

Ocean dynamics, not dust, have controlled equatorial Pacific productivity over the past 500,000 years

Gisela Winckler^{a,b,1}, Robert F. Anderson^{a,b}, Samuel L. Jaccard^{c,d}, and Franco Marcantonio^e

^aLamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, Columbia University, Palisades, NY 10964; ^bDepartment of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027; ^cInstitute of Geological Sciences, University of Bern, 3012 Bern, Switzerland; ^dOeschger Center for Climate Change Research, University of Bern, 3012 Bern, Switzerland; and ^eDepartment of Geology and Geophysics, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843

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Biological productivity in the equatorial Pacific is relatively high compared with other low-latitude regimes, especially east of the dateline, where divergence driven by the trade winds brings nutrient-rich waters of the Equatorial Undercurrent to the surface. The equatorial Pacific is one of the three principal high-nutrient low-chlorophyll ocean regimes where biological utilization of nitrate and phosphate is limited, in part, by the availability of iron. Throughout most of the equatorial Pacific, upwelling of water from the Equatorial Undercurrent supplies far more dissolved iron than is delivered by dust, by as much as two orders of magnitude. Nevertheless, recent studies have inferred that the greater supply of dust during ice ages stimulated greater utilization of nutrients within the region of upwelling on the equator, thereby contributing to the sequestration of carbon in the ocean interior. Here we present proxy records for dust and for biological productivity over the past 500 ky at three sites spanning the breadth of the equatorial Pacific Ocean to test the dust fertilization hypothesis. Dust supply peaked under glacial conditions, consistent with previous studies, whereas proxies of export production exhibit maxima during ice age terminations. Temporal decoupling between dust supply and biological productivity indicates that other factors, likely involving ocean dynamics, played a greater role than dust in regulating equatorial Pacific productivity.

climate change | export production | iron fertilization | carbon | eolian dust

Spanning nearly half the circumference of Earth, the equatorial Pacific represents one of the ocean's largest biogeographic provinces (1). Discovery of prominent Pleistocene cycles of carbonate (CaCO_3) abundance in equatorial Pacific sediments in the 1950s (2) launched one of the longest-running debates in paleoceanography. Arrhenius (2, 3) inferred that maxima in CaCO_3 abundance reflected greater biological productivity under ice age conditions, when intensification of the trade winds caused by steeper meridional global temperature gradients generated enhanced nutrient supply by upwelling. This view has been supported by a variety of complementary approaches, often based on the accumulation rate of organic carbon in equatorial Pacific sediments (e.g., refs. 4–7). On the other hand, studies involving microfossil preservation indices (8), spatial patterns of CaCO_3 accumulation (9, 10), and B/Ca ratios in benthic foraminifera as an indicator of carbonate ion concentration (11) have inferred a primary control on CaCO_3 cycles by varying deep ocean chemistry, which regulates CaCO_3 preservation, leaving unresolved the question of past variability of equatorial Pacific productivity and the conditions that regulate it.

A plausible role for dust in affecting productivity (e.g., refs. 12 and 13) can be invoked based on the following. First, biological utilization of major nutrients is limited by some other factor, especially in the eastern and central equatorial Pacific (14) where nutrients upwelled at the equator may spread poleward at the surface by more than five degrees of latitude before being completely consumed (15). Second, mesoscale iron (Fe) enrichment experiments have been shown to stimulate phytoplankton growth in the equatorial Pacific (16, 17). Lastly, the supply of dust, a source of Fe, was globally higher during the ice ages than during interglacials

(18, 19), potentially reducing the growth-limiting effect of Fe deficiency.

Here, we evaluate the link between biological productivity and dust supply by establishing whether or not there were systematic changes in biological productivity throughout the past five glacial cycles, and whether these changes in productivity correlated with dust supply, as expected for the dust fertilization hypothesis.

Results and Discussion

We track dust flux and biological productivity, measured in the same sediment cores from the eastern equatorial Pacific [Ocean Drilling Program (ODP) site 849; 0.2°N, 110.5°W (19), this study] across the central equatorial Pacific [TT013-PC72; 0.1°N, 139.4°W (19–21)] to the western equatorial Pacific [RNDP74; 0.3°N, 159.4°E (22)] (Fig. 1 and Table S1). We primarily use the accumulation rate of excess barium (Ba_{xs} ; see *Materials and Methods*) to reconstruct changes in export production, the flux of organic matter produced by biological productivity that rains from the euphotic zone to the deep ocean (Fig. 2). At one of the sites, TT013-PC72 in the central equatorial Pacific, where a record of opal, an independent proxy of export production, is available (13, 23), the accumulation rate of Ba_{xs} follows closely the accumulation rate of opal over the past 500 ky ($r = 0.7$, $P < 0.001$, Fig. S1). As the preservation of Ba_{xs} and opal are both variable and sensitive to multiple, but different, environmental factors, the correspondence of the two proxy records strongly supports their interpretation here as a robust representation of changes in export production (see also *Supporting Information*).

Throughout the past five glacial cycles, dust fluxes (reconstructed from accumulation rates of ^{232}Th ; see *Materials and Methods*) at the three sites are closely correlated with $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ of foraminifera, which primarily tracks global ice volume (Fig. 2).

Significance

The equatorial Pacific is a key oceanographic region in Earth's climate system. Biological production in this region is limited, in part, by the lack of the micronutrient iron. Atmospheric dust is a source of iron, as is upwelling of ocean waters from below. A longstanding question has been whether biological productivity has responded to variable dust supply over ice age cycles. We use geochemical proxies in three sediment cores spanning the breadth of the equatorial Pacific to show that biological productivity did not respond to dustier ice age conditions. Rather than atmospheric iron supply, we infer that ocean dynamics, linking the equatorial Pacific to nutrient supply from the Southern Ocean, played a crucial role in regulating equatorial Pacific productivity.

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¹To whom correspondence should be addressed. Email: winckler@ldeo.columbia.edu.

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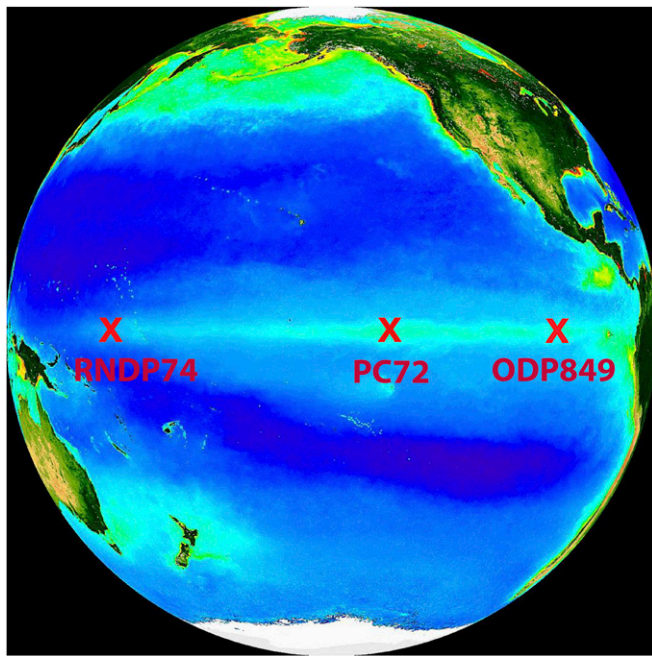


Fig. 1. Location of the three cores from the equatorial Pacific. Background map shows the surface water phytoplankton pigment concentration (oceancolor.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEAWIFS), which is interpreted to reflect primary production.

Dust fluxes are consistently about 2.5 times larger at peak glacial conditions than during interglacial periods (19, 20).

Whereas Ba_{xs} accumulation rates show variability of a factor of 2 at each of the sites, we do not observe systematically greater export production during glacial periods. Accumulation rates of Ba_{xs} are not correlated with dust flux (Fig. 2; for scatter plots, see Fig. S2). Given that we do not observe a systematic response of export production to greater ice age supply of dust, we reject the dust fertilization hypothesis for the equatorial Pacific.

The lack of a productivity response to changing dust fluxes is consistent with our understanding of the Fe budget in the present-day equatorial Pacific. Iron may be supplied to the euphotic zone from advective and diffusive processes within the ocean as well as by atmospheric deposition of mineral dust to the ocean surface. Iron contribution by upwelling (Fig. 3, Fig. S3, and Supporting Information) is found to be consistently much higher than eolian-derived Fe contributions, identifying upwelling from the Equatorial Undercurrent (EUC) as the principal source of Fe to the surface waters across most of the equatorial Pacific (24–26). Iron supply from upwelling is a factor of 20–100 greater than eolian sources for much of the central/eastern equatorial Pacific centered around site TT013-PC72 at 140°W (~160°W to 115°W). In the western equatorial Pacific (~160°E), where eolian input is higher, and at the eastern end of our transect (110°W), where dissolved Fe concentrations are lower, Fe input from upwelling is about a factor of 7–10 higher than eolian supply. Possible changes in the upwelling source or rate, as a result of changing ocean circulation, are therefore more likely to impact dissolved Fe supply to the surface ocean than the recorded 2.5-fold increase in dust-bound Fe deposition during glacials.

The dominant control on Fe supply by upwelling rather than dust holds true for past climates, as shown by the lack of a correlation ($r = 0.11$, $P = 0.16$, Fig. S4) between $\delta^{18}O$ and the accumulation rate of Fe (27) at TT013-PC72. Further support comes from the Fe/Th record at core TT013-PC72 (Fig. 3). Bulk sediment Fe/Th ratios are closely correlated to the ^{232}Th flux (Fig. 3B) and show cyclical variability between typical crustal

Fe/Th ratios [$\sim 3,200$ (28)] at maximum glacial conditions, when eolian input was the highest, and increased Fe/Th ratios during interglacial times. The enriched Fe/Th ratio requires an additional Fe source independent from eolian input, and we interpret this source to be upwelled dissolved Fe from the EUC, with a possible contribution from Papua New Guinea (PNG) volcanics carried eastward across the equatorial Pacific.

At TT013-PC72, multiple linear regression modeling of trace element and isotope data shows an upper limit for the contribution to total lithogenic deposition from PNG volcanics of 30% during the Holocene, and a much lower contribution during the Last Glacial Maximum and earlier glacial stages (29). In the following, we consider two limiting end-member scenarios to estimate the supply of Fe by upwelling (Fig. 3C and Supporting Information). For a constant maximum PNG lithogenic input, the best fit to the 500-ky time series Fe and Th data at 140°W requires a source of dissolved Fe from upwelling of $117 \pm 7 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{y}^{-1}$. Assuming no PNG supply of lithogenic material, the best fit corresponds to $167 \pm 8 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{y}^{-1}$. This sediment-based estimated range of dissolved Fe from upwelling by the EUC (Fig. 3C) is consistent with the modern hydrographic constraints of Fe upwelling (gray box at 140°W in Fig. 3A) and provides independent support for upwelling rather than dust as the dominant control on Fe supply in the equatorial Pacific.

The main feature in the record of export production across the equatorial Pacific is repeated increases in export productivity centered at glacial terminations (I, II, and IV; Figs. 4 and 2). Deglacial productivity maxima are consistent with previously observed peaks in opal flux at glacial terminations in the central equatorial Pacific (23) and similar findings, based on diatom/coccolithophore ratios (30) and carbon burial rates (31) in the easternmost equatorial Pacific.

Phytoplankton growth and utilization of nitrate (NO_3) and phosphate (PO_4) in the equatorial Pacific are colimited by Fe and by Si (32). Most of the Fe and all of the macronutrients (N, P, and Si) supplied to equatorial Pacific phytoplankton are delivered by upwelling of nutrient-rich water from the EUC. Therefore, the deglacial productivity maxima must reflect either an increase in the nutrient content of EUC water or an increase in the rate at which EUC water is upwelled into the euphotic zone.

Is there any evidence for increased nutrient concentrations of the EUC during the deglaciation? Most of the nutrients that fuel biological productivity in the tropical ocean, including the equatorial Pacific, originate in the Southern Ocean, where a portion of the nutrient-rich deep water that upwells south of the Antarctic Polar Front (APF) mixes northward to be entrained into Subantarctic Mode Water (SAMW), thereby feeding the upper thermocline nutrient source to low latitudes (33, 34). A southward displacement of the southern westerly winds, thought to have been responsible for the deglacial increase in upwelling of deep water south of the APF (35), would also have raised the nutrient content of SAMW based on historical observations (36). Silicon isotope records from core sites in the New Zealand sector of the Southern Ocean indicate higher nutrient concentrations in the SAMW source regions during the last deglaciation (37). At sites in the easternmost equatorial Pacific, east of 90°W, a deglacial peak in the nutrient content of EUC water during the last three ice age terminations has been inferred from the carbon isotope composition of thermocline-dwelling planktonic foraminifera (38, 39). The Nd isotope composition of the foraminifera from the same site indicates an increase in supply of Southern Ocean water to the EUC coincident with the rise in nutrient concentration (40).

Support for increased rates of upwelling during deglacial periods of greater export production, concurrently with a rise in the nutrient content of EUC water, comes from observations of the spatial and temporal variability of sea surface temperature at eastern equatorial Pacific sites (31, 41). Similarly, the nitrogen isotope composition of sedimentary organic matter in the eastern equatorial Pacific indicates a deglacial minimum in nitrate utilization coinciding with maximum export production,

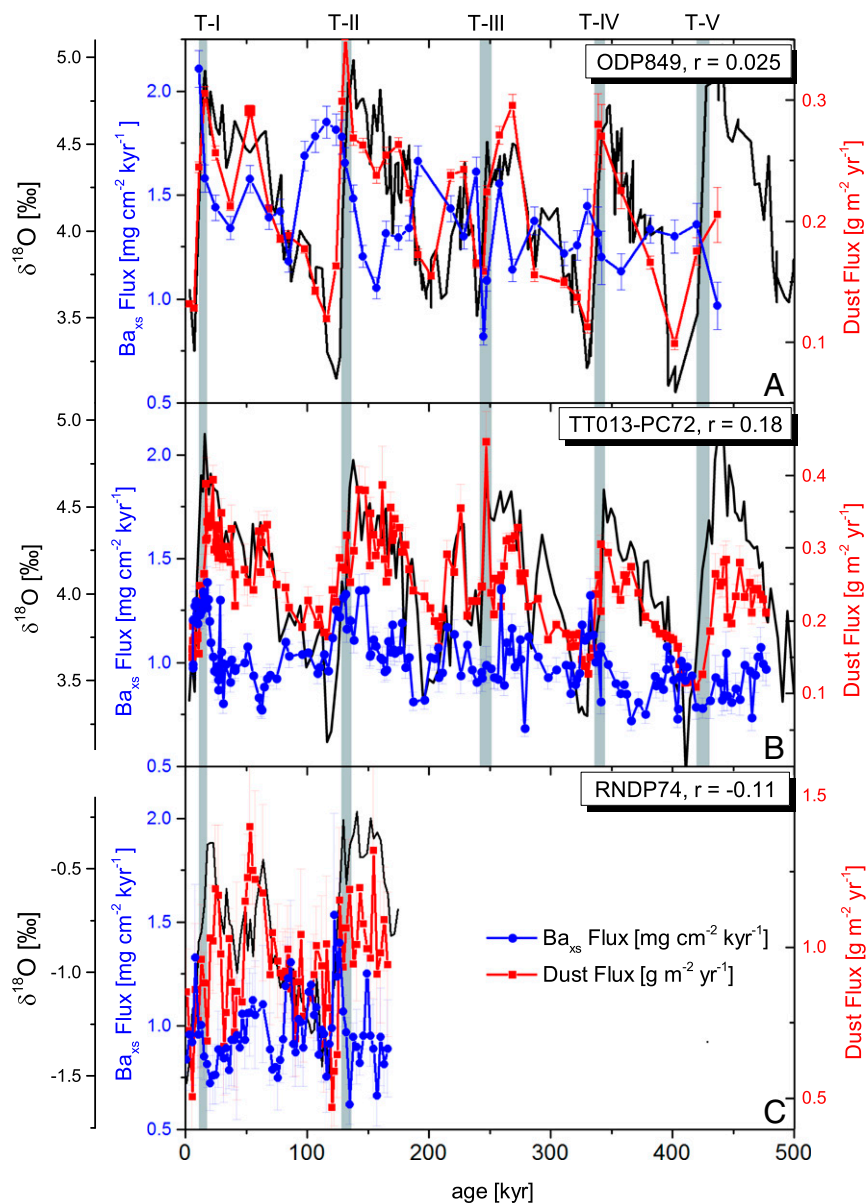


Fig. 2. Accumulation rates ($^{230}\text{Th}_{\text{xs}}$ -normalized fluxes) of excess barium (Ba_{xs} , blue) and dust (red) at the three sites across the equatorial Pacific: (A) ODP site 849, (B) TT013-PC72, and (C) RNDP74. Dust fluxes are converted from $^{230}\text{Th}_{\text{xs}}$ -normalized ^{232}Th fluxes by dividing by the average ^{232}Th concentration of upper continental crust (10.7 ppm; see *Materials and Methods*). Accumulation rates of Ba_{xs} are not correlated with dust flux [correlation coefficients of the Ba_{xs} and dust flux time series are 0.025 ($P = 0.88$), 0.18 ($P = 0.014$), and -0.11 ($P = 0.37$) in the eastern, central, and western Pacific, respectively]. The oxygen isotope records (black lines, y axis not reversed) are included for reference and define the glacial terminations as periods of rapid decrease in $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ (highlighted in gray bars).

a situation that requires an increase in supply of nutrients by upwelling (42).

The evidence for both increased nutrient content and increased upwelling is limited to observations from sites in the easternmost equatorial Pacific; unfortunately, corresponding proxy records are not available for our sites. Nevertheless, as the EUC supplies a uniform source of water, corresponding to uniform forcing throughout the upwelling system, we infer that the changes presented above for the easternmost equatorial Pacific likely extended to the entire central and eastern equatorial Pacific. Consequently, both factors, increased nutrient content of EUC water as well as increased rates of upwelling, likely contributed to the deglacial maxima in export production.

Although upwelled nutrients are not used immediately in the equatorial Pacific, they are eventually consumed completely and

exported to depth as organic matter as surface waters mix poleward. Consequently, the biological pump in the equatorial Pacific is operating at full efficiency when integrated over appropriate temporal and spatial scales (15, 43). Neither natural variability of Fe sources in the past nor purposeful addition of Fe to equatorial Pacific surface water today, proposed as a mechanism for mitigating the anthropogenic increase in atmospheric CO_2 inventory, would have a significant impact on atmospheric pCO_2 .

Materials and Methods

Reconstruction of Dust Supply. We use common thorium (^{232}Th), a trace element enriched in continental crust and low in basaltic volcanic material, as a tracer for lithogenic material, which, for cores far enough away from the continental margins, exclusively reflects eolian dust supply (19, 44). As ^{232}Th has very similar concentrations in dust sources from around the world, we

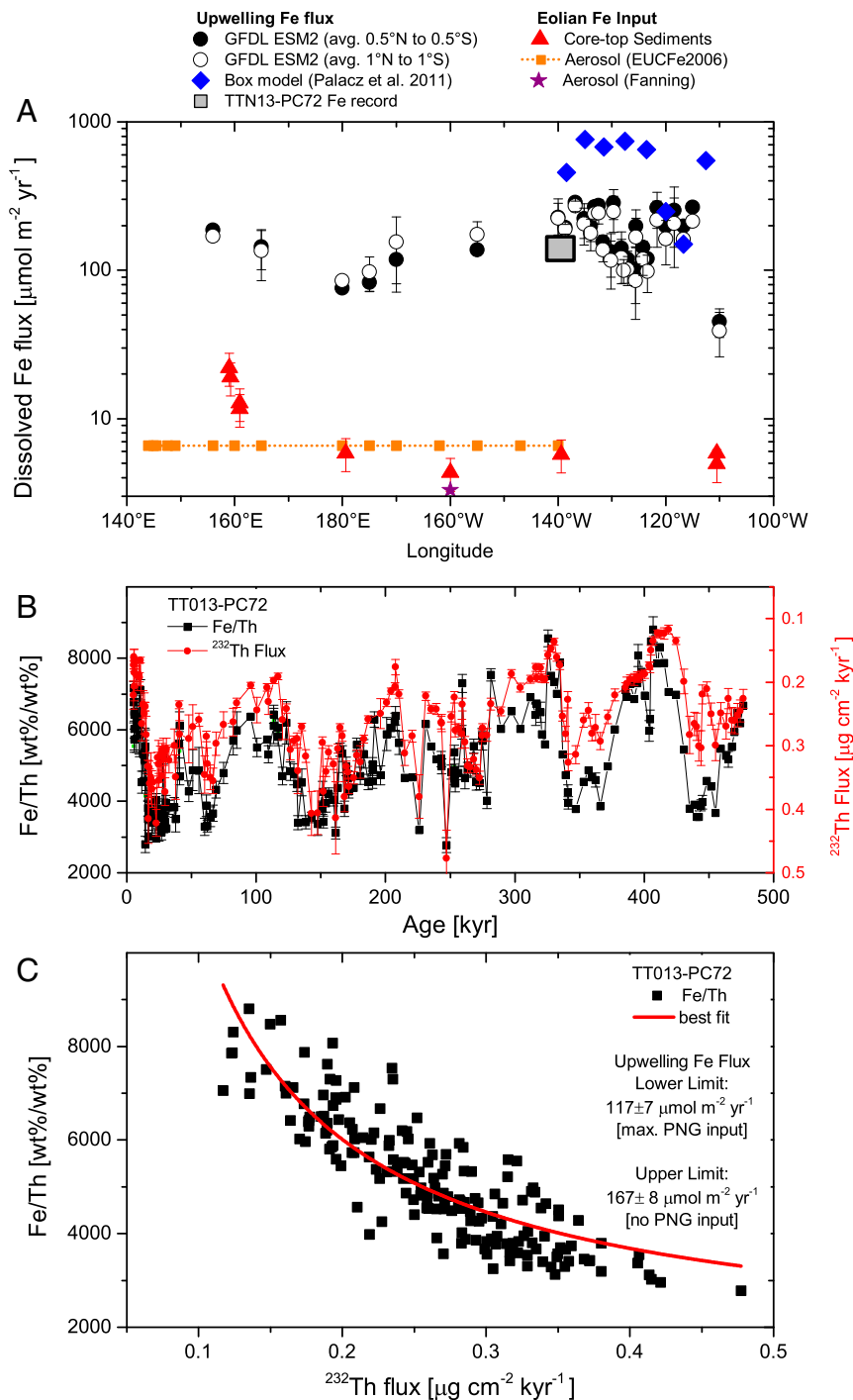


Fig. 3. Iron budget of the equatorial Pacific. (A) Compilation of upwelled Fe fluxes (using Fe concentration data from refs. 26 and 48 and vertical velocities from ref. 49; box model results from ref. 50) and eolian Fe fluxes [aerosol data from ref. 51 and Shank and Johansen (2008),* as cited in ref. 48; for details on core top sediment data compilation, see [Supporting Information](#)] illustrating that, over much of the equatorial Pacific, the input of Fe to surface waters from upwelling is much higher than that from eolian input. (B) Time series records of bulk sediment Fe/Th ratios (black) and ^{232}Th fluxes (red) at site TT013-PC72 over the past 500 ky. (C) The relationship between Fe/Th ratio and ^{232}Th fluxes reflects mixing of an eolian component, upwelling Fe from the EUC, and possible influence from PNG. The fit (see [Supporting Information](#) for details) requires EUC upwelling Fe fluxes between $117 \pm 7 \mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{yr}^{-1}$ [assuming an upper limit (29) of PNG lithogenic ^{232}Th input of $0.015 \mu\text{g m}^{-2} \text{kyr}^{-1}$, assumed to be constant over the past 500 ky], and $167 \pm 8 \mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{yr}^{-1}$ (assuming no sediment input from PNG). This range of upwelling Fe supply (gray square in A) is consistent with modern hydrographic estimates of Fe upwelling fluxes.

convert to dust mass fluxes by dividing by the average ^{232}Th concentration of upper continental crust (UCC), 10.7 ppm (28).

Reconstruction of Export Production. We use Ba_{xs} and opal to reconstruct variability in export production. The flux to the seabed of Ba_{xs} , the fraction of

*Shank LM, Johansen AM (2008) Atmospheric trace metal and labile iron deposition fluxes to the equatorial Pacific during EUCFe2006. Ocean Sciences Meeting, March 2–7, 2008, Orlando, FL.

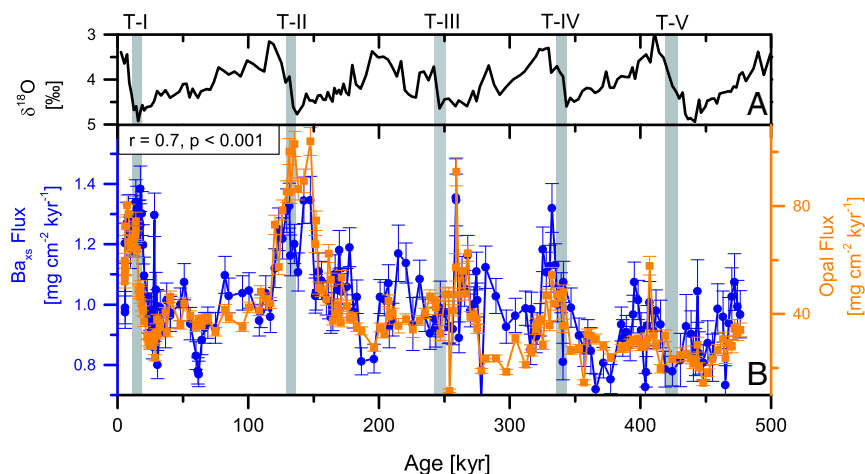


Fig. 4. Sedimentary records from the central equatorial Pacific site TT013-PC72. (A) Oxygen isotope record of benthic foraminifera (27); (B) $^{230}\text{Th}_{\text{xs}}$ -normalized accumulation rates of excess barium (Ba data from ref. 21) and opal (opal data from ref. 23) illustrating deglacial peaks in export production at glacial Terminations I, II, and IV.

Ba that is not associated with lithogenic input, has been empirically shown to be strongly related to export production (e.g., refs. 45–47), because barite forms within aggregates of decomposing organic matter. Excess barium was calculated by subtracting the lithogenic Ba from the total Ba concentration using a $(\text{Ba}/\text{Al})_{\text{terrigeneous}}$ ratio of 0.0075 (46). Corrections for the terrigenous fraction are <1.5% at ODP site 849, <2.5% at TT013-PC72, and 3–8% at RNDP74 of the total measured barium in the sediments.

We present new Ba_{xs} data from ODP site 849 and integrate these with previously published U/Th data (19), as well as previously published Fe (27), Ba (21), and opal (23) data from site TT013-PC72, and Ba data from RNDP74 (22). Barium at ODP site 849 was measured by inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry by isotope dilution at Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory (LDEO). Data will be made available through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration paleoclimatological data archive (National Climatic Data Center).

Reconstruction of Accumulation Rates. Accumulation rates of sedimentary constituents (Ba_{xs} , opal, Fe, ^{232}Th) were calculated using the $^{230}\text{Th}_{\text{xs}}$ method (for more details, see [Supporting Information](#)). Briefly, ^{230}Th is produced in the water column by the decay of ^{234}U at a known and constant rate. Thorium has

a short residence time in the water column (20–40 y); it is adsorbed rapidly to settling particles and deposited in sediments at a rate that is fast relative to the timescale of lateral advection. Its scavenged flux to the seafloor can be assumed to be approximately equal to its known production rate in the overlying water column. Fluxes of sedimentary constituents (e.g., Ba_{xs} , opal, Fe, ^{232}Th) were calculated as the product of the concentration of the constituent, [i], and the $^{230}\text{Th}_{\text{xs}}$ -derived mass accumulation rate.

Statistical Correlation. Correlations between time series are indicated by Pearson's correlation coefficient (r).

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