

# The role of CO<sub>2</sub> variability and exposure time for biological impacts of ocean acidification

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[1] Biological impacts of ocean acidification have mostly been studied using future levels of CO<sub>2</sub> without consideration of natural variability or how this modulates both duration and magnitude of CO<sub>2</sub> exposure. Here we combine results from laboratory studies on coral reef fish with diurnal in situ CO<sub>2</sub> data from a shallow coral reef, to demonstrate how natural variability alters exposure times for marine organisms under increasingly high-CO<sub>2</sub> conditions. Large in situ CO<sub>2</sub> variability already results in exposure of coral reef fish to short-term CO<sub>2</sub> levels higher than laboratory-derived critical CO<sub>2</sub> levels (~600  $\mu$ atm). However, we suggest that the in situ exposure time is presently insufficient to induce negative effects observed in laboratory studies. Our results suggest that both exposure time and the magnitude of CO<sub>2</sub> levels will be important in determining the response of organisms to future ocean acidification, where both will increase markedly with future increases in CO<sub>2</sub>. **Citation:** Shaw, E. C., P. L. Munday, and B. I. McNeil (2013), The role of CO<sub>2</sub> variability and exposure time for biological impacts of ocean acidification, *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 40, 4685–4688, doi:10.1002/grl.50883.

## 1. Introduction

[2] There has been a rapid expansion of ocean acidification research over the past decade since *Kleypas et al.* [1999] and *Caldeira and Wickett* [2003] published modeled predictions of how global ocean pH would change as a result of increasing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Annual ocean acidification-related publications increased tenfold from 2004 to 2010, with the majority of publications describing biological effects of changes to seawater chemistry [*Gattuso and Hansson*, 2011]. While perturbation experiments that determine the impacts of ocean acidification on organisms have expanded to include an increasingly large number of different species and life history stages [*Albright*, 2011; *Kroeker et al.*, 2010], the carbonate chemistry levels used in these experiments have mostly been set at some constant future atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> level [*McElhany and Busch*, 2013]. Many of the most vulnerable species to ocean acidification are found in coastal environments that

exhibit large natural variability compared with that of the open ocean [*Hofmann et al.*, 2011; *McElhany and Busch*, 2013]. Large natural variability in CO<sub>2</sub>, whether diurnal or seasonal, has the potential to significantly alter the duration of time that organisms and habitats are exposed to a given CO<sub>2</sub> level in the future. In this study, we seek to first understand and illustrate theoretically how natural variability will modulate CO<sub>2</sub> exposure times for organisms and habitats. We then combine in situ carbonate chemistry data from a coral reef along with the CO<sub>2</sub> levels known to cause behavioral impairments of coral reef fishes, to illustrate how CO<sub>2</sub> exposure times and magnitudes, and the associated biological impacts, will be modulated in the future. Although the data used in this synthesis study are taken from a highly varying shallow coral reef, the implications are important for other marine habitats that have some degree of natural diurnal or seasonal variability in CO<sub>2</sub>.

## 2. How Does Natural Variability Modulate CO<sub>2</sub> Exposure Time?

[3] Partial pressure of CO<sub>2</sub> ( $p$ CO<sub>2</sub>) and pH in coastal marine systems have been found to exhibit large variability on a variety of timescales, indicating that organisms in those environments are exposed to considerable natural temporal and/or spatial variability in carbonate chemistry [*Hofmann et al.*, 2011] (Figure S1 in the supporting information). There are a number of different environments that experience large natural variability. Shallow coral reefs can experience diurnal changes in carbonate chemistry that exceed the predicted end-century open ocean changes [*Santos et al.*, 2011; *Shaw et al.*, 2012]. This is due to high levels of benthic community metabolism, where these changes are diluted with increasing depth, such that deeper reefs do not experience the same magnitude of change [*Bates et al.*, 2001]. Other shallow productive environments, such as sea grass meadows, intertidal and subtidal pools, and rocky reefs, can experience similar, and even larger, natural diurnal variability than coral reefs due to biological metabolism [*Bensoussan and Gattuso*, 2007; *Christensen et al.*, 2011; *Invers et al.*, 1997]. Upwelling of CO<sub>2</sub>-rich waters can also lead to large seasonal increases in seawater  $p$ CO<sub>2</sub> in coastal environments [*Feely et al.*, 2008; *Thomsen et al.*, 2010]. In high-latitude seas, seasonal carbonate chemistry variability occurs in response to seasonal changes in upwelling, biological production, and sea ice melt [*McNeil and Matear*, 2008; *Yamamoto-Kawai et al.*, 2009]. Extreme variability is also observed in estuarine and mangrove environments in response to variability in physical and biological processes [*Chen and Borges*, 2009]. Importantly, the variability in these environments is likely to increase in the future as long-term anthropogenic changes to oceanic CO<sub>2</sub> reduce the ability of the ocean to buffer these natural changes [*Melzner et al.*, 2013; *Schulz and Riebesell*, 2013; *Shaw et al.*, 2013].

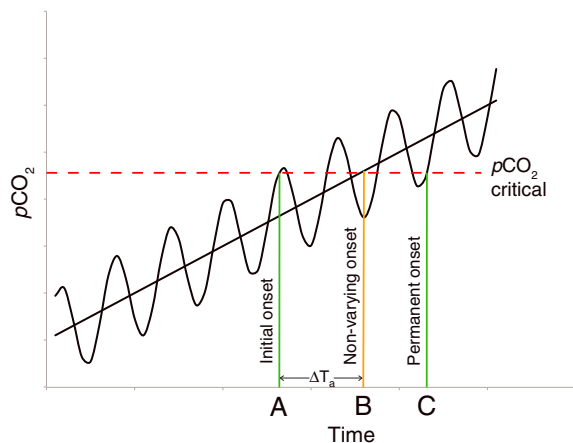
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**Figure 1.** Conceptual diagram of how natural variability in carbonate chemistry modulates the onset of ocean acidification impacts. Black lines show an increasing atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  signal, along with a periodic oceanic natural variability signal (could be diurnal or seasonal). For a given  $p\text{CO}_2$  threshold for which impacts are observed in a species or ecosystem, then natural variability will hasten the initial crossing of this value (initial onset, green line), but delay the amount of time until this level of  $\text{CO}_2$  is permanently crossed (permanent onset, green line), compared with the nonvarying scenario (orange line). For a diurnal signal, the daily exposure beyond a given threshold will increase from  $<1$  h at initial onset to  $\sim 12$  h at nonvarying onset, up until 24 h a day when atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  levels are well beyond the  $p\text{CO}_2$  threshold.

[4] Given the large natural variability that has been observed in many marine habitats, it is important to understand how these short-term variations will combine with the long-term average increases in atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  over the coming century. Figure 1 shows an idealized marine habitat subject to both short-term natural variability and long-term average increases in atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$ . Added is a critical  $p\text{CO}_2$  threshold, which can be thought of as a known biological impact level for  $\text{CO}_2$  on a species, as determined in the laboratory or elsewhere.

[5] In a naturally varying marine environment subject to long-term atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  increases, the onset and exposure times of biological thresholds for  $p\text{CO}_2$  vary significantly over a considerable time period (Figure 1). Natural variability brings forward the initial onset of a critical  $p\text{CO}_2$  threshold by  $\Delta T_a$  (Figure 1). At this time point (time A), the  $p\text{CO}_2$  critical threshold is reached despite average  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels being lower than the critical level. If a diurnal signal, the initial exposure time maybe an hour or two during each day; while if seasonal in nature, it could be a month or two [McNeil and Matear, 2008].

[6] As atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  continues to increase in this variable marine environment, at some point, the average  $p\text{CO}_2$  matches the critical  $p\text{CO}_2$  level (i.e., time B). However, the  $\text{CO}_2$  exposure time in the naturally variable habitat differs from a nonvarying environment, whereby for approximately half of the time  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels will be above and half of the time below the critical  $p\text{CO}_2$  threshold in the varying habitat. This is critically important, since the high- $\text{CO}_2$  levels used in most laboratory experiments are nonvarying [McElhany and Busch, 2013]. Exposing marine organisms to permanently high  $\text{CO}_2$  without regard to the in situ reality that for up to

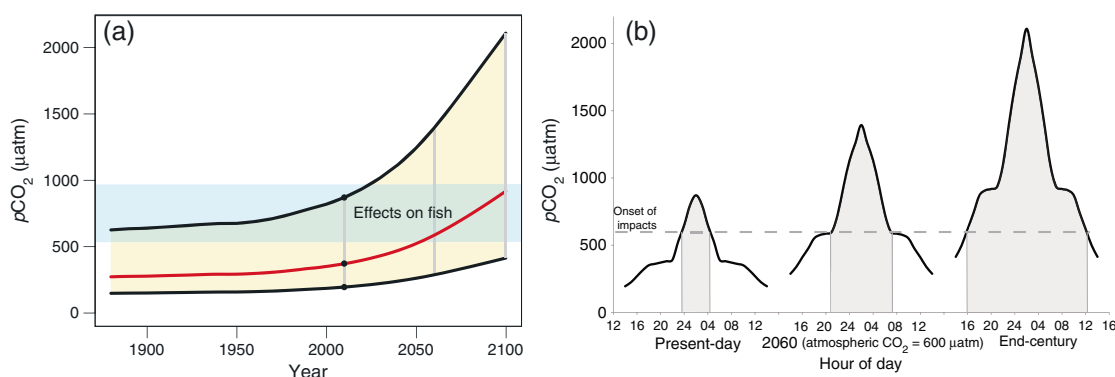
half of the time, the organisms could be exposed to  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels below the critical level could lead to misleading biological results. Eventually, with increases in atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$ , the anthropogenic change moves beyond the magnitude of natural variability, whereby exposure time for a marine environment is permanently above the critical threshold (i.e., time C). In reality, most experimental studies have been examining the impacts of marine organisms when subject to this permanent condition, rather than a varying  $\text{CO}_2$  exposure.

### 3. Real-World Example: $\text{CO}_2$ Exposure Times for Coral Reef Fish in a Naturally Varying Habitat

[7] To illustrate a real-world example, we use in situ carbonate chemistry data for a coral reef flat at Lady Elliot Island (LEI) in the Great Barrier Reef [Shaw *et al.*, 2012], combined with laboratory knowledge of biological  $p\text{CO}_2$  thresholds for coral reef fish species that are known to inhabit this habitat. By combining both the chemical and biological data, we seek to demonstrate how natural variability significantly alters exposure times for these coral reef fish under high  $\text{CO}_2$  conditions.  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels at LEI were observed to range from 70 to 1325  $\mu\text{atm}$ , driven primarily by reef metabolic processes (photosynthesis/respiration and calcification/dissolution) at shallow depth [Shaw *et al.*, 2012]. Presently,  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels on the reef flat vary from a mean minimum daily value of  $\sim 200$   $\mu\text{atm}$  to a mean maximum of  $\sim 900$   $\mu\text{atm}$ . By end-century under higher  $\text{CO}_2$  levels, the same metabolic processes that drive natural variability at LEI will result in a predicted daily  $p\text{CO}_2$  range of 400–2100  $\mu\text{atm}$ , with the amplification in  $p\text{CO}_2$  range occurring as a result of the decline in seawater buffer capacity [Shaw *et al.*, 2013] (Figure 2a).

[8] Meanwhile, laboratory experiments on a number of coral reef fishes (e.g., clownfish, damselfish, and cardinal fish) have shown significant impairment of behavioral and sensory performance at  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels of 550–950  $\mu\text{atm}$ , levels within the present range of natural variability (Figure 2a). Abnormalities include increased boldness and activity [Munday *et al.*, 2010], loss of behavioral lateralization [Domenici *et al.*, 2012], altered auditory preferences [Simpson *et al.*, 2011], and impaired olfactory function [Cripps *et al.*, 2011; Dixon *et al.*, 2010; Munday *et al.*, 2009], the latter affecting predator-prey interactions, habitat selection, and homing ability [Allan *et al.*, 2013; Cripps *et al.*, 2011; Devine *et al.*, 2012; Ferrari *et al.*, 2011; Munday *et al.*, 2010].

[9] Given the known  $p\text{CO}_2$  impact threshold for these coral reef fish ( $\sim 600$   $\mu\text{atm}$ ), how does the daily exposure times for this threshold vary as atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  levels increase? The coral reef fish at the LEI reef flat are presently exposed to  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels of  $\geq 600$   $\mu\text{atm}$  for  $\sim 5$  h per day, which will increase to  $\sim 21$  h per day by end-century (Figure 2b). Furthermore, the magnitude of  $\text{CO}_2$  exposure will be considerably higher by end-century (Figure 2). However, although laboratory evidence suggests that biological impacts for coral reef fish start at 600  $\mu\text{atm}$ , our results from LEI show that even when atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  reaches this level (year 2060), seawater  $\text{CO}_2$  levels in this particular coral reef will be below this known biological threshold for  $\sim 12$ – $14$  h of each day (levels ranging from 290 to 600  $\mu\text{atm}$ ) (Figure 2b). This example demonstrates how exposure time significantly varies and evolves into the future for marine organisms living in naturally variable habitats.



**Figure 2.** The  $p\text{CO}_2$  magnitude and exposure at Lady Elliot Island (Great Barrier Reef). (a)  $p\text{CO}_2$  natural variability measured in 2010 (black dots) and future projections [Shaw *et al.*, 2013]. Minimum and maximum reef flat projections are in black, and the mean open ocean projection is in red. Years 2010 (~present), 2060, and 2100 (end-century) are indicated with gray lines.  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels at which negative responses in coral reef fish have been observed are indicated. (b) Diurnal variability in  $\text{CO}_2$  exposure magnitude for a given day for present, 2060 (atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  level of 600 µatm), and end-century. Shaded areas show the number of hours per day above critical  $\text{CO}_2$  level for which impacts have been observed in coral reef fish.

#### 4. Discussion

[10] Toxicological studies show that the response of an organism to a stressor is dependent on both the magnitude and duration of exposure. Our biological understanding of ocean acidification impacts has been focused on the semipermanent chronic changes that are unfolding in a high- $\text{CO}_2$  world. Due to a paucity of measurements, our understanding of the biological processes during natural short-term (diurnal to seasonal) marine  $\text{CO}_2$  events has been lacking. However, these events can result in acute exposure to  $\text{CO}_2$  levels that are of equal or greater magnitude and severity to those predicted from anthropogenic ocean acidification and can provide new insights into species resilience.

[11] The same species of fish that experienced impairment of behavior and sensory performance in the laboratory at  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels of 550–950 µatm likely inhabit shallow reef flats that already have short-term  $\text{CO}_2$  levels of up to 1300 µatm. We suggest that this is possible because the duration of exposure to high  $\text{CO}_2$  is presently insufficient to induce the physiological changes responsible for behavioral and sensory impairment. Munday *et al.* [2010] demonstrated that behavioral effects of high  $\text{CO}_2$  take 24–96 h to manifest for coral reef fish, depending on the  $\text{CO}_2$  level experienced. In a recent study, Nilsson *et al.* [2012] showed that changes to ion concentrations in the tissues of fish exposed to high  $\text{CO}_2$  are responsible for the diverse effects of high  $\text{CO}_2$  on behavior and sensory abilities of marine fish. When exposed to high  $\text{CO}_2$ , fish regulate the concentration of acid-base relevant ions (primarily  $\text{HCO}_3^-$  and  $\text{Cl}^-$ ) to maintain blood and tissue pH despite higher blood  $p\text{CO}_2$ . These changes in ion concentrations interfere with brain neurotransmitters, causing abnormal responses to sensory cues. Importantly, restoration of acid-base is usually achieved over a period of 8–48 h [Brauner and Baker, 2009; Esbaugh *et al.*, 2012]. Therefore, the ionic changes responsible for behavioral impairment occur on a longer timescale than the short-term extremes of high  $\text{CO}_2$  that are naturally experienced on the reef (1–6 h). This mismatch between timescales may help explain why behavioral impairment does not occur in fish currently living in shallow reef habitats. While fish likely experience some level of respiratory acidosis and alkalosis

during routine short-term fluctuations in  $\text{CO}_2$  on the reef, the duration of exposure to high  $\text{CO}_2$  may not be currently sufficient to induce the serious neurological effects that occur as a result of longer-term exposure to high  $\text{CO}_2$ .

[12] Variable  $\text{CO}_2$  exposure times also provide important insight into the vulnerability of marine organisms to future ocean acidification. Populations from highly variable environments may be more tolerant to future high  $p\text{CO}_2$  than populations from less variable environments [Melzner *et al.*, 2009]. However, the timescale of exposure is an important consideration; organisms may not respond to high  $p\text{CO}_2$  on the timescale that natural variability operates (diurnal timescale in this case) but may respond with longer-term exposure to high  $p\text{CO}_2$ . We show that coral reef fish at the study site are presently exposed to  $p\text{CO}_2$  levels of  $\geq 600$  µatm for ~5 h per day but that by end-century, this will increase to ~21 h per day (Figure 2b). Furthermore, the magnitude of  $\text{CO}_2$  exposure will be considerably higher by end-century (Figure 2). This is important as the duration of time to the onset of a response has been shown in a number of toxicological studies to be inversely related to the magnitude of exposure [Rozman, 1999, and references therein]. This has already been observed with  $\text{CO}_2$  perturbation experiments on fish, where the onset of negative impacts of  $\text{CO}_2$  has been shown to be shorter at higher exposure concentration [Munday *et al.*, 2010]. While populations of species that inhabit variable environments may be more resilient to increases in  $p\text{CO}_2$ , these populations will also experience more extreme conditions in the future via the nonlinear amplification of the maximum  $p\text{CO}_2$  values (Figure 2) [Shaw *et al.*, 2013].

#### 5. Conclusions

[13] As ocean acidification research has evolved, it has become apparent that there is large variability in the carbonate chemistry that many organisms experience, either for part or all of their life history, and that this will influence their vulnerability to future ocean acidification. Our work seeks to show how naturally varying environments will significantly modulate the onset of certain future  $p\text{CO}_2$  thresholds for marine organisms. By using both theoretical and in situ data, we conclude that exposure time for  $\text{CO}_2$  could be just

as important as the magnitude of ocean acidification itself in understanding how marine species will respond to a high CO<sub>2</sub> world. Future work will be required to determine more quantitatively how exposure to natural variability influences resilience and to improve our understanding of the interaction between the magnitude of pCO<sub>2</sub> exposure and the duration, where both the exposure time to critical CO<sub>2</sub> levels as well as the magnitude of CO<sub>2</sub> exposure will increase with increasing anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

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