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Carbon Cycle Dynamics: Sources, Sinks, and Fluxes in Changing Climates

Aravind K

Assistant Professor, Department of Chemistry, St. Berchmans College, Changanassery, Kerala, India.

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Abstract

The carbon cycle represents one of Earth's fundamental biogeochemical processes, governing the exchange of carbon between the atmosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of contemporary carbon cycle dynamics, examining major sources, sinks, and fluxes within the context of anthropogenic climate change. Anthropogenic perturbations have fundamentally altered natural carbon flux patterns, with fossil fuel combustion contributing approximately 9.5 ± 0.5 Gt C yr^{-1} and land-use changes adding 1.5 ± 0.7 Gt C yr^{-1} to atmospheric carbon burdens. Ocean and terrestrial ecosystems absorb approximately 2.5 Gt C yr^{-1} and 3.1 Gt C yr^{-1} respectively, though sink efficiency shows concerning decline trajectories. Climate feedbacks, including permafrost thaw, ocean acidification, and ecosystem respiration changes, threaten to amplify atmospheric CO_2 accumulation rates. This analysis integrates contemporary observational networks, isotopic constraints, and Earth system models to provide a quantitative understanding of carbon cycle perturbations and their implications for climate stabilisation pathways.

Keywords: Carbon Cycle, Climate Change, Carbon Sources, Carbon Sinks, Biogeochemical Cycles, Earth System Modelling

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Problem Context and Significance

The global carbon cycle constitutes a critical component of Earth's climate system, mediating exchanges of approximately 200 petagrams of carbon (Pg C) annually between atmospheric, terrestrial, and oceanic reservoirs[1]. Prior to industrialization, this system maintained quasi-equilibrium conditions over millennial timescales. However, anthropogenic activities since 1750 have fundamentally disrupted this balance, introducing systematic perturbations that exceed natural variability by more than an order of magnitude [2].

Contemporary atmospheric CO_2 concentrations have reached 420 parts per million (ppm), representing a 50% increase from pre-industrial levels of 280 ppm[3]. This accumulation results from the imbalance between anthropogenic carbon emissions, estimated at 11.0 ± 0.8 Pg C yr^{-1} for the 2013-2022 period, and the combined uptake capacity of natural sinks, which remove approximately 5.6 Pg C yr^{-1} [4]. The remaining carbon accumulates in the atmosphere, driving radiative forcing that has contributed to approximately 1.1°C of global warming since pre-industrial times[5].

1.2. Research Objectives

This investigation addresses three fundamental questions:

- What are the magnitudes and temporal variations of major carbon sources and sinks?
- How do climate-carbon cycle feedbacks modulate system behavior?
- To what extent can current frameworks constrain future carbon cycle trajectories?

The primary objective is to synthesize contemporary understanding of carbon cycle dynamics, integrating observational data and modeling predictions to establish a framework for evaluating carbon cycle perturbations.

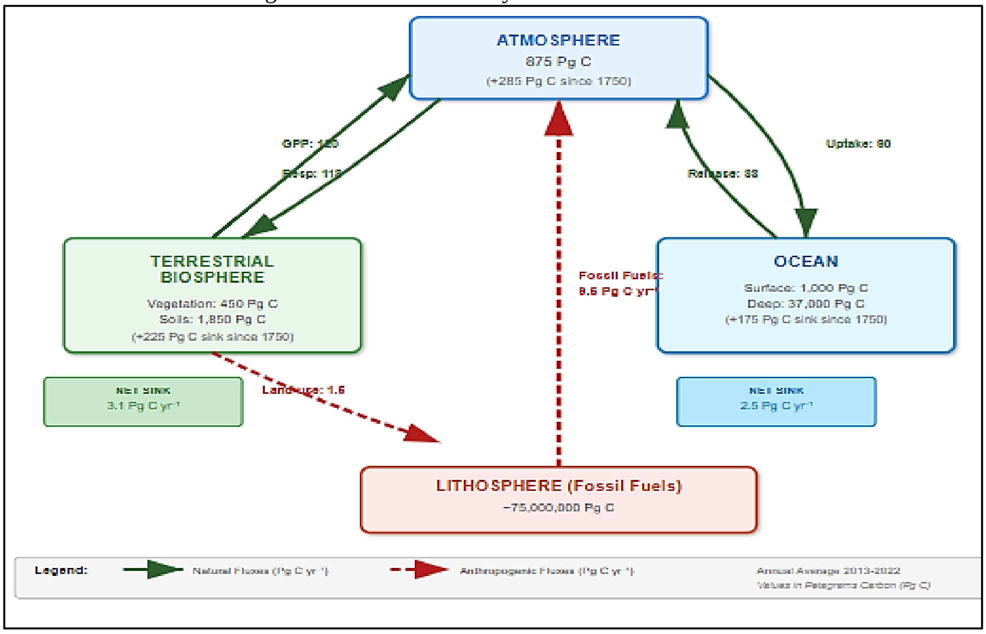
II. CARBON CYCLE ARCHITECTURE

2.1. Reservoir Structure

The carbon cycle comprises four primary reservoirs with characteristic exchange rates[6]:

- Atmospheric Reservoir: Contains approximately 875 Pg C as CO_2 with residence time of 3-5 years
- Terrestrial Biosphere: Stores 2,300 Pg C in vegetation (450 Pg C) and soils (1,850 Pg C)
- Oceanic Reservoir: Holds 38,000 Pg C in dissolved inorganic carbon (37,000 Pg C) and organic forms (1,000 Pg C)
- Lithospheric Reservoir: Contains fossil carbon with geological timescale exchange rates

Figure 1: Global Carbon Cycle – Reservoirs and Fluxes



2.2. Exchange Processes

Carbon transfers between reservoirs occur through distinct processes. Terrestrial ecosystems exchange carbon through photosynthesis (Gross Primary Production ~120 Pg C yr^{-1}) and respiration (~118 Pg C yr^{-1})[7]. Ocean-atmosphere exchange (~90 Pg C yr^{-1} in each direction) is driven by partial pressure gradients and governed by gas transfer velocity and solubility[8].

The air-sea CO_2 flux follows:

$$F = k \times K_0 \times (pCO_{2sea} - pCO_{2air})$$

where k is gas transfer velocity and K_0 is solubility coefficient. Ocean carbon sequestration operates through the solubility pump (temperature-dependent dissolution) and biological pump (photosynthetic fixation followed by organic matter export to depth)[9].

III. MAJOR CARBON SOURCES

3.1. Fossil Fuel Emissions

Fossil fuel combustion represents the dominant anthropogenic carbon source at 9.5 ± 0.5 Pg C yr^{-1} (2013 -2022 average) [4]. Emissions have increased from ~3 Pg C yr^{-1} in 1960 to current levels, with coal contributing 40%, petroleum 32%, natural gas 21%, and cement production 7% [10]. The top five emitters (China, United States, India, Russia, Japan) account for 64% of global fossil CO_2 release [11].

Emission trajectories show strong coupling to economic growth, though the elasticity has declined from

~1.0 in 1990 to ~0.6 in 2020 due to efficiency improvements and renewable energy deployment [12]. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic produced a temporary 5.4% emission reduction followed by 5.9% rebound in 2021 [13].

3.2. Land-Use Change Emissions

Deforestation, agricultural expansion, and biomass burning contribute 1.5 ± 0.7 Pg C yr^{-1} to atmospheric carbon [14]. Tropical deforestation accounts for approximately 60% of land-use emissions, with Brazil, Indonesia, and Democratic Republic of Congo as major source regions. Land conversion releases carbon through immediate biomass burning (30-40% of vegetation carbon) and rapid soil organic matter decomposition (20-30% of soil carbon in top 30 cm in first 5 years post-conversion) [15].

3.3. Natural Sources

Natural sources include ecosystem respiration (~60 Pg C yr^{-1}), tropical ocean outgassing (~0.5 Pg C yr^{-1}), volcanic emissions (~0.3 Pg C yr^{-1}), and natural wildfires (~1.5 Pg C yr^{-1})[16]. While these fluxes are large, pre-industrial systems maintained approximate balance with natural sinks.

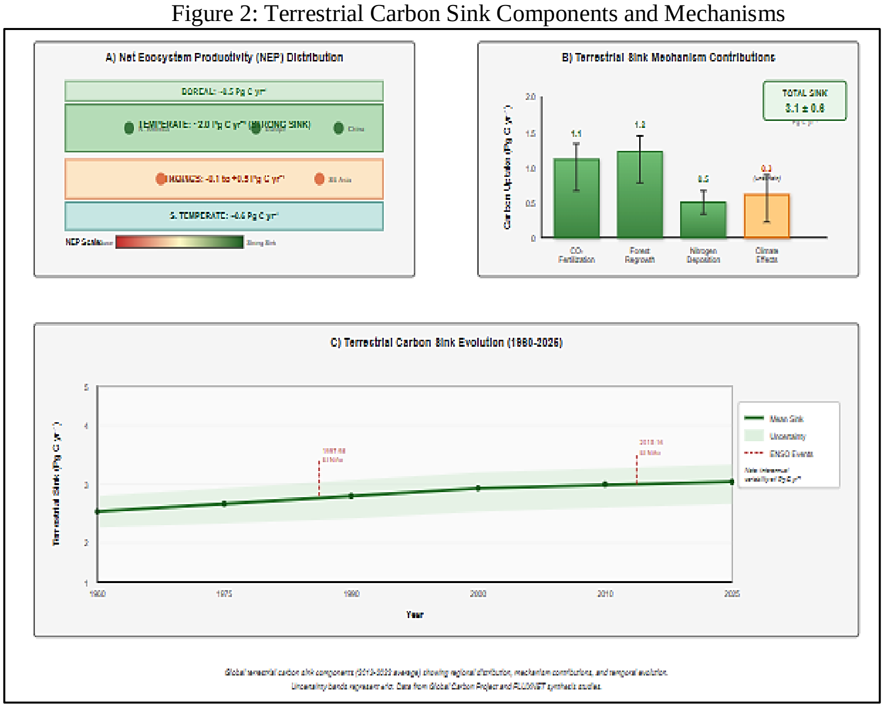
IV.MAJOR CARBON SINKS

4.1. Terrestrial Carbon Sink

The terrestrial biosphere has absorbed 3.1 ± 0.6 Pg C yr^{-1} over 2013-2022, removing approximately 31% of anthropogenic emissions [17]. This sink results from multiple mechanisms:

- CO_2 Fertilization: Elevated atmospheric CO_2 enhances photosynthetic rates through increased substrate availability. Free-Air CO_2 Enrichment (FACE) studies indicate 15-30% productivity increases under elevated CO_2 [18], though nutrient limitations constrain long-term responses.
- Nitrogen Deposition: Anthropogenic reactive nitrogen deposition (~60 Tg N yr^{-1}) alleviates nutrient limitation, enhancing carbon sequestration by ~0.3 Pg C yr^{-1} [19].
- Forest Regrowth: Recovery of previously cleared forests, particularly in temperate zones of North America, Europe, and China, contributes ~1.0 Pg C yr^{-1} through biomass accumulation [20].

Figure 2: Terrestrial Carbon Sink Components and Mechanisms



Multi-panel figure showing:

- Global map of net ecosystem productivity;
- Bar chart decomposing terrestrial sink mechanisms;
- Time series 1960-2025 showing sink magnitude with uncertainty bounds.

Regional distributions reveal tropical regions as near carbon-neutral to small source (-0.1 to +0.5 Pg C yr^{-1}), temperate Northern Hemisphere as strong sink (~2.0 Pg C yr^{-1}), and boreal regions as moderate sink (~0.5

Pg C yr^{-1}) . The terrestrial sink exhibits substantial interannual variability (standard deviation ~1 Pg C yr^{-1}) driven by tropical temperature and precipitation during ENSO events [22].

4.2. Ocean Carbon Sink

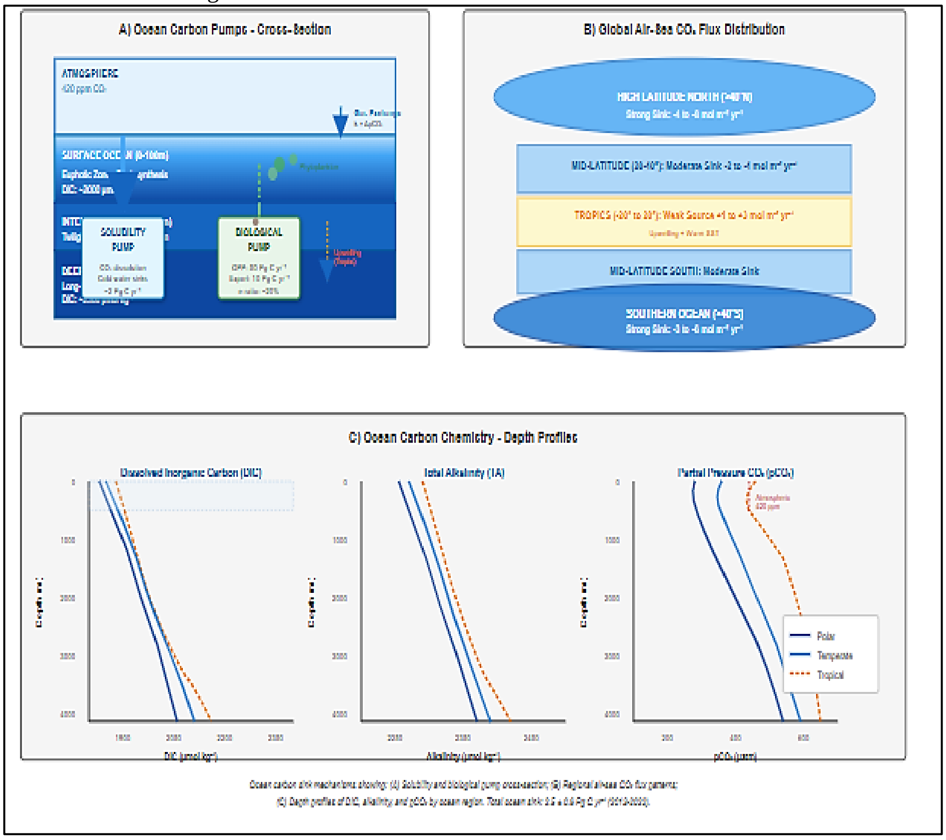
The ocean absorbs 2.5 ± 0.6 Pg C yr^{-1} of anthropogenic CO_2, accounting for 26% of fossil fuel and land-use emissions [23]. Cumulative ocean uptake since 1750 totals ~175 Pg C, representing 39% of total anthropogenic emissions.

Ocean CO_2 uptake is governed by carbonate chemistry:

$$CO_2(aq) + H_2O \leftrightarrow H_2CO_3 \leftrightarrow H^+ + HCO_3^- \leftrightarrow 2H^+ + CO_3^{2-}$$

The Revelle factor ($\beta = \partial\ln(pCO_2)/\partial\ln(DIC)$) quantifies buffer capacity, ranging 9-15 in surface waters [24]. Regional ocean uptake varies substantially: high-latitude regions (>40°) show strong sinks due to deep water formation and cold temperatures; mid-latitudes (20-40°) show moderate sinks with seasonal productivity influences; tropics (-20° to 20°) are near-neutral to weak source [25].

Figure 3: Ocean Carbon Sink Mechanisms and Distribution



Three-panel figure:

- Cross-section showing solubility and biological pump processes;
- Global map of air-sea CO_2 flux;
- Depth profiles of DIC and alkalinity.

The biological carbon pump exports ~10 Pg C yr^{-1} from the euphotic zone through particulate organic carbon settling and dissolved organic carbon transport [9]. Multiple lines of evidence indicate declining ocean sink efficiency, with observed pCO_2 growth rates in surface waters (~2.0 µatm yr^{-1}) slightly exceeding atmospheric rates in some regions [26].

4.3. Anthropogenic Carbon Inventory

Cumulative anthropogenic carbon uptake since 1750 totals:

- Ocean: 175 ± 35 Pg C
- Terrestrial biosphere: 225 ± 75 Pg C
- Atmosphere: 285 ± 5 Pg C
- Total emissions: 685 ± 75 Pg C

The airborne fraction has averaged 44 ± 3% over six decades with no statistically significant trend [12].

V. CLIMATE-CARBON CYCLE FEEDBACKS

5.1. Temperature Sensitivity

Climate warming induces multiple feedback mechanisms that modulate carbon cycle responses [27]. The climate-carbon cycle feedback parameter (γ) quantifies atmospheric CO_2 changes per degree warming, with Earth system models projecting γ values ranging 5-30 ppm CO_2 per °C [28].

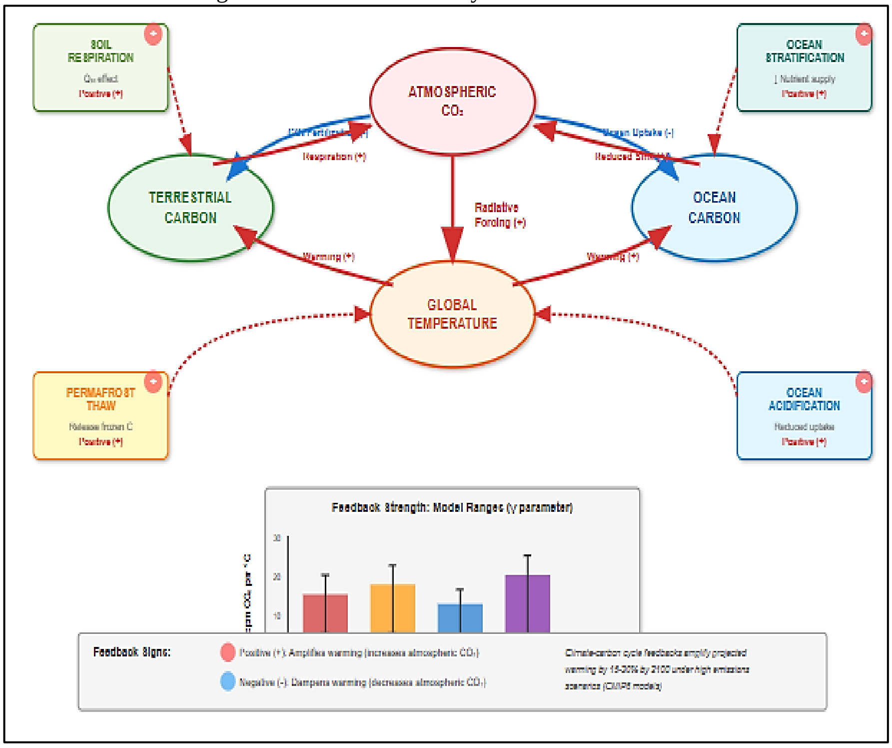
5.1.1. Terrestrial Feedbacks:

- Enhanced Respiration: Warming accelerates ecosystem respiration more than photosynthesis due to higher temperature sensitivity ($Q_{10} \approx 2$-3), potentially reducing terrestrial carbon storage [29].
- Permafrost Thaw: Arctic and boreal permafrost soils contain ~1,700 Pg C. Progressive thaw mobilizes previously frozen organic matter, with projected releases of 50-250 Pg C by 2100 [30].
- Vegetation Shifts: Biome migrations alter regional carbon balances through changes in productivity and biomass density [31].

5.1.2. Ocean Feedbacks:

- Solubility Reduction: CO_2 solubility decreases ~4% per °C, reducing ocean uptake capacity [32].
- Stratification Enhancement: Upper ocean warming strengthens density stratification, reducing nutrient supply and diminishing biological pump efficiency by 5-15% under high-emission scenarios [33].

Figure 5: Climate–Carbon Cycle Feedback Mechanisms



Conceptual diagram showing feedback loops between atmospheric CO_2, temperature, ocean carbon, and terrestrial carbon with positive/negative feedback signs and strength ranges from models.

5.2. CO_2 Concentration Feedbacks

The carbon-concentration feedback parameter (β) quantifies terrestrial carbon storage change per ppm CO_2 increase. Model estimates suggest $\beta = 0.5$-1.5 Pg C per ppm CO_2 sustained over decades [34]. Rising atmospheric CO_2 drives ocean acidification, reducing pH by 0.1 units since pre-industrial times with projected further decreases of 0.3-0.4 units by 2100 under high-emission scenarios [35].

VI. OBSERVATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

6.1. Atmospheric Monitoring

The Global Greenhouse Gas Reference Network provides continuous CO_2 measurements from 40+ baseline stations since 1958 [36]. NASA's Orbiting Carbon Observatory-2 (OCO-2) provides column-averaged CO_2 measurements with ~1 ppm precision, enabling detection of regional source/sink patterns through inverse modeling [37].

Isotopic constraints include:

- $\delta^{13}C$: Distinguishes fossil fuel ($\delta^{13}C \approx -28‰$) from biosphere (-25 to -30‰) and ocean (0‰) contributions
- $\Delta^{14}C$: Separates fossil fuel (^{14}C-free) from contemporary sources
- $\delta^{18}O$-CO_2: Traces biospheric processing

Combined isotopic analyses resolve anthropogenic CO_2 to ±0.5 Pg C yr^{-1} [38].

6.2. Terrestrial Observations

FLUXNET integrates >900 tower sites measuring ecosystem-atmosphere CO_2 exchanges at 30-minute resolution [39]. These data quantify Net Ecosystem Exchange across biomes and parameterize ecosystem models. National forest inventories provide repeated biomass measurements constraining accumulation rates and disturbance effects [20].

6.3. Ocean Observations

The Surface Ocean CO_2 Atlas (SOCAT) compiles 30+ million pCO_2 measurements since 1957[40.] The Argo float array (>4,000 autonomous profiling floats) increasingly measures biogeochemical variables including pH [41]. The Global Ocean Ship-based Hydrographic Investigations Program quantifies anthropogenic carbon storage changes through repeat trans-ocean sections [42].

VII. EARTH SYSTEM MODELING

7.1. Model Hierarchy

Carbon cycle models range from simple box models to comprehensive Earth system models (ESMs) coupling atmosphere, ocean, land, and cryosphere components[43]. CMIP6 ESMs integrate atmospheric general circulation models, ocean general circulation models with biogeochemistry, dynamic vegetation models, and land surface schemes representing carbon-nitrogen-phosphorus interactions [44].

7.2. Process Representation

Terrestrial models simulate photosynthesis using the Farquhar-von Caemmerer-Berry biochemical model:

$$An = \min(Wc, Wj, Wp) - Rd$$

where Wc is Rubisco-limited, Wj is RuBP-regeneration-limited, and Wp is phosphate-limited carboxylation[45].

Ocean biogeochemical models simulate nutrient uptake with Michaelis-Menten kinetics and particle export using power-law attenuation:

$$F_{Z=F_{Z0}} \times \left(\frac{z}{z_0}\right)^{-b}$$

where b ≈ 0.85 (Martin curve) [46].

7.3. Model Evaluation

The International Land Model Benchmarking framework provides systematic evaluation against observations [47].Key metrics include GPP spatial patterns ($r^2 > 0.7$ for most models), biomass distributions (±30% regional biases), and interannual variability correlation. Emergent constraints using relationships between observable contemporary properties and future projections enable uncertainty reduction[48].

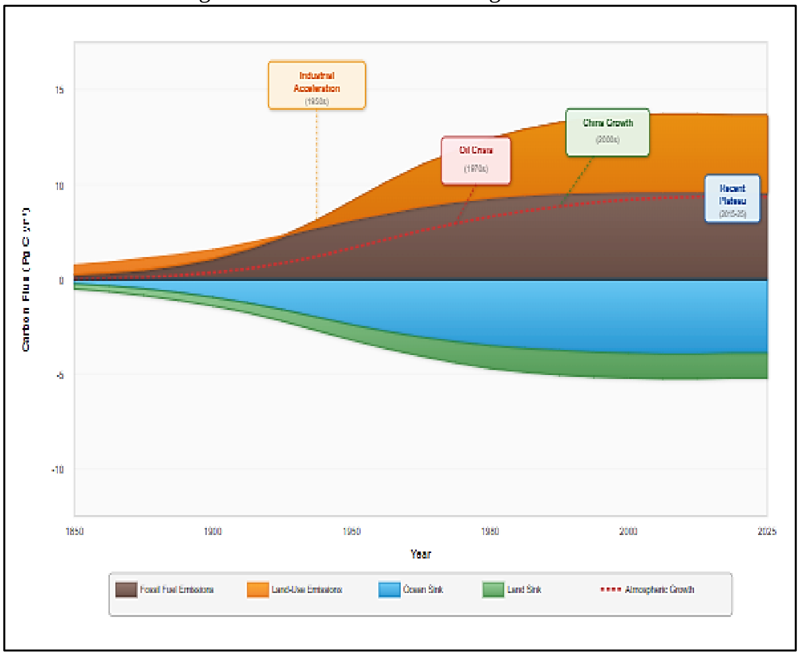
VIII. CARBON BUDGET TRAJECTORIES

8.1. Historical Changes (1750-2023)

Comprehensive carbon budget reconstructions reveal:

- Total anthropogenic emissions: 685 ± 75 Pg C
    - Fossil fuels and industry: 465 ± 20 Pg C
    - Land-use change: 220 ± 60 Pg C
- Atmospheric accumulation: 285 ± 5 Pg C
- Ocean uptake: 175 ± 35 Pg C
- Terrestrial uptake: 225 ± 75 Pg C

Figure 5: Historical Carbon Budget Evolution



Stacked area plot showing annual carbon fluxes 1850-2025 with fossil fuel emissions, land-use emissions, ocean sink, land sink, and atmospheric growth rate. Highlights key periods: industrial acceleration (1950s), oil crises (1970s), China growth (2000s), recent stabilization (2015-2025).

Emission growth rates have varied substantially across decades, with the 2000s showing 3.1% yr^{-1} growth (China rapid industrialization) compared to 0.9% yr^{-1} in the 2010s (efficiency improvements, renewables)[49].

8.2. Contemporary Budget (2013-2022)

Mean annual budget:

- Fossil fuel and industry: 9.6 ± 0.5 Pg C yr^{-1}
- Land-use change: 1.2 ± 0.7 Pg C yr^{-1}
- Total emissions: 10.8 ± 0.9 Pg C yr^{-1}
- Atmospheric growth: 5.1 ± 0.02 Pg C yr^{-1}
- Ocean sink: 2.9 ± 0.4 Pg C yr^{-1}
- Terrestrial sink: 3.1 ± 0.9 Pg C yr^{-1}

Atmospheric growth rate varies 2.5-fold (3.4 to 8.5 Pg C yr^{-1} for 2010-2023), driven primarily by tropical terrestrial flux anomalies during ENSO cycles [50].

8.3. Future Projections

The Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSPs) encompass emissions scenarios[51]:

- SSP1-1.9 (1.5°C target): Peak emissions ~2020, declining to net-zero by 2050, requires ~10 Pg C yr^{-1} CO_2 removal by 2100, atmospheric CO_2 peaks ~440 ppm mid-century.
- SSP2-4.5 (Intermediate): Emissions stabilize mid-century at ~7 Pg C yr^{-1}, warming reaches 2.0-2.5°C by 2100, atmospheric CO_2 stabilizes ~550 ppm.
- SSP5-8.5 (High emissions): Continued emission growth through 2100, warming exceeds 4°C, atmospheric CO_2 reaches ~1100 ppm.

ESM projections reveal substantial spread: ocean sink efficiency declines 15-35% by 2100 relative to present; terrestrial sink ranges from continued uptake (+2 Pg C yr^{-1}) to net source (-1 Pg C yr^{-1}); combined feedback adds 50-250 ppm CO_2 by 2100 beyond emissions under SSP5-8.5 [52].

IX. REGIONAL DYNAMICS

9.1. Tropical Systems

Tropical regions contain ~50% of terrestrial biomass and account for ~40% of global GPP [53]. The Amazon Basin stores ~120 Pg C with intact forest sink declining from 0.5 Pg C yr^{-1} (1990s) to 0.2 Pg C yr^{-1} (2010s), while deforestation emissions of 0.3-0.5 Pg C yr^{-1} push the region toward carbon neutrality or source behavior [54]. Southeast Asian peatland drainage and deforestation constitute major sources, releasing 0.35-0.55 Pg C yr^{-1} combined [16].

9.2. Boreal and Arctic Systems

Northern high-latitude regions contain ~500 Pg C in vegetation and ~1,700 Pg C in permafrost-affected soils[55]. Progressive permafrost thaw mobilizes carbon through gradual top-down active layer deepening and abrupt thermokarst formation. Decomposition produces both CO_2 (aerobic) and CH_4 (anaerobic), with CH_4 contributing ~5% of carbon release but 15-20% of radiative forcing [56]. Boreal forests show complex carbon balance influenced by warming-enhanced growth in moisture-sufficient regions offset by drought stress, increasing fire frequency, and insect outbreaks [57].

9.3. Temperate Zone Sinks

North American forests absorb ~0.3 Pg C yr^{-1} (~15% of national fossil fuel emissions) through regrowth following historical clearing, fire suppression, and CO_2 fertilization [20]. European forests sequester ~0.15 Pg C yr^{-1} through active management and expansion[61]. Chinese afforestation programs, particularly Grain-to-Green, contribute ~0.2 Pg C yr^{-1} [58].

X. CARBON MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

10.1. Natural Climate Solutions

Ecosystem-based approaches offer significant potential while providing co-benefits[59]. Afforestation and reforestation could sequester 3-10 Pg C yr^{-1} by 2050, though estimates depend on land availability and climate impacts[59]. Improved forest management through reducing harvest intensity and preventing deforestation could avoid 1-3 Pg C yr^{-1} emissions [60]. Agricultural soil carbon sequestration through cover cropping, reduced tillage, and biochar amendments could sequester 0.5-2.0 Pg C yr^{-1}, though saturation effects limit long-term potential [61].

10.2. Technological Carbon Removal

Direct Air Carbon Capture and Storage (DACCS) extracts CO_2 from ambient air with current costs of $400-1,000 per tonne CO_2 and energy requirements of 1.5-2.5 MWh per tonne [62]. Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) offers 1-5 Pg C yr^{-1} potential but requires 200-1,000 million hectares, competing with food production [63]. Enhanced weathering using crushed silicate minerals has technical potential of 2-4 Pg C yr^{-1} [64].

10.3. Emission Reduction Priorities

Energy system decarbonization through transition to renewables and nuclear power while electrifying end-uses remains primary priority [65]. Industrial process emissions (cement, steel, chemical production, ~15% of global emissions) require alternative chemistries, carbon capture, and circular economy approaches[66]. Agricultural emissions from livestock, rice cultivation, and fertilizer use require dietary shifts, improved nitrogen efficiency, and alternate wetting and drying in rice systems [66].

XI. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

11.1. Carbon Budgets for Temperature Targets

Limiting warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial with 50% probability requires remaining budget of ~400 Pg C from 2020, exhausted by ~2038 at current rates, necessitating immediate emission peak and net-zero by ~2050 [67]. The 2°C budget allows ~1,000 Pg C remaining, exhausted by ~2090 at current rates, requiring net-zero by ~2070 [68]. Both targets require substantial carbon removal (2-10 Pg C yr^{-1} by 2100).

11.2. Monitoring and Verification

The Paris Agreement requires transparent greenhouse gas inventory reporting[69]. Bottom-up inventory approaches using activity data and emission factors produce national inventories with fossil CO_2 uncertainty of

±5-10% for developed nations and ±20-50% for developing countries [70]. Top-down atmospheric inversions provide independent constraint, estimating fluxes at sub-continental scales with ±20-50% uncertainties[70]. Integrated approaches combining bottom-up and top-down methods through Bayesian fusion enhance confidence.

11.3. Economic Instruments

Carbon pricing internalizes climate externalities, with current implemented prices ranging $1-150 per tonne CO_2 [71]. Modeling studies suggest $50-200 per tonne CO_2 by 2030 and $100-500 by 2050 required for 2°C pathways [71]. Cap-and-trade systems including the EU Emissions Trading System and China national system provide market-based mechanisms [72]. Border carbon adjustments prevent carbon leakage while incentivizing global participation [73].

XII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This comprehensive analysis reveals the carbon cycle as a complex system experiencing unprecedented anthropogenic perturbation. Human activities have increased atmospheric CO_2 by 50% above pre-industrial levels, with current emission rates (~11 Pg C yr^{-1}) exceeding natural sink capacity (~5.5 Pg C yr^{-1}) by a factor of two, driving atmospheric accumulation at ~2.5 ppm yr^{-1}.

While natural sinks have absorbed ~55% of anthropogenic emissions to date, multiple lines of evidence suggest declining efficiency. Tropical regions are transitioning from net sink to near-neutral or source, temperate zones maintain strong sinks through regrowth, and boreal/Arctic regions show complex responses balancing growth enhancement and disturbance increases. Climate-carbon feedbacks projected to reduce future sink capacity by 15-35% include permafrost thaw (potentially releasing 50-250 Pg C by 2100), ocean acidification (reducing uptake efficiency), and enhanced ecosystem respiration.

Achieving climate stabilization requires fundamental transformation. The dominant role of fossil fuel emissions (87% of anthropogenic sources) necessitates rapid energy system decarbonization as primary strategy. All IPCC pathways limiting warming to 1.5-2°C require carbon dioxide removal at 2-10 Pg C yr^{-1} scale by mid-century, representing a 200-1,000× increase from current deployment. Protecting existing carbon stocks through deforestation prevention and ecosystem restoration offers cost-effective near-term mitigation.

Critical uncertainties persist regarding regional carbon balance attribution, climate-carbon feedback magnitudes, and threshold behavior potential. Sparse data coverage in tropical terrestrial systems and Southern Ocean limits quantitative precision (±0.5-1.0 Pg C yr^{-1} uncertainties in major flux components). Earth system models exhibit 200+ ppm CO_2 spread by 2100 under identical scenarios, reflecting process representation limitations for permafrost dynamics, fire regimes, and drought-induced mortality.

Future research priorities include:

- Resolving Tropical Carbon Cycle Discrepancies Through Enhanced Observational Networks
- Constraining Permafrost Feedback Magnitudes Through Intensive Field Campaigns
- Understanding Ocean Biology-Climate Interactions
- Developing Robust Monitoring For Carbon Removal Verification And
- Coupling Earth system models with integrated assessment models.

The carbon cycle science synthesized herein provides clear imperatives: rapid fossil fuel emission reductions must constitute the primary mitigation strategy, complemented by ecosystem protection and emerging carbon removal technologies. The scale and urgency of required action demand immediate implementation of comprehensive climate policies, acknowledging that delayed action increases both costs and risks. Future carbon cycle trajectories will be determined not by biophysical constraints but by societal choices regarding emission pathways, technological investments, and policy implementation over the coming critical decades.

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