Focus on the impact of climate change on wetland ecosystems and carbon dynamics

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Abstract

The renewed growth in atmospheric methane (CH₄) since 2007 after a decade of stabilization has drawn much attention to its causes and future trends. Wetlands are the single largest source of atmospheric CH₄. Understanding wetland ecosystems and carbon dynamics is critical to the estimation of global CH₄ and carbon budgets. After approximately 7 years of CH₄ related research following the renewed growth in atmospheric CH₄, Environmental Research Letters launched a special issue of research letters on wetland ecosystems and carbon dynamics in 2014. This special issue highlights recent developments in terrestrial ecosystem models and field measurements of carbon fluxes across different types of wetland ecosystems. The 14 research letters emphasize the importance of wetland ecosystems in the global CO₂ and CH₄ budget.

Introduction

Wetlands cover approximately 6% of the Earth’s land surface and contain a large portion of the world’s biodiversity (Junk et al 2013). Wetland ecosystems are an important component in the global carbon cycle and play an important role in terrestrial ecosystem and atmosphere interactions. On the one hand, wetland ecosystems are an ideal natural environment for the carbon sequestration and long-term storage of atmospheric CO₂ (Frolking et al 2011); on the other hand, wetlands are the largest single source of atmospheric methane (Meng et al 2012). Therefore, wetlands serve as both a carbon sink and source from global warming perspectives (Junk et al 2013). It is highly uncertain that whether wetlands act as a positive or negative feedback to the climate system.

Currently, carbon stored in wetlands is close to that stored in the atmosphere (Lenhart 2009). Understanding the impact of climate changes and human activities on carbon dynamics of wetland ecosystems is critical to climate predictability. The 14 letters included in this special issue ‘focus on the impact of climate change on wetland ecosystem carbon dynamics’ deal with carbon dynamics in different types of wetlands in high latitudes, altitudes (e.g., Tibetan plateau), and tropical regions through observational studies and modeling simulations. Thus, this special issue provides a set of valuable findings and data related to wetlands carbon cycling and its environmental controls.

Northern wetlands (45 °N north)

Northern wetlands store over 50% of the global soil organic carbon due to the slow organic carbon decomposition rate as a result of wet surface conditions and cold temperatures (Hugelius et al 2013). The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014) AR5 (the fifth assessment report) (IPCC 2014) predicts that increasing temperatures will affect high latitudes more than tropical and subtropical regions (Collins et al 2013). Therefore, northern wetlands might be more vulnerable to the changes in
temperatures. A few letters from this special issue address the impact of environmental changes on wetland ecosystem carbon balance and methane emissions. Peichl et al (2014) used 12 years of Eddy covariance (EC) measurements to investigate the inter-annual variation in the long-term net ecosystem exchange (NEE) of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and its relationship to environmental factors such as water table level and pre-growing season air temperatures in an oligotrophic mire in northern Sweden. It was found that this boreal peatland serves as a persistent long-term sink of atmospheric CO₂ that is not subject to moderate inter-annual climate variations except under extreme low water table level conditions. Another study found that dry conditions have no persistent effects on the CO₂ exchange dynamics in the Andoya blanket bog in northern Norway on seasonal to annual time scales, and that growing season onset and amount of incoming light are more important controls of inter-annual variation of the CO₂ exchange in this blanket bog (Lund et al 2015). Similarly, Pelletier et al (2015) found boreal peatlands with pools in Quebec, Canada are net sinks of CO₂ at the ecosystem level during the growing season using one-season of EC measurement of NEE and CO₂ flux despite the pools themselves being persistent sources of CO₂.

In addition to the natural causes of carbon dynamics and changes on high latitude wetland ecosystems, agricultural activities such as grazing also affect vegetation structure and greenhouse gas emissions in a high arctic mire (Falk et al 2015). Falk et al (2015) conducted controlled grazed and ungrazed experiments to investigate the impact of muskox grazing on the vegetation composition and the carbon balance in a high arctic mire located in the Zachenberg valley, NE Greenland. It was found that net ecosystem uptake of CO₂ and CH₄ emissions have decreased by 47% and 44% in the ungrazed experiment plots respectively, suggesting the importance of grazing mammals in ecosystem greenhouse gas dynamics. Another study evaluated 5 years of EC measurement of CO₂ and 4 years of chamber measurements of CH₄ from a freshwater Marsh in Ottawa, Ontario, and found that the Marsh C budget as a sink was significantly reduced when combining CO₂ and CH₄ emissions (Strachan et al 2015) due to the substantial Marsh CH₄ emissions. Strachan et al (2015) also demonstrated that cold season ecosystem respiration, driven by temperature and snowfall, was an important component of the Marsh annual C budget and Marshes should be included in national and global estimates of wetland greenhouse gas contributions to the global carbon cycle.

Johnston et al (2014) investigated the effects of lowland permafrost thaw over millennial timescales using a measurement of CO₂ and CH₄ from thermo-karst collapse bogs and adjacent fen locations that contain a ~1000 yr thaw chronosequence in western Alaska. They found that CH₄ efflux has been enhanced during the growing season following lowland permafrost thaw over decadal time scales, suggesting that thaw features (such as thaw stages and cycles) should be included when evaluating high latitude CH₄ dynamics (Johnston et al 2014).

This special issue also includes a perspective by Stark and Ylanne (2015) on the importance of grazing in affecting ecosystem processes and C budgets in Arctic peatlands. They develop a conceptual model of possible pathways by which grazing and climate change may affect peatland C storage, CO₂ balance, and CH₄ release in the Arctic.

### Tropical and subtropical wetlands

Tropical and subtropical wetlands contribute at least 50% of total wetland methane emissions, and over 80% of the natural sources, to the atmosphere partially due to large inundated areas and high temperatures (Riley et al 2011, Meng et al 2012, Meng et al 2015). Understanding the carbon dynamics and their influential factors will be critical to the estimation of global carbon budgets and its spatial distribution. Jauhiainen et al (2014) evaluated the heterotrophic CO₂, N₂O, and CH₄ fluxes in a drained tropical peatland under four shading conditions with different treatments in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. They found that soil shading by vegetation decreases greater greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to the atmosphere through reducing peat temperatures. Land management differences affect how greenhouse gas fluxes respond to peat temperature and fertilization, but increases in temperature do not necessarily translate into GHG emissions. The internal characteristics of peatlands (such as open degraded peatlands, intact peatland forests) may decrease the sensitivity of GHG emissions to temperature change (Jauhiainen et al 2014). A study by Oliveras et al (2014) assessed net primary productivity and carbon cycling in Andean tropical alpine grasslands based on direct measurements and found that Andean grasslands had similar NPP and soil carbon stocks to tropical montane cloud forests. Therefore, high elevation tropical grasslands are an important reservoir for soil carbon stocks and production (Oliveras et al 2014). A study of CO₂ budget dynamics in a subtropical estuarial Marsh wetland ecosystem in Taiwan shows that temperature and radiation have stronger influence on gross primary production of CO₂ than soil moisture content and vapor pressure deficit. Further, these environmental variables have strong but different impacts on the CO₂ budget in the two different low-latitude ecosystems (para grass and reed) (Lee et al 2015).
Wetland ecosystem modeling

Wetland ecosystem models have been used to estimate CH$_4$ and CO$_2$ fluxes at regional and global scales (Zhuang et al 2004, Wania et al 2010). Uncertainties associated with the environmental controls of methane biogeochemical processes prevent the accurate prediction of global and regional methane budgets (Riley et al 2011). One of the largest uncertainties is wetland extent or inundated area (Riley et al 2011, Meng et al 2012). Three letters from this special issue address the impact of changes in wetland inundation extents on regional CH$_4$ and CO$_2$ fluxes using two different models. Watts et al (2014) investigated the impact of surface warming and moisture availability on northern latitude CH$_4$ emissions using the Joint UK Land Environment Simulator (JULES) methane emission model driven by satellite-derived fractional inundation. The JULES methane model experiments produced mean summer contribution of 53 Tg CH$_4$ yr$^{-1}$ from the boreal-arctic wetlands ($\geq 45^\circ$N). The JULES model sensitivity analysis highlighted the importance of finer (or sub-monthly) temporal resolution of fractional inundation on annual CH$_4$ emission estimation. Zhuang et al (2015) used the terrestrial ecosystem model (TEM) to evaluate the influence of the inter-annual variability in wetland inundation extent from 1993–2004 on CO$_2$ and CH$_4$ emissions from the northern wetlands ($\geq 45^\circ$N). The TEM model, driven by the same satellite-derived fractional inundation used in Watts et al (2014), estimated the annual methane emission to be 67.8±6.2 Tg CH$_4$ yr$^{-1}$ and regional CO$_2$ sink of $-1.28 \pm 0.03$ Pg C yr$^{-1}$. Zhuang et al (2015) found northern wetlands to be a consistent greenhouse gas sink per global warming potential and that variability in wetland inundation plays a very important role in affecting regional greenhouse gas budgets. Jin et al (2015) applied the TEM to estimate net exchanges of methane and CO$_2$ fluxes on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau from 1979 to 2100 under different climate change scenarios. Their simulations, by considering both CO$_2$ and CH$_4$ fluxes, demonstrate that the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau will serve as a carbon source from 1979–2030 and turn to a carbon sink from 2030 to 2100.

Concluding remarks and future research

Wetland ecosystems are one primary component of the global carbon budget. The collection of 14 letters and one perspective in this special issue provides an excellent starting point for researchers who are interested in wetland ecosystem and carbon dynamics. Both field measurements and modeling studies are included to address different aspects of carbon cycling at local and regional scales. Environmental variables that affect CO$_2$ and CH$_4$ fluxes at local and regional scales are investigated, including temperature, radiation, agricultural treatments and land management, soil moisture content, and vapor pressure deficit. With the current global warming trend, it is expected that both tropical and northern wetland ecosystems will experience large changes in temperature and wetting and drying cycles. Future research should continue focusing on the influential factors that affect carbon dynamics across different wetland ecosystems. A few variables that were not addressed in this special issue are soil pH and redox potentials, soil moisture dynamics, and vegetation types and their impacts on CH$_4$ and CO$_2$ emissions. More field measurements of carbon budget and fluxes are required to further understand the dominant environmental variables that impact wetland carbon dynamics.

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