As a major CO₂ sink, the North Atlantic, especially its subpolar gyre region, is essential for the global carbon cycle. Decadal fluctuations of CO₂ uptake in the North Atlantic subpolar gyre region are associated with the evolution of the North Atlantic Oscillation, the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation, ocean mixing and sea surface temperature anomalies. While variations in the physical state of the ocean can be predicted several years in advance by initialization of Earth system models, predictability of CO₂ uptake has remained unexplored. Here we investigate the predictability of CO₂ uptake variations by initialization of the MPI-ESM decadal prediction system. We find large multi-year variability in oceanic CO₂ uptake and demonstrate that its potential predictive skill in the western subpolar gyre region is up to 4-7 years. The predictive skill is mainly maintained in winter and is attributed to the improved physical state of the ocean.
The world’s oceans currently take over about 25–30% of anthropogenic CO₂ from the atmosphere, and the North Atlantic is a key component of this oceanic carbon sink. Steered by deep convection, most of the North Atlantic CO₂ uptake takes place in the subpolar gyre (SPG) region, a region also characterized by pronounced variability in CO₂ fluxes. The variability of carbon uptake in the subpolar North Atlantic ocean was found to be largely related to variations of the North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO), the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC), sea surface temperature (SST) and ocean-mixing strength, and all these processes are intrinsically related. The SPG region experienced several abrupt warming and cooling events in the twentieth century, with SST increasing or decreasing by more than 1°C in only a few years. These changes are related to variations of the NAO and the associated AMOC, heat transports, SPG circulation and Labrador Sea convection. The key elements such as AMOC and SST have been shown to be predictable several years ahead by initialization of Earth system models (ESMs), which includes an assimilation simulation by nudging observations into the atmospheric and oceanic components of the ESM (see the Methods section) and a set of initialized retrospective prediction simulations (that is, starting from the assimilation run). For comparison, a set of uninitialized simulations is performed without any observations nudged. No carbon cycle observations are used in the assimilation run, so that the ocean biogeochemical processes perform as a passive component. Such an assimilation run, including both anthropogenic trends and natural fluctuations, allows us to investigate the spatial and temporal variability of the oceanic carbon uptake and its connection to local and large-scale physical processes. The initialized retrospective prediction simulations enable us to assess the predictability of carbon uptake. Here we mainly focus on interannual and longer timescale and if not stated otherwise use multi-year and annual mean data set. In this study, we focus on the SPG region because first it plays a prominent role in the oceanic carbon budget. Second, both the physical and the biogeochemical states of the ocean in the SPG region exhibit pronounced natural variability, which is governed by processes acting on decadal scales. Third, this region demonstrates robust predictive skill for the physical fields offering promise for predictions of the oceanic carbon uptake. Our analysis indicates that the North Atlantic CO₂ uptake shows large spatial and temporal variations on decadal scale. Furthermore, these variations are better represented in the initialized simulations than in the uninitialized simulations. Direct comparison to observations indicates improved representation of the ocean surface pCO₂ by initialization. We find the potential prediction skill of the western SPG CO₂ uptake until lead time of 4–7 years. This predictability of CO₂ uptake is related to the initialization of SST and AMOC by observations.

Results

Spatial variations of CO₂ flux in the North Atlantic. Spatial distributions of trends in CO₂ flux during the 25 years before the mid-1990s SPG abrupt warming (that is, from 1970 to 1995) show a remarkably different pattern between the uninitialized and assimilation runs (Fig. 1). The oceanic CO₂ uptake in the uninitialized simulations increases at about 0.2 gC m⁻² yr⁻¹, following the increase in atmospheric CO₂ due to rising fossil fuel carbon emissions, with a somewhat larger increase in the eastern part of the North Atlantic. The CO₂ flux in the assimilation run does not increase uniformly in the North Atlantic; the largest increase is found in the western SPG region (Fig. 1b), and decreasing trends are found in the eastern SPG region. A zonal dipole distribution in delta pCO₂ anomalies was also found in a previous study based on the simulations with an ocean only model. This dipole trend pattern of CO₂ uptake can be attributed to the NAO-related western–eastern heat loss gradient and the related ocean-mixing strength changes (Supplementary Fig. 1 and Supplementary Note 1). Regarding the mid-1990s warming, decomposition of the SPG region by a previous study suggests a longer predictive skill in the western SPG region, which involves AMOC and meridional heat transport changes in response to persistent positive NAO phase from 1988 to 1995, and a shorter predictive skill in the eastern SPG region, which involves gyre circulation adjustment in response to NAO phase switch from positive to negative in 1995. Here we focus on the western SPG region with the largest trend of CO₂ uptake and with longer prediction skill of the ocean physical state.

Temporal evolution of CO₂ uptake and related processes. To further explore the temporal variability of the oceanic carbon uptake and how it is related to prominent local hydrodynamic processes in the SPG region, we compare the CO₂ flux calculated in the assimilation run with the observed NAO index, observed
Potential predictive skill of CO2 flux and SST. The state-of-the-art decadal prediction systems consistently identify the North Atlantic as a key region with pronounced forecast skill for different parameters of the climate system. Several abrupt climate events in the twentieth century have been shown to be predictable several years ahead. The SPG abrupt warming and cooling events are also well captured in our initialized simulations, whereas the uninitialized simulations only capture the long-term warming trend and display large spread among ensemble members. The correlation between CO2 flux and SST is not significant in our simulations. Given the robust predictive skill of the physical state of the ocean, can variations in the North Atlantic CO2 uptake be predicted as well? A previous study explored multi-year predictability of tropical marine productivity and found a predictive skill of 3 years, whereas the predictive skill of SST there is only 1 year. In our analysis, as indicated by the initialized time series at different lead times, the variability of CO2 flux, which is absent in the uninitialized simulations, can be reproduced by the model with initialization several years in advance and implies predictability of CO2 uptake.

Owing to lack of observational data, we first use model fields calculated in the assimilation run as a proxy to quantify the potential predictive skill of SST and of the CO2 flux into the ocean. The correlation coefficients of the initialized 4-year mean SST exceed the uninitialized correlations for lead times of 1–4 and 2–5 years. The correlation goes down in the intermediate lead time, however, it recovers from a lead time of 5–8 years. The results suggest improved potential predictive skills of the background ocean physical fields. The correlation coefficient of initialized CO2 flux is significantly higher than the uninitialized correlation until a lead time of 4–7 years. The P values are lower than 0.05 until the lead time of 4–7 years suggesting significant improvement of potential predictive skill due to initialization of the physical states constrained by observations.

Further investigation of the potential predictive skill with seasonal and monthly time series reveals that the high predictive skill of CO2 flux in the initialized simulations is mainly maintained during winter months. This is related to the seasonal shift of processes in regulating the CO2 uptake and the fact of assimilation for the decadal prediction system. In winter, the CO2 uptake in western SPG region is regulated primarily by physical process such as the ocean-mixing strength and ocean
The variations of ocean physical fields are well represented in the initialized simulations, as the corresponding initial states are constrained by observations through assimilation. However, in spring and early summer, when the ocean warms, the biological primary production draws down seawater pCO₂ and regulates the oceanic CO₂ uptake in the western SPG region\textsuperscript{33–35}; the correlation of the initialized simulations goes down from May, as no ocean biological observations are assimilated into the system.

We further explore possible causes of the potential predictive skill of CO₂ uptake in comparison with that of the SST and MLD (Fig. 3d). The SST correlations peak in December and go down from late winter, which is coherent with that of the MLD and the CO₂ uptake. It suggests that both the evolution of the ocean thermal state and the local mixing strength contribute to the predictive skill of CO₂ uptake in winter. Although the correlation skill of MLD is generally lower than that of CO₂ uptake, both share similar seasonal cycle of predictive skill, indicating effects of MLD changes in maintaining the predictive skill of CO₂ uptake. Moreover, the potential predictive skill of CO₂ uptake is related to the AMOC variability. As revealed by previous studies, the predictive skill of SPG SST is assured by initialization of the AMOC variability\textsuperscript{27}, and the AMOC shows predictive skill up to 4 years\textsuperscript{17}. The potential predictive skill of AMOC in our system is up to 2–5 years (figure omitted). The AMOC at lead time of 1 year is highly correlated with CO₂ flux at lead time of 1 year and up to 2–5 years (figure omitted). The AMOC at lead time of 1 year is highly correlated with CO₂ flux at lead time of 1 year and up to 2–5 years (figure omitted). The AMOC at lead time of 1 year is highly correlated with CO₂ flux at lead time of 1 year and up to 2–5 years (figure omitted). The AMOC at lead time of 1 year is highly correlated with CO₂ flux at lead time of 1 year and up to 2–5 years (figure omitted).

**Figure 3** | Potential predictive skill of CO₂ flux and related physical variables. Correlation skill of ensemble mean of 4-year mean SST (a), 4-year mean CO₂ flux into the ocean (b), seasonally stratified 4-year mean CO₂ flux into the ocean (late winter, that is, January–February–March) (c) and monthly stratified 4-year mean CO₂ flux, SST and MLD (d) in the western SPG region. Shown are uninitialized (blue dot in a–c) and initialized (red dots in a–c) simulations at different lead time verified against assimilation. The correlations are calculated from 4-year mean predictions (that is, years 1–4, 2–5 and so on) of initialized simulations, and 4-year running mean of the corresponding assimilation and uninitialized time series. To ensure that the number of validation years is the same for both initialized and uninitialized simulations, we use the common time period from 1967–1970 mean to 2008–2011 mean. The blue dashed line in a–c extends the uninitialized correlation for easy comparison. The vertical lines in a–c provide 90% confidence intervals based on a bootstrap approach\textsuperscript{46}. The numbers on the top of the bars in a–c show the \( P \) values based on the hypothesis that the difference of correlations between the initialized and uninitialized simulations is smaller or equal to zero based on 1,000 bootstrapped resamples. The potential predictive skills of monthly stratified 4-year mean CO₂ flux, SST and MLD in d are shown with red, black and blue curves, respectively. Three-month running mean is applied before monthly correlation estimation in d. The horizontal dashed grey line in d shows the 95% level of significance based on a two-sided \( t \)-test. The vertical dashed grey lines in d are added to better distinguish different lead year results.
these are the best ocean surface observations we can get for this region. The ocean surface pCO2 in the SPG region peaks in winter as a result of the enhanced vertical supply of carbon from the intermediate waters by deep convection; surface pCO2 values reach a minimum in summer due to biological draw down (Fig. 4). The initialized predictions produce ocean surface pCO2 closer to SOCAT observation than the uninitialized simulations as indicated by the correlations and root mean squared error (in brackets) between model simulations and SOCAT observations. For the all season time series in a the correlations of the assimilation and initialized simulations at lead time of 3 years are significantly larger than that of the uninitialized simulations at 95% significant level based on a bootstrap test. Note the SOCAT observational data are not continuously distributed in space and time; the model simulations are averaged over the grid points where SOCAT data are available.

![Figure 4](image_url)

**Figure 4 | Observed and model simulated monthly mean ocean surface pCO2 in western SPG region. (a) All season time series, (b) only January-February-March are shown and (c) only April-May-June are shown. The SOCAT observations are shown with grey bars, and model output of assimilation, uninitialized simulations and initialized simulations at a lead time of 3 years (yr3) are shown in black, blue and red dots, respectively. The grey dashed lines connect outlier dots with the grey bars to make the comparison clearer. The numbers in legend are correlation coefficients and root mean squared error (in brackets) between model simulations and SOCAT observations. For the all season time series in a the correlations of the assimilation and initialized simulations at lead time of 3 years are significantly larger than that of the uninitialized simulations at 95% significant level based on a bootstrap test. Note the SOCAT observational data are not continuously distributed in space and time; the model simulations are averaged over the grid points where SOCAT data are available.**
uptake. The drawdown of pCO₂ by biological processes such as carbon fixation during seasonal phytoplankton growth, with consequent export of carbon into the deep ocean is also critical for the air–sea carbon exchange in the nutrient-rich SPG region[27]. These marine biogeochemical processes themselves are influenced by variability in climate and circulation. For instance, an increase in ocean temperature leads to a decrease of CO₂ uptake through decrease in solubility. Biological production starts in spring when the ocean warms up. This draws down the ocean surface pCO₂ and enhances CO₂ uptake. However, the growth of phytoplankton in the North Atlantic is more limited by nutrient supply than by temperature. The nutrient supply, in turn, is constrained by the enhanced thermal stratification associated with the ocean warming, thus resulting in a decrease of primary production[38]. Therefore, while the biological CO₂ drawdown regulates the seasonal cycle of CO₂ flux, the physical regulation is more important for interannual and decadal variations of CO₂ in the SPG region[29]. Our findings show that there is an improved representation of the oceanic carbon flux because the background ocean circulation and thermal state are well reproduced. Physical processes such as the ocean thermal state, local mixing and large-scale circulation contribute to the predictability of CO₂ uptake. It requires further large ensembles of multi-model decadal prediction simulations and sensitivity experiments to disentangle the relative role of an individual physical mechanism on the predictability of CO₂ uptake.

We find that beside the trend due to CO₂ emissions, predictions of the oceanic uptake and storage of carbon show considerable decadal variations that are not fully captured in the uninitialized simulations with modern ESMs. We demonstrate that variations in the oceanic carbon cycle can be predicted several years ahead. Hence, predictions of the North Atlantic carbon sink considering both anthropogenic change and natural fluctuations are important to understand the evolution of climate and ocean acidification and to reduce uncertainties in CO₂ uptake estimates. Predictions of the oceanic carbon sink are also necessary to provide information to monitoring programs aimed at the present and future oceanic carbon sink.

Predictive skill assessment. We mainly show ensemble mean results in this study. For the uninitialized experiments, the anomalies are calculated by removing the climatology of the ensemble mean. For the initialized experiments, the anomalies are calculated in terms of the climatology of the ensemble member and the lead time. The observed temporal evolution of the DJFM NAO index (station based)[23] and the SST[24] in SPG is investigated together with the mixing and CO₂ flux around the SPG region in the assimilation run. We use the fields in the assimilation run as a proxy to quantify the historical variability and to estimate the potential predictive skill of CO₂ uptake. The potential predictions are verified with skill scores based on anomaly correlation coefficients against the assimilation run. As short-term/small-scale variability may add noise and hence reduce predictive skill, temporal and spatial averaging was recommended[46] and has been used in most decadal prediction studies[25,31,47]. A set of 4-year mean (that is, 1–4, 2–5, …, 7–10 years) predictions is verified in this study against corresponding running mean of the assimilation and uninitialized simulations.

Bootstrap approach for significance test. Statistical tests and confidence intervals of the correlations in Figs 3 and 4 are calculated through a bootstrapping approach[46]. The resampling scheme considers uncertainty arising from both ensemble size and hindcast period. A block size of 2 is used to account for autocorrelation in the SOCAT time series (Fig. 4). Note that the significance of correlation differences in Fig. 3 remains unaltered for the same block size.

Conversion of ocean surface CO₂ observation data. The gridded observations of the SOCAT[18] surface ocean fugacity of CO₂ (fCO₂) from 2002 to 2011 are used to verify the numerical simulations. The SOCAT data are coincident with the model grid points where SOCAT data are available.

Code availability. The MPI-ESM model is freely available to the scientific community. The code can be accessed with a license agreement on the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology model distribution website: http://www.mpimet.mpg.de/en/science/models/license/

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**Acknowledgements**
We thank J. Marotzke, H. Pohlmann and C. Li for their helpful comments and suggestions on the manuscript. We acknowledge funding from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany (BMBF) through the research programme 'MiKlip’ (FKZ: 01LP1144A; 01LP1145A; 01LP1519A; 01LP1515B; and 01LP1517B). This study has also received funding from EU FP7 project CARBOCHANGE (grant 268479) and the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant 641816). The simulations were performed at the German Climate Computing Center (DKRZ).

**Author contributions**
H.L., T.I. and W.M. jointly designed the study and wrote the manuscript; H.L. analysed the data; F.S. provided suggestions and comprehensive support on statistical analyses; all authors discussed the results and commented on the manuscript.

**Additional information**
Supplementary Information accompanies this paper at http://www.nature.com/naturecommunications

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**How to cite this article:** Li, H. et al. Decadal predictions of the North Atlantic CO2 uptake. *Nat. Commun.* **7**:11076 doi: 10.1038/ncomms11076 (2016).

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