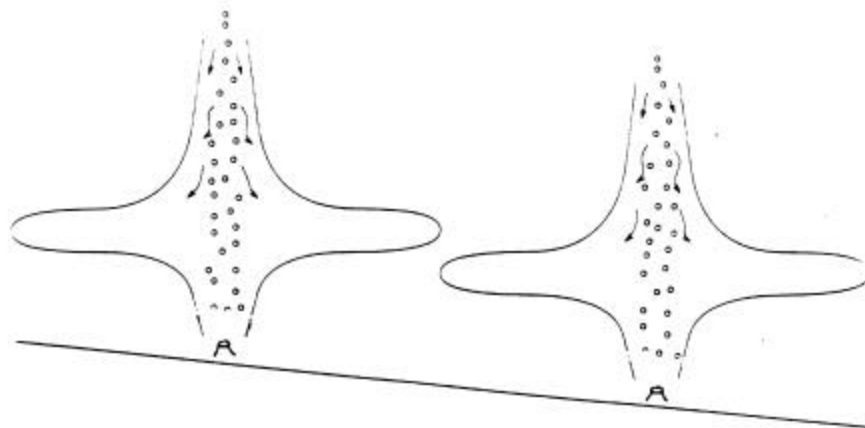


Figure 5. *Schematic of buoyant droplet plumes from adjacent ports of a manifold lying on a sloping seafloor.*

The concept of a CO₂ lake is based on a desire to minimize leakage to the atmosphere and exposure to biota. This would require more advanced technology and perhaps higher costs. Led in part by the oil industry, great strides have been made in undersea off-shore technology. It is becoming routine to work in depths approaching 2000 m. However, technical challenges still exist in going deeper. The depth of the lake must be at least 3000 m, the depth at which CO₂ becomes negatively buoyant (i.e., sinks) in seawater. The CO₂ in the lake would be mostly in the form of solid hydrates. This would slow the dissolution of CO₂ into the water column, further slowing leakage to the atmosphere from that shown in Figure 2, which assumes the CO₂ is injected into the water column.

The two other methods that have been discussed for injecting CO₂ are dry ice released at the ocean surface from a ship and a dense CO₂-seawater mixture created at a depth of between 500 and 1000 m forming a sinking bottom gravity current. The former is probably too expensive due to the production and handling of dry ice, while the latter has many questions concerning environmental impact due to the highly concentrated nature of its plume.

As discussed earlier, the deep-ocean equilibrates with the surface-ocean on the scale of 300 - 1000 years, and by injecting anthropogenic CO₂ into the deep ocean, the surface-to-deep mixing time-scale is effectively bypassed. Anthropogenic CO₂ also equilibrates with carbonate sediments, but over a much longer time, about 6000 years. It has been suggested that technical means could also be used to bypass this time-scale, thereby increasing the effectiveness and diminishing environmental impacts of intentional storage of carbon dioxide in the ocean.

CO₂ reacts with carbonate sediments to form bicarbonate ions (HCO₃⁻) in solution. Seawater could be brought into contact with flue gases in a reactor vessel at a power plant, and that CO₂-rich water could be brought into contact with crushed carbonate minerals, which would then dissolve and form bicarbonate ions. Drawbacks of this approach are the cost due to the need for large amounts of water and carbonate minerals. The principle of carbonate-dissolution could be utilized in conjunction with direct CO₂ injection. Carbonate minerals could be mined on land, and then crushed, or fine-grained lime mud could be extracted from the sea floor. These fine-grain carbonate particles could be suspended in the water column upstream from the CO₂-rich plume emanating from direct CO₂ injection site. The suspended carbonate minerals could then be advected with the ambient seawater into the plume, where the minerals could dissolve, increasing the effectiveness ocean CO₂ storage and diminishing the pH impacts of direct injection.

LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Environmental impacts may be the most significant factor determining the acceptability of ocean storage, since the strategy is predicated on the notion that impacts to the ocean will be significantly less than the avoided impacts of continued emission to the atmosphere. In the Capacity Section above,

environmental impacts were discussed from the global viewpoint. Here, we examine the environmental impacts near the injection point.

Several reviews have identified potential impacts, with the most significant deriving from lowered pH resulting from the reaction of CO₂ with seawater. Impacts would occur principally to non-swimming marine organisms (e.g., zooplankton, bacteria and benthos) residing at depths of about 1000 m or greater and their magnitude will depend on both the level of pH change and the duration of exposure. Figure 6 summarizes data showing that organisms can tolerate small pH excursions for many days, but must limit exposure to larger excursions to a matter of hours. The data shown in Figure 6 involve organisms found in the surface waters. There is a need for similar data on deep water organisms to see if the same pattern holds and whether the deep water organisms are more or less sensitive to pH than those in the surface.

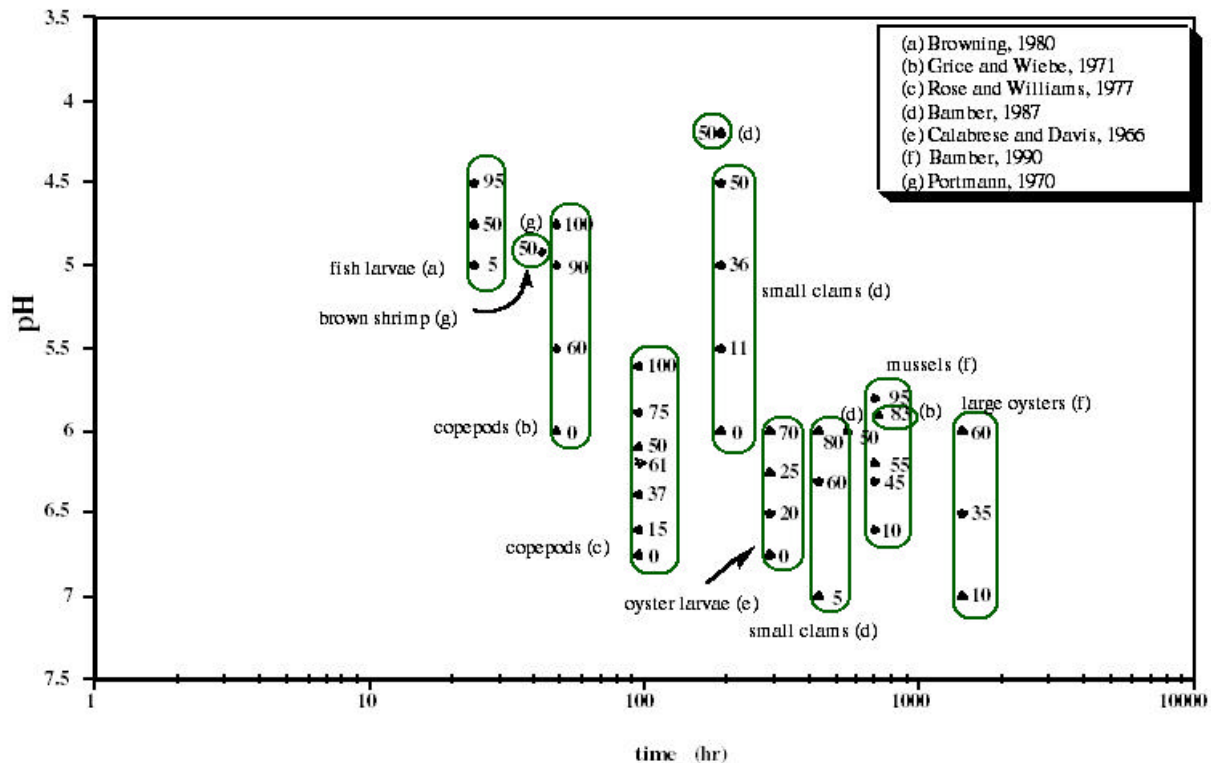


Figure 6. Mortality rates for various marine organisms plotted as a function of pH and time of exposure. The plot show that impacts will depend on both the level of pH change and the duration of exposure.

The pH of seawater which is saturated with CO₂ is less than 4, but an injection system designed to promote efficient mixing would produce minimum pH values of about 7 near the discharge, gradually returning to an ambient value of about 8 away from the injection point. Available data suggest that acute

impacts associated with pH change can be completely avoided if the injection is properly designed to disperse the CO₂ as it dissolves.

The viability of ocean storage as a greenhouse gas mitigation option will also hinge on social and political considerations. In view of public precaution toward the ocean, the strategy will require that all parties (private, public, non-governmental organizations) be included in ongoing research and debate.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

In order for ocean sequestration of CO₂ to become a viable option, much research must be done in the areas of ocean modeling, environmental assessment, engineering analysis, and public outreach. Several significant efforts are underway, but we are just at the beginning of the journey. Listed below is a description of several on-going research efforts into ocean sequestration of CO₂.

DOE Center for Research on Ocean Carbon sequestration (DOCS). DOCS has been established as a center to conduct, focus, and advance the research necessary to evaluate and improve the feasibility, effectiveness and environmental acceptability of ocean carbon sequestration. The Center will address fertilization and direct injection, and other ocean carbon sequestration strategies. It will advance our understanding of the biological, chemical, and physical processes that are critical to the ocean carbon cycle and help us understand the effects of proposed sequestration strategies on this system. The Center is directed by the Lawrence Berkeley and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories. Participants include the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Moss Landing Marine Labs, the Pacific International Center for High Technology Research, Rutgers University and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

International field experiment. Many of the important physical, chemical and biological processes related to ocean sequestration of CO₂ cannot be scaled, which means that more experimental research must eventually be conducted in the field. To this end, Japan, Norway, and the United States signed a Project Agreement for International Collaboration on CO₂ Ocean Sequestration in December 1997; since that time, Canada, Australia, and Switzerland have joined the project. The objective of the project is to investigate the technical feasibility of, and improve understanding of the environmental impacts from, CO₂ ocean sequestration in order to minimize the impacts associated with the eventual use of this technique to reduce greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. The project will continue through March 31, 2002, with a field experiment to take place in the summer of 2001 off the Kona Coast of Hawaii. The implementing research organizations are the Research Institute of Innovative Technology for the Earth (Japan), the Norwegian Institute for Water Research (Norway), and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (United States). The general contractor for the project will be the Pacific International Center for High Technology Research in Hawaii. Based on the results of this effort, a Phase II may be initiated to investigate longer-term acute and chronic biological impacts conducted at a semi-enclosed site such as a fjord.

The CO₂ ocean sequestration project in Japan. In April, 1997, a five year national program looking at ocean sequestration of CO₂ began in Japan. Annual funding is in excess of 10 million USD per year. The lead research institutes for this program are the Research Institute of Innovative Technology for the Earth and the Kansai Environmental Engineering Center. The R&D agenda includes studying the behavior of liquid CO₂ released in the ocean, developing an engineering system for CO₂ injection, assessing the impacts of CO₂ on marine organisms, developing a near field environmental impact assessment model, predicting the long-term fate of the sequestered CO₂, and participation in the international field experiment.

Comparison of ocean carbon cycle models. The International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme initiated the Ocean Carbon-cycle Model Intercomparison Project (OCMIP) in 1995 through the Global Analysis, Interpretation, and Modeling task force. OCMIP is an international project devoted to improving marine carbon cycle models by comparing them with each other and by evaluating them using observational data sets. The European research program on Global Ocean Storage and Anthropogenic Carbon participates in OCMIP and will also look at global scientific aspects of the deep-ocean CO₂ sequestration issue. Specifically, the researchers will compare models of dispersion of CO₂ from seven hypothetical point sources in order to get a better understanding of sequestration efficiency. The U.S. component of OCMIP is positioned to perform the same set of analyses contingent on obtaining funding for this task.

Experiments at the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI). Researchers at MBARI have conducted several small scale field experiments to observe the reaction of CO₂ with seawater at various depths. For example, in April 1998, they carried out a controlled experiment with a 9 liter liquid CO₂ release at a depth of 3650 m (in-situ temperature about 1.6°C) from their ROV *Tiburón*. For several hours they observed the transformation of liquid CO₂ into solid hydrate. Future plans call for a series of biological response experiments.

LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ACRONYMS

CO ₂	Carbon Dioxide
DOCS	DOE Center for Research on Ocean Carbon Sequestration
FCCC	Framework Convention on Climate Change
GtC	Gigatonnes (billion metric tons) Carbon
H ₂ O	Water
HCO ₃ ⁻	Bicarbonate Ion
IPSL	Institut Pierre Simon Laplace
m	meters
MBARI	Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute
MPI	Max Planck Institut für Meteorologie
OCMIP	Ocean Carbon-cycle Model Intercomparison Project
OGCM	Ocean General Circulation Model
ppm	parts per million
ROV	Remotely Operated Vehicle

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