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# Exploring the climatic impact of the continental vegetation on the Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and climate history

Y. Donnadieu<sup>1</sup>, Y. Godd ris<sup>2</sup>, and N. Bouttes<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Laboratoire des Sciences du Climat et de l'Environnement (LSCE), unit  mixte CNRS-CEA-UVSQ, Gif/Yvette, France

<sup>2</sup>Laboratoire des M canismes et Transferts en G ologie (LMTG), Toulouse, France

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Correspondence to: Y. Donnadieu (yannick.donnadieu@lsce.ipsl.fr)

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## Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

## Abstract

In this contribution, we continue our exploration of the factors defining the Mesozoic climatic history. We improve the Earth system model GEOCLIM designed for long term climate and geochemical reconstructions by adding the explicit calculation of the biome dynamics using the LPJ model. The coupled GEOCLIM-LPJ model thus allows the simultaneous calculation of the climate with a 2-D spatial resolution, the coeval atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, and the continental biome distribution. We found that accounting for the climatic role of the continental vegetation dynamics (albedo change, water cycle and surface roughness modulations) strongly affects the reconstructed geological climate. Indeed the calculated partial pressure of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> over the Mesozoic is twice the value calculated when assuming a uniform constant vegetation. This increase in CO<sub>2</sub> is triggered by a global cooling of the continents, itself triggered by a general increase in continental albedo owing to the development of desertic surfaces. This cooling reduces the CO<sub>2</sub> consumption through silicate weathering, and hence results in a compensating increase in the atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> pressure. This study demonstrates that the impact of land plants on climate and hence on atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is as important as their geochemical effect through the enhancement of chemical weathering of the continental surface. Our GEOCLIM-LPJ simulations also define a climatic baseline for the Mesozoic, around which exceptionally cool and warm events can be identified.

## 1 Introduction

Since the early work of Walker et al. (1981), global climatic evolution of the Earth is described as the result of the long term balance between continental silicate weathering ( $F_{sw}$ ) and solid Earth CO<sub>2</sub> degassing ( $F_{vol}$ ). This balance defines the multi-million years atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> base level, around which fluctuations are allowed at shorter timescales (Berner and Kothavala, 2001; Donnadiou et al., 2006a; Godd eris and Fran ois, 1995). The term  $F_{sw}$  is expressed as a function of numerous parame-

CPD

4, 1021–1045, 2008

## Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadiou et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

ters, such as temperature (Brady, 1991; Dessert et al., 2001), continental runoff (Oliva et al., 2003), physical erosion (Millot et al., 2002) and continental vegetation cover (Berner, 1997), these parameters being all intertwined. Nevertheless, a comprehensive formula, physically accounting for each parameter, is far from being reached. Indeed, the most standard mathematical expression for silicate weathering is:

$$Fsw(=)k \times runoff \times exp(aT) \quad (1)$$

where *runoff* and *T* are respectively the mean annual temperature and continental runoff. *k* is a constant. Then, in order to introduce the others factors influencing *Fsw*, one can add several dimensionless parameters or feedback functions representing the erosion changes driven by the uplift occurring in Earth's history, the evolution of the continental area modulated by the sea-level changes, the impact of continental vegetation, and so on (Berner, 2004). An interesting example of this method is the simulation of the effect of land plants on weathering. Land plants can activate the silicate weathering rate. With their roots, they make the soil more acidic to enhance the uptake of nutrients. They also increase the pCO<sub>2</sub> of the soil since there is more organic matter, and CO<sub>2</sub> is released by the root and microbial respiration. They finally increase the residence time of water in the weathering profile, thus promoting further mineral dissolution. Studies were made to quantify the impact of plants by measuring the silicate weathering rate over vegetated area versus area sporadically covered by mosses and lichens (Drever and Zobrist, 1992; Moulton and Berner, 1998). Those authors found a ratio of weathering rates between vegetated and non-vegetated area varying between 2 and 8 for young weathering systems (with intense physical erosion such as in mountainous area, or on recent volcanic outcrop as in Iceland).

Based on these results, Berner (1990) introduced a multiplying parameter in Eq. (1) (*fE(t)*, where *t* is geological time) that expresses the effects of the rise and evolution of vascular land plants on the rates of silicate weathering. The lowest value of *fE(t)* is 0.25 and is used for a non vegetated world (before 380 Ma). Then, a value of *fE(t)*=0.875 for weathering by pteridophytes and gymnosperms (350–130 Ma) is used with a transition to angiosperm controlled weathering taking place between 130

## Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

and 80 Ma (Berner, 2004). After 80 Ma, the value of  $fE(t)$  is set equal to one. Based on such parameterization, Berner (2004) has demonstrated that the evolution of land plants is a first-order control parameter of the long term climate evolution through its impact on silicate weathering rates. In this contribution, we will explore a second effect of the land plants on the Earth climate evolution neglected up to now: its physical impact on the global water cycle, on the albedo of the Earth surface, and on the continental roughness. All those parameters should directly influence the continental temperature and runoff, and hence the continental weathering, in addition to the direct effect of land plants on weathering described above. These climatic impacts have been neglected up to now because the climate model used in long-term geochemical and climatic evolution were too basic to allow a physical quantification. Indeed, previous climatic-geochemical coupled models did not explicitly and physically include the climate as they either use a parameterization linking the mean global temperature to atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, and global continental runoff to this calculated air temperature (Berner, 1990), or 1-dimensional energy balance models with no physical water cycle representation (Goddéris and Joachimski, 2004; Simon et al., 2007). These simple tools are useless regarding our purpose. However spectacular progresses have been made in the climate modelling area. In particular, owing to the ongoing improvement of supercomputers, we are now in a position to use General Circulation Models for performing such a study with an interactive vegetation model. Such types of models would allow a physical quantification of the effect of land plants on the climate.

We recently developed an Earth System Model, called GEOCLIM, capable of multi-million year integrations of long-term variables (i.e. oceans, ice sheets, geochemical cycles) accounting for relatively low frequency forcing (e.g. paleogeography, carbonate factory) and internal feedbacks contributing to non-linear behaviour (Donnadieu et al., 2004). This model coupled an atmospheric general circulation model to a global biogeochemical cycle model (including a description of the carbon and alkalinity cycles). This model has been used to explicitly quantify the impact of the continental configurations on the Mesozoic climate history (251–65 Ma). We showed that the break-up of

**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

the Pangaea supercontinent has triggered an increase in continental runoff, resulting in enhanced atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> consumption through silicate weathering (Donnadieu et al., 2006a). As a result, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> fell from values above 3000 ppmv during the Triassic down to rather low levels during the Cretaceous (around 400 ppmv), resulting in a decrease in global mean annual continental temperatures from about 20°C to 10°C over the course of the Mesozoic. Most of the CO<sub>2</sub> drop is concentrated at the end of the Triassic within a 20 Myr time window in response to a moderate northward drift of the Pangea supercontinent (Goddéris et al., 2008), exposing large continental surface to intense weathering in the warm and humid equatorial climate.

All those GEOCLIM simulations were performed assuming uniform physical characteristics of the continental surface, typical of a globally distributed deciduous forest. Because of this rough assumption, the climatic feedback of the biome distribution was not explored. After having unravelled the tectonic forcing over the Mesozoic, we focus on the impact of vegetation on climate and hence on weathering rates. This objective requires the estimate of the biome distribution in response to climate change, and the feedback of this distribution on the climate itself. For that reason, we have coupled the Dynamic Vegetation Model LPJ (Sitch et al., 2003) to the Fast Ocean Atmosphere Model FOAM (Donnadieu et al., 2006b). We thus quantify the feedback of changing vegetation cover on the climate, which in turn influences the silicate weathering through the runoff and the temperature variables used to calculate weathering rates (Eq. 1). New predicted atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and climate are discussed regarding the most recent <sup>18</sup>O constraints.

## 2 Methods and tools

### 2.1 Generality

We use the GEOCLIM model allowing to calculate simultaneously the global carbon cycle (including the atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> partial pressure), the climate and the silicate rock

weathering, the two last output with a 2-dimensional spatial resolution above continental surfaces. A full description of the model can be found in Donnadieu et al. (2006) (see also references therein). In summary, a full coupling between FOAM and COMBINE (the geochemical module) cannot be achieved owing to excessive computational times. Hence we adopt an indirect coupling that employs look-up tables from a catalogue of simulations. Climatic parameters, temperature and runoff, calculated on the 48×40 grid of FOAM are used to evaluate the weathering rates on the same grid according to Eq. (1). Then, fixing the CO<sub>2</sub> degassing rate, a numerical feedback loop between FOAM and COMBINE is run until a steady-state PCO<sub>2</sub> is reached. Each continental configuration is thus finally characterized by a steady-state atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> level and a distribution of the climatic variables (mean annual temperature and runoff).

## 2.2 Vegetation

The main improvement of GEOCLIM is the coupling with the vegetation model LPJ (Lund-Potsdam-Jena) so that vegetation distribution can be coevally calculated with the climatic reconstruction. LPJ is a Dynamic Global Vegetation Model of vegetation biogeography and vegetation/soil biogeochemistry. Starting from the climate, soil and atmospheric information as input, it dynamically computes spatially explicit transient vegetation composition in terms of plant functional groups, and their associated carbon and water budgets. To couple FOAM with LPJ, we have written a python program that changes the climatic parameters in the FOAM boundary files according to the vegetation given by LPJ. The influence of vegetation on climate occurs through the fluxes of energy, water vapour and momentum between land and atmosphere. Vegetation absorbs part of the heat which modifies the sensible heat flux. Plants also transpire and change the latent heat flux. Furthermore, they hinder air movements which transfer momentum. The calculated vegetation distribution directly impacts on the following physical parameters in FOAM: (1) the albedo of each continental grid element, (2) its thermal properties, (3) its roughness, (4) its potential evaporation.

### Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

### 2.3 Approximations for deep time utility

Even if LPJ has been designed to be used for present and past simulations, some of the PFTs are not relevant for the Mesozoic simulations. Indeed, C4 grass were only well established by the Miocene period, and C3 grass probably appeared during the Late Cretaceous (Chapman, 1993). Instead of grass, ferns would probably have grown. Thus, the temperate herbaceous (C3 grass) and the tropical herbaceous (C4 grass) must be understood as ferns. Nevertheless, the creation of a new PFT corresponding to ferns, which remains to be done, would allow us to have a more precise idea of where ferns would have developed. This study should really be understood as a first step toward a better understanding of the climatic role of land plants on weathering. Indeed, in addition to the uncertainties tied to the use of modern PFTs for deep time problems, representation of the explicit effect of plants on weathering in the soil will not be investigated here as mentioned in the introduction. Our goal here is to isolate the climatic role of land plants. Future advances on coupling LPJ with an explicit soil weathering model such as WITCH (Goddéris et al., 2006) will be undergone in the future, so that the impact of continental vegetation on chemical weathering could be explicitly modelled.

A single soil type (medium) is prescribed in LPJ because adequate empirical constraints on the types of soil during the Mesozoic are lacking. A sensitivity analysis on the type of soil prescribed in LPJ for the present has been done; comparing the vegetation distribution obtained with a single soil type to the results obtained with the real soil types. It appears that it only changes the vegetation distribution by 12% in the worst case (with the fine, vertisol soil type). As the vegetation changes are less than 2% with the medium soil type, the latter is chosen as the single soil type used for the Mesozoic simulations.

## Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

## 2.4 Boundary conditions

The two only forcing functions are the slowly increasing solar constant and the continental configuration. The carbon cycle, the climate and the continental vegetation evolve freely until a steady-state is reached. Since no firm constraint exists on the solid Earth degassing rate, we kept it at its present-day constant value in all simulations (see the brief discussion in Donnadieu et al., 2006). Once steady-state is reached, the total CO<sub>2</sub> consumption through silicate weathering is thus the same in all simulations to maintain the multi-million year balance of the carbon cycle. But the spatial distribution will differ from one geological period to the other. Seven time slices are simulated, corresponding to seven geographical configurations along the course of the Pangea breakup. These configurations are exactly the same as those used in Donnadieu et al. (2006) and in Godd ris et al. (2008), from the end Permian towards the latest Cretaceous. The only but important change is the coupling of FOAM with the terrestrial biosphere model, LPJ. In our coupling of FOAM and LPJ, FOAM is run for one year, during which monthly average temperature, precipitation, cloud cover and insolation are saved. These fields are then used to force LPJ, after which the vegetation is updated in FOAM. This process is repeated throughout the experiment integration defined by geography and an atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> level. Each experiment is integrated for 30 model years; results used in the GEOCLIM interpolation procedure have been averaged over the final ten years.

## 3 Results

Calculated atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> for the 7 time slices of the geological past show the same general trend as the one simulated in Donnadieu et al. (2006) (noted D06 thereafter) (Fig. 1), a more or less monotonic decrease punctuated by a large fall at the end of the Triassic. Nevertheless, implementing vegetation as a function of climate induces changes in the absolute values of PCO<sub>2</sub>. Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is always higher when the

### Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[⏪](#)[⏩](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)

**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[⏪](#)[⏩](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)

going on, let's take a look at the mean annual temperature distribution for the three time periods during which a diverging trend between global and continental temperatures takes place (Fig. 4). We can first note that this period corresponds to the acquisition of two major characters of the modern geography i.e. the existence of pole-centred continents (see also Fig. 2 to have a general overview of geographies) and the existence of a northern polar ocean surrounded by land masses. The accentuated cooling over land is mainly due to the drifting of the Antarctica continent over the South Pole. In addition, general cooling induced by decreasing CO<sub>2</sub> increases the surface of continents favourable to winter snow cover resulting in a positive feedback. Figure 5 clearly shows the polar thermal amplification of the cooling first generated by the CO<sub>2</sub> decrease. In detail, the cooling signal from Toarcian to Berriasian follows the drifting of Antarctic and Australia toward the South Pole. The continuous cooling from Berriasian to Cenomanian is more due to the snow-albedo feedback, with a larger surface of the Northern Hemisphere being snow covered.

## 4 Discussions

Implementation of LPJ in GEOCLIM allows us to account for the dynamic effects of vegetation on climate. Main conclusions regarding the previous results obtained with a unique vegetation type (“mixed deciduous evergreen forest”) on every land point are :

1. For the same atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> level, free evolving vegetation induces a cooler and a drier world. Indeed, large barren surfaces replace the previously imposed PFT mixed deciduous evergreen forest and lead to a cooling and to a modification of the hydrological cycle.
2. However, and surprisingly, changes in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> level following the inclusion of vegetation dynamics remains broadly constant with a doubling of CO<sub>2</sub> and appears only weakly dependant on the various continental positions occurring during the Mesozoic. As a result the general trend of the CO<sub>2</sub> history is not

sensitive to the implementation of dynamic biomes, but the absolute level is.

This result demonstrates that the biome distribution impacts heavily on the global climatic evolution of the Earth. Even without accounting for the direct effect of land plants on weathering, the biome distribution can be responsible for atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> changes by a factor of 2 compared to a simulation where no biome reactivity to climate changes is modelled. This emphasizes the need for explicit modelling of continental vegetation in the modelling of past CO<sub>2</sub> evolution, including the impact on continental surface properties. Because CO<sub>2</sub> globally increases by a factor of 2 when biome dynamic is considered, compared to the D06 set of simulations where a global temperate forest was prescribed, it might be expected that without any land plant cover, CO<sub>2</sub> would further increase (mainly because of an albedo increase when vegetation is replaced by barren surface, resulting in a global cooling of the continental surface and a collapse of the CO<sub>2</sub> consumption through continental weathering). This effect would further contribute to the global CO<sub>2</sub> drawdown at the end of the Devonian. Indeed, Berner and Kothavala (2001) have calculated that the rise of land plants would decrease atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> from about 3300 ppmv down to 1200 ppmv (a factor of 2.75) between 380 and 350 Ma through silicate weathering enhancement. This is the maximum effect since organic carbon burial is increasing at the same time in the GEOCARB III model, a process further reducing atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>. We demonstrate here that the climatic effect of land plants (albedo, roughness, water cycling changes) might be potentially of the same order of magnitude, further enhancing the cooling linked to the rise of land plants. Modelling of this key period of the Earth history (end Devonian – early Carboniferous) should be undertaken accounting for the global effect of the radiation of plants on land.

While interesting, the absolute atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels calculated here remain very theoretical and need to be discussed regarding data constraints. As discussed in Godd ris et al. (2008), paleo-proxies of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> still suffer from major uncertainties. The stomatal index method fully relies on present-day correlation between stomatal indexes and the CO<sub>2</sub> partial pressure for living species (such as Ginkgo, Re-

## Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



tallack, 2001). Such relationships are then exported in the geological past and applied to CO<sub>2</sub> levels very far beyond any observed values. The method based on measurement of carbon isotopic composition of pedogenic carbonates mainly suffers from the estimate of the link existing between the soil respired CO<sub>2</sub> level and the atmospheric pCO<sub>2</sub> (Royer et al., 2001). Soil CO<sub>2</sub> levels are not well constrained for present-day environments, and they largely depend on the soil hydrology, soil temperature and on the vegetation type and production, parameters that cannot easily be defined for past environments. As a result of these various uncertainties, for the period spanning the first 60 millions of years following the Permo-Triassic boundary, CO<sub>2</sub> paleosol reconstructions show a completely different pattern than the CO<sub>2</sub> stomatal reconstructions, the latter reconstruction being in better agreement with our CO<sub>2</sub> simulation (Godd ris et al., 2008). Models also suffer from major uncertainties due to the complexity of the Earth climatic system. We have seen here that the inclusion of a dynamic vegetation model results in higher atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the coupled carbon-climate model, compared to simulations where a global vegetation type is prescribed. Nevertheless, various unaccounted processes remain to be implemented in order to come out with an integrated picture of the CO<sub>2</sub> evolution over the Mesozoic. For example, a work, still in progress, has been undertaken to explicitly simulate the chemical weathering within soil rather than to continue to use parametric law providing us with a broad estimate of CO<sub>2</sub> consumption through weathering. In addition, another difficulty arises from the short response time of carbon in the exospheric system (200 kyr, see in Francois and Godd ris, 1998). Within a few million years, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels may rise or fall by one order of magnitude, apart from any long-term trends that are explored in this contribution, and the proxies may record these abrupt changes. Indeed, the GEOCLIM-LPJ experiments designed here are only helpful to understand what forces the long-term trend of the climate. However, the paleo-climate evolution integrates short, mid, and long-term processes which can destabilize the climate for a given time period. In order to illustrate our purpose, let us now consider the Mesozoic climate evolution using the last updated compilation of carbonate marine oxygen

**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[⏪](#)[⏩](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)

northern mid-latitudes record a 7°C cooling. Using  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  measured on apatite from fish teeth, Dromart et al. (2003) suggested a cooling of 3 to 5°C depending on the value of the  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  of sea-water. They also noted that the seawater cooling indicated by the O-isotope paleothermometry coincided exactly with the massive southward movement of boreal ammonites. The documentation of this cold snap with three independent climate proxies shows that it is a real and firm event but also that the Prokoph database produces a trustable isotopic signal. The second largest cooling event of the Mesozoic database is the one occurring at the Berriasian-Valanginian boundary. Accounting for these events and considering the Prokoph et al. (2008) database, the alleged warm Cretaceous is considerably reduced in length and appears to have taken place within the Late Cretaceous (100–70 Ma). In detail, the amplitude of the variability becomes important within this period, including a short cold snapshot in the Campanian, and makes it hard to assimilate the Late Cretaceous to a mean “warm” period. Nevertheless, it seems that the 20 Myr spanning the Cenomanian to the Santonian stages were really warm and only interrupted by brief intervals of minor cooling. We use “minor” because when looking at the 200 Ma paleotemperature record, minimum values of the sea surface temperature remain well above those found during the Callovian-Oxfordian and the Valanginian. Then, a short cooling event occurs at the beginning of the Campanian (83.5–70.6 Ma) followed by a warm period. The Maastrichtian records a cooling that settles back the temperature to the mean base level of the Early Cretaceous. Fish teeth  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  data gathered by Puceat et al. (2007) have already demonstrated that marine temperatures of the climatic optimum of the middle Cretaceous and of the cooler latest Cretaceous were separated by 7°C on average. Amplitude of the cooling estimated here is of the same order. In summary, the Prokoph database shows a climate highly unstable at the million years time step punctuated by warm and cool events. This first conclusion leads us to question the notion of a mean 10 Myr time step climate used in our long-term climate model. Indeed, it seems that the climate is never equilibrated and shifts from one instability to the other. Nevertheless, a way to validate our model is to see where it sets the mean climate state (see Fig. 6). For that, we calculate the

**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

mid-latitude oceanic surface temperatures in the Tethys realm for each paleogeography and steady-state CO<sub>2</sub> simulated. Green crosses are the temperatures as simulated by GEOCLIM-LPJ using a constant Earth degassing flux. The calculated temperatures define a multi-million year baseline, standing for the climate that should be reached if the Earth system was close to steady-state and not affected by the various processes occurring at shorter timescales than 10 Myr. Despite the simplicity of our modelling system, our mid-latitudes temperature estimates fall on the mean trend of the dataset and are in good agreement in terms of absolute values. These results support the conclusion that the continental configuration is the first order process controlling the long-term climatic evolution. It is interesting to note that our mean climate trend allows to qualify the Callovian-Oxfordian and the Berriasian-Valanginian events as cool events according to our modelled baseline. In the same way, the early Jurassic and the late Cretaceous temperature estimates are well above our simulated temperatures and as such can be qualified as exceptionally warm periods (exceptionally here meaning a warming exceeding the baseline value). As already envisioned before, processes we have focused on here can not account for millions years time step instabilities, continental configurations through its impact on silicate weathering only fix the long-term mean atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> level trend. Then, in the real world, several processes can modify the long-term trend. Among them, let us cite the perturbations due to the LIPs, to the OAE or to changes in global ocean dynamics (Courtillot and Renne, 2003; Jenkyns, 1988; Knoll et al., 1996). The next steps toward a better understanding of the forcing factors controlling the Mesozoic climate evolution will thus imply the consideration of these processes. This will consist in developing specific modules accounting for the sulphur cycle if we want to be able to accurately simulate the impact of LIPs or better accounting for the water-sediment interface processes for OAE.

In summary, our study provides the first explicit quantification of the effect of plants on weathering through climatic changes. Data/model comparisons allow to validate our simulated climate long-term trend as a plausible baseline and demonstrate the importance of the tectonic forcing factor. More explicit modelling will help to reveal the



importance of the tectonic forcing over the other factors cited above.



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CPD

4, 1021–1045, 2008

## Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadieu et al.

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- 30

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[⏪](#)[⏩](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)

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vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[⏪](#)[⏩](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)

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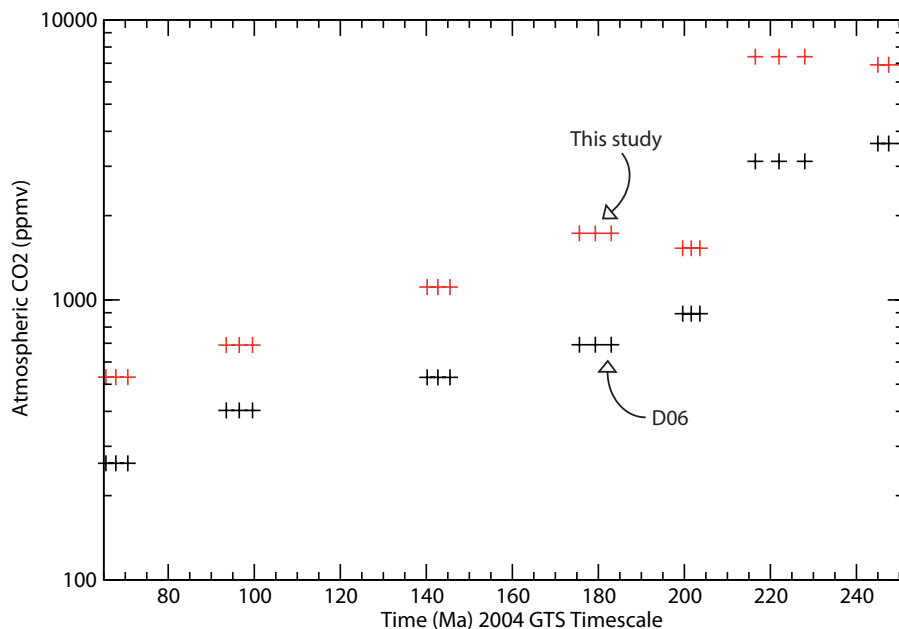
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**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

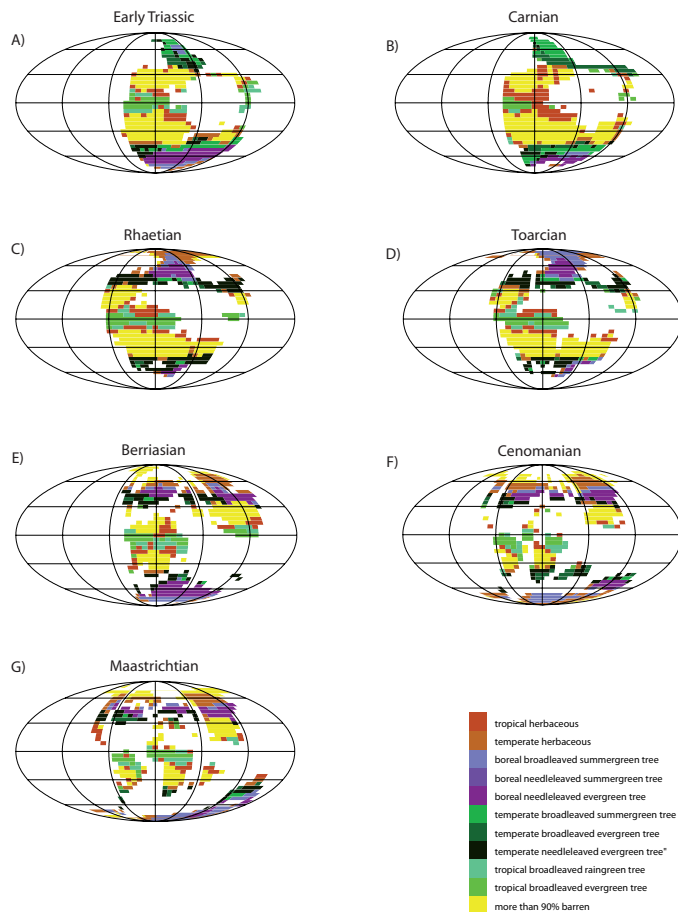


**Fig. 1.** Evolution of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> through the Mesozoic. Black crosses stand for the CO<sub>2</sub>-value obtained with the 2006 GEOCLIM version. The red crosses represent the modelled atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> with GEOCLIM-LPJ under boundary conditions fully described in the text.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)

## Biophysical effect of vegetation on Mesozoic atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

Y. Donnadieu et al.



**Fig. 2.** Simulated ecological biomes for the 7 time periods.

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

⏪

⏩

◀

▶

Back

Close

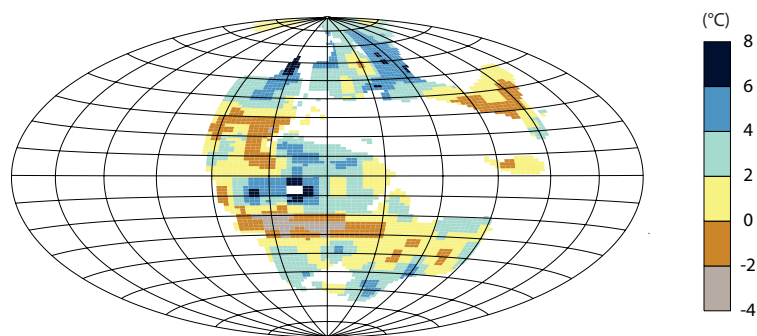
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Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

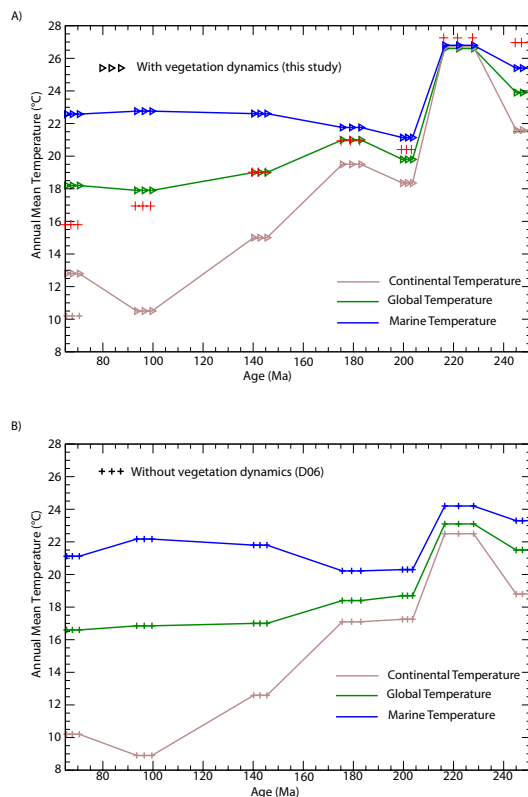


**Fig. 3.** Difference in mean annual temperature as simulated between a GEOCLIM-LPJ Toarcian run and a GEOCLIM Toarcian run.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[⏪](#)[⏩](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)

**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.

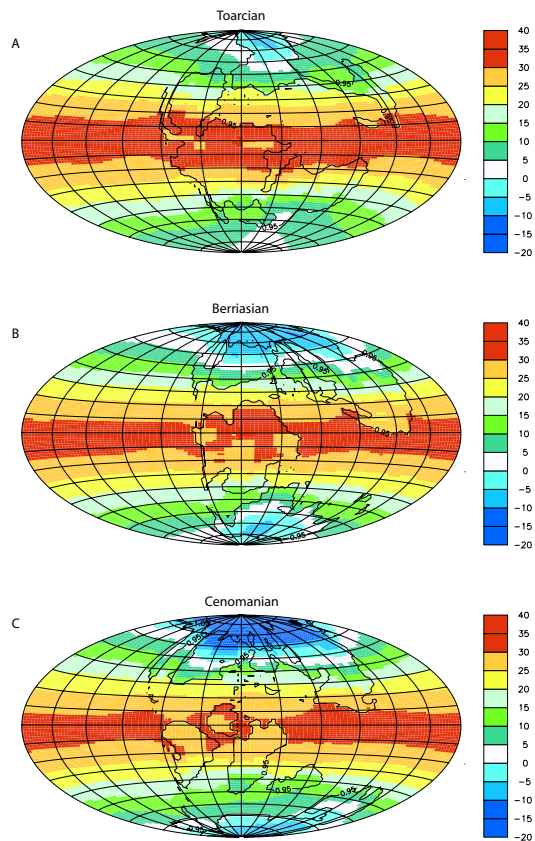


**Fig. 4.** Mean annual global temperature evolution over the Mesozoic as simulated by the GEOCLIM-LPJ version and by the GEOCLIM-only version from Donnadieu et al. (2006a). Continental, marine and global trends are shown. Red crosses are the atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> estimates simulated with GEOCLIM-LPJ (see Fig. 1) and have been arbitrarily positioned in Fig. 4a in order to fit the early Jurassic and the early Cretaceous temperature estimates from the GEOCLIM-LPJ runs.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)

**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.



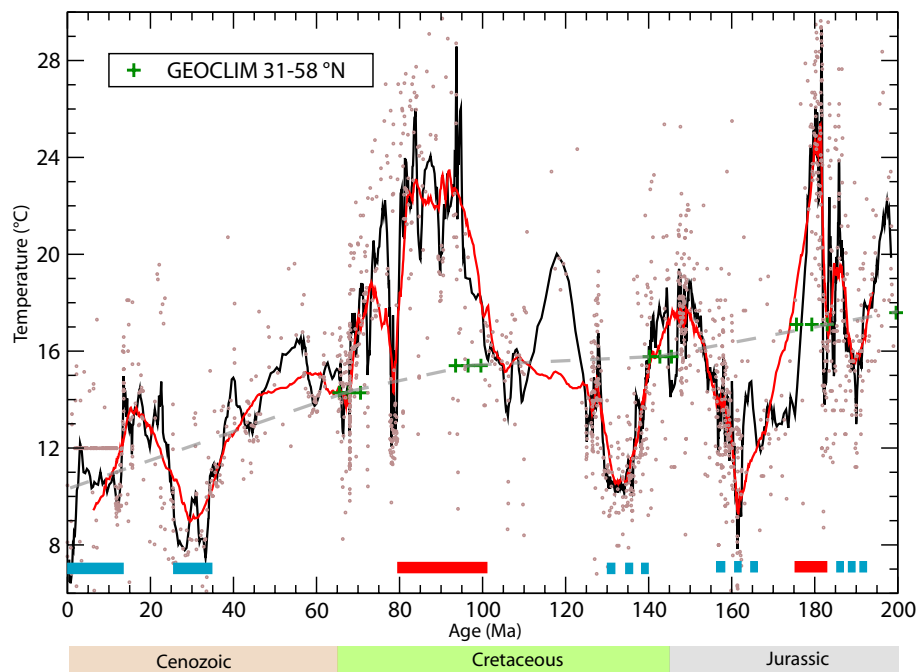
**Fig. 5.** Geographical distribution of the mean annual temperature for three time-period (a) Toarcian (b) Berriasian and (c) Cenomanian.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)



**Biophysical effect of  
vegetation on  
Mesozoic  
atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>**

Y. Donnadieu et al.



**Fig. 6.** Northern mid-latitudes sea surface temperature estimates from the  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  database published by Prokoph et al. (2008) using the palaeothermometer of Kim and O’Neil (1997) and a sea water  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ -value of  $-1\%$  (see text for details). The brown dots are the original data, the black curve represents a 2 Myr time-window running average and the red curve represents a 5 Myr time-window running average. Green crosses show the temperature of the northern mid-latitudes as simulated by LPJ-GEOCLIM.

[Title Page](#)[Abstract](#)[Introduction](#)[Conclusions](#)[References](#)[Tables](#)[Figures](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[◀](#)[▶](#)[Back](#)[Close](#)[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)