

Effect of Greenhouse Gases and Solar Radiation

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Abstract: *Gases that trap heat in the atmosphere are called greenhouse gases. This section provides information on emissions and removals of the main greenhouse gases to and from the atmosphere. Click on a greenhouse gas below to learn about its emissions in more detail. Global warming is defined as the increase in the Earth's atmosphere and ocean temperatures over time, primarily due to human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation, which raise the concentration of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide. This phenomenon leads to climate changes that can disrupt ecosystems and threaten food supply and living environments.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Global warming is the phenomenon of a gradual increase in the temperature near the earth's surface. This phenomenon has been observed over the past one or two centuries. This change has disturbed the climatic pattern of the earth. However, the concept of global warming is quite controversial but the scientists have provided relevant data in support of the fact that the temperature of the earth is rising constantly.

There are several causes of global warming, which have a negative effect on humans, plants and animals. These causes may be natural or might be the outcome of human activities. In order to curb the issues, it is very important to understand the negative impacts of global warming.

Increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) cannot directly be attributed to a larger ozone hole, as they exert a dual effect. While GHGs are thought to lead to warmer temperatures, they tend to have a cooling effect in the middle and upper stratosphere which reduces the temperature exchange between the different layers of Earth's atmosphere. This stratospheric cooling effect is generally positively associated with ozone recovery, except for the polar regions. Here, very low temperatures can lead to an increase in the formation of polar stratospheric clouds, which facilitate ozone depletion as explained above.¹

Finally, smoke-charged vortex (SCV) resulting from wildfires transport aerosols into the stratosphere, and this leads to both depleting and increasing the ozone layer stemming from different chemical reactions at different atmospheric layers, depletion being the bigger part (Max Planck Institute for Chemistry, 2024 - see the list of scientific references). With the increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires driven by global warming, the formation of SCVs and their impact on the stratosphere could become more common, posing a threat to the ozone layer.

The new findings by researchers of the Max Planck Institute highlight that natural events, exacerbated by climate change, pose additional risks to this fragile stratospheric layer. Since current observations show that the size and persistence of the ozone hole are largely dynamically driven, the urgency of continuing global efforts under the Montreal Protocol to ensure a swift recovery of the ozone layer and mitigating climate change remain key.²

Over the last few decades, emissions of human-made chemicals known as ozone-depleting substances (ODSs) have resulted in a thinning of the ozone layer. This is most obvious over the Antarctic, where the chemical destruction of ozone constrained by the strong winds of the stratospheric polar vortex results in the 'ozone hole', but ODSs affect stratospheric ozone concentrations worldwide. On 1 January 1989, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (a protocol to the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer) entered into force as an international treaty designed to protect the ozone layer by phasing out the production of numerous ODSs responsible for ozone depletion. As a result of this first universally ratified treaty in United Nations

history the ozone layer is slowly recovering. To ensure the treaty is successfully executed over this long time period, policy makers need information about the amounts of ozone and related chemical species in the stratosphere.

The Protocol provides a set of practical ways to phase out ODSs – including through stringent measures worldwide to control products containing the chemicals. In 2016, the Protocol was amended in Kigali to also phase out the production and use of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) - which became a replacement for ODSs but proved to be more potent than carbon dioxide, and detrimental to the climate. According to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), thanks to the agreement, there has been a substantial reduction in ODSs emissions over the last two decades, and there is evidence that the ozone layer is healing itself and can recover by the middle of this century.³

Scientists have also noted that ozone protection efforts have evidently slowed climate change by avoiding an estimated 135 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions from 1990 to 2010. A successful reduction in HFCs in the atmosphere can avoid up to 0.4 degree Celsius of global temperature rise by 2100, while continuing to protect the ozone layer. For humans, the Montreal Protocol has potentially helped to prevent up to 2 million cases of skin cancer globally each year by 2030 and resulted in an estimated US\$1.8 trillion in health benefits, mostly in skin cancer treatment alone. “The Montreal Protocol stands ready to provide more: to protect all life on Earth, creating a cooler environment, and safeguarding biodiversity to help feed growing populations,” said Inger Andersen, the head of UNEP, in her message for the day.

Ozone layer depletion increases harmful ultraviolet (UV-B) radiation reaching Earth, causing severe health risks (skin cancer, cataracts, immune suppression), damaging marine ecosystems by killing phytoplankton, and disrupting plant growth/agricultural yields. It also harms animals and impacts global climate⁴

- **Human Health Impacts:** Increased UV exposure leads to higher rates of skin cancers (including melanoma), cataracts (clouding of the eye lens), and weakened immune systems.
- **Environmental & Marine Damage:**
- UV-B radiation harms phytoplankton, which are critical to the marine food chain, and reduces the reproductive capacity of fish, shrimp, and other aquatic organisms.
- **Terrestrial Ecosystems and Agriculture:** Excessive UV radiation inhibits photosynthesis, slows plant growth, and alters the stability of ecosystems.
- **Biodiversity Loss:** Increased, uncontrolled UV radiation disrupts ecological balance and can alter the composition of plant species.

The primary cause is the release of man-made chemicals, specifically Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), halons, solvents, and foaming agents. When these rise to the stratosphere, they are broken down by sunlight, releasing chlorine atoms that destroy ozone molecules.

Ozone layer depletion increases the amount of UVB that reaches the Earth’s surface. Laboratory and epidemiological studies demonstrate that UVB causes non-melanoma skin cancer and plays a major role in malignant melanoma development. Of the human health effects from sun exposure, melanoma is the most lethal, causing nearly 8,500 deaths annually in the United States. In addition, UVB has been linked to the development of cataracts, a clouding of the eye’s lens.

UVB radiation affects the physiological and developmental processes of plants. Despite mechanisms to reduce or repair these effects and an ability to adapt to increased levels of UVB, plant growth can be directly affected by UVB radiation.⁵

Indirect changes caused by UVB (such as changes in plant form, how nutrients are distributed within the plant, timing of developmental phases and secondary metabolism) may be equally or sometimes more important than damaging effects of UVB. These changes can have important implications for plant competitive balance, herbivory, plant diseases, and biogeochemical cycles.

Phytoplankton form the foundation of aquatic food webs. Phytoplankton productivity is limited to the euphotic zone, the upper layer of the water column in which there is sufficient sunlight to support net productivity. Exposure to solar UVB radiation has been shown to affect both orientation and motility in phytoplankton, resulting in reduced survival

rates for these organisms. Scientists have demonstrated a direct reduction in phytoplankton production due to ozone depletion-related increases in UVB.

UVB radiation has been found to cause damage to early developmental stages of fish, shrimp, crab, amphibians, and other marine animals. The most severe effects are decreased reproductive capacity and impaired larval development. Small increases in UVB exposure could result in population reductions for small marine organisms with implications for the whole marine food chain.⁶

Increases in UVB radiation could affect terrestrial and aquatic biogeochemical cycles, thus altering both sources and sinks of greenhouse and chemically important trace gases (e.g., carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, carbonyl sulfide, ozone, and possibly other gases). These potential changes would contribute to biosphere-atmosphere feedbacks that mitigate or amplify the atmospheric concentrations of these gases. Synthetic polymers, naturally occurring biopolymers, as well as some other materials of commercial interest are adversely affected by UVB radiation. Today's materials are somewhat protected from UVB by special additives. Yet, increases in UVB levels will accelerate their breakdown, limiting the length of time for which they are useful outdoors.

Ozone depletion is greatest at the South Pole. It occurs mainly in late winter and early spring (which is from August to November in that region) and peak depletion usually occurs in early October, when the ozone is often completely destroyed in large areas.

This severe depletion creates the so-called "ozone hole" that can be seen in images of Antarctic ozone, made using satellite observations. In most years, the maximum area of the hole is bigger than the Antarctic continent itself. Although ozone losses are less radical in the Northern Hemisphere, significant thinning of the ozone layer is also observed over the Arctic and even over continental Europe.

On its path through the atmosphere, solar UVR is absorbed and scattered by various constituents of the atmosphere. It is scattered by air molecules, particularly oxygen and nitrogen, by aerosol and dust particles, and is scattered and absorbed by atmospheric pollution. Total solar irradiance and the relative contributions of different wavelengths vary with altitude. Clouds attenuate solar radiation, although their effect on infrared radiation is greater than on UVR. Reflection of sunlight from certain ground surfaces may contribute significantly to the total amount of scattered UVR. By adding more GHGs, like carbon dioxide and methane, to the atmosphere, humans are causing average global temperature to rise at an unprecedented rate. Earth has warmed by an average of 0.11°F (0.06°C) per decade since 1850, or about 2°F (1.1°C) in total. If yearly emissions continue to increase as rapidly as they have since 2000, climate models project that by the end of this century global temperature will be between 2.7°F (1.5°C) warmer than the 1901-1960 average, and possibly as much as 7.9°F (4.4°C) warmer, which would be catastrophic to human civilization..

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