Two years on from the Monaco Declaration

Two years ago I hosted a meeting of more than 150 leading marine scientists from 26 countries organised and supported by the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, the Scientific Committee on Oceanic Research, the Government of Monaco and my Foundation. These scientists joined in a call for immediate action by policy makers to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. A sharp reduction was urged from that meeting to avoid widespread and severe damage to marine ecosystems from ocean acidification. This warning formed the heart of the Monaco Declaration to which I was happy to lend my full support.

Two years on, significant work has been undertaken by science teams around the world on ocean acidification. Sometimes the results from this work confounded early predictions on the impacts of ocean acidification, but most of what we have learnt since the Monaco Declaration substantially increases concern about the speed and potential scale of impact that our emissions of carbon dioxide will have on the ocean, and in turn on us.

I am delighted that my Foundation supports Ocean Acidification: Questions Answered. Once again the science world has come together, this time in concert with the Ocean Acidification Reference User Group, to tackle a new issue – that of uncertainty and misinformation about ocean acidification.

I am convinced that armed with these clarifications and answers to new questions that have arisen, this work will help unlock decisions and overcome barriers that stand in the way between us and more rapid progress to tackle ocean acidification.

HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco
Setting the scene

Since the end of the first Industrial Revolution in the 1830s widespread burning of fossil fuels, deforestation and cement production has released more than 440 billion metric tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere (half of it in the last 30 years). This mass release of previously ‘locked away’ carbon enhances the natural greenhouse effect, and jeopardises the future stability of the Earth’s climate. Fortunately for us more than half of this extra CO₂ has been taken up by vegetation and the ocean, greatly slowing the rate and extent of impacts of climate change observed to date, but with other consequences, especially for the ocean.

The ‘other CO₂ problem’

When the additional CO₂ released into the atmosphere dissolves in sea water, several chemical changes occur. These are collectively known as ocean acidification – also as the ‘other CO₂ problem’ and ‘the evil twin of climate change’. Ocean acidification has only recently been noticed, yet its implications may be as great as the global temperature increases arising from climate change. Indeed, whilst climate change may be diffuse and difficult to track, ocean acidification is measurable, predictable and progressive. Recent studies show that the current uptake of CO₂ by the surface waters of the ocean – and the resulting rate of ocean acidification – is about 100 times quicker than at the end of the last glacial (20,000 yrs ago), the last time CO₂ significantly rose.
Resolving confusion, providing clarity

Ocean acidification first emerged as a high profile issue beyond the scientific community in 2005 with the publication of the Royal Society report. It had previously been reported in the literature as far back as the 1970s but more consistently some ten years before the Royal Society report. Since 2005 major scientific studies have started around the world and although there are many unanswered questions there is considerable scientific consensus that ocean acidification is both real and is a major threat to our way of life. The Inter-Academy Panel on International Issues Statement on Ocean Acidification for example states that ‘Even with stabilisation of atmospheric CO$_2$ at 450ppmv, ocean acidification will have profound impacts on many marine systems. Large and rapid reductions of global CO$_2$ emissions are needed globally by at least 50% by 2050.’

One of the challenges in getting the message out on ocean acidification is that many people find the science complex and confusing – issues which now have to be resolved, and quickly. This is vital if we are to act with the collective ambition and urgency needed to dramatically reduce our CO$_2$ emissions, and lessen over time the changes now being seen in the ocean from acidification. To help this process, in the winter of 2009 and directly after the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen, 27 leading scientists from 19 institutions and five countries came together to provide information and answers to many of the common questions that are now being asked about ocean acidification. This scientific analysis and discussion forms the basis for this new guide.

1. ppmv is parts per million by volume (one part per million by volume is equal to a volume of a given gas mixed in a million volumes of air).

2. This is the work of the U.S. Ocean Carbon and Biogeochemistry (OCB; www.us-ocb.org) program, supported by the European Project on Ocean Acidification (EPOCA; http://www.epoca-project.eu/) and the UK Ocean Acidification Research Programme (http://www.oceanacidification.org.uk). Leading ocean acidification scientists compiled responses to a list of 39 frequently asked questions (FAQs) that were subject to open peer review.
Major studies underway or in advanced stages of planning

**EUROPEAN UNION**

The European Commission has funded the European Project on Ocean Acidification (EPOCA), an initiative to investigate ‘ocean acidification and its consequences’ as a multinational effort that includes 31 partner institutions located in ten European countries. EPOCA research, already underway, aims to monitor ocean acidification and its effects on marine organisms and ecosystems, to identify the risks of continued acidification, and to understand how these changes will affect the Earth system as a whole. A new project ‘Mediterranean Sea Acidification under changing climate’ (MedSeA) will specifically target ocean acidification in the Mediterranean and will start shortly.

**GERMANY**

Biological Impacts of Ocean Acidification (BIOACID). This coordinated project involving 18 research institutions is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) for an initial 3-year period starting in September 2009. Its main focus is on the effects of ocean acidification on the marine biota at the sub-cellular to ecosystem levels and their potential impacts on ecosystem services and biogeochemical feedbacks.

**CHINA**

Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) and National Science Foundation of China (NSFC) have started to support research on ocean acidification. CHOICE-C is a newly funded 5-year project to study high CO$_2$ and ocean acidification issues in Chinese marginal seas, a joint project of seven major institutions with funding of 34 million RMB. NSFC started to fund projects on ocean acidification in 2006, and there are several ongoing national-level projects exploring the impacts of ocean acidification on calcifying organisms.

**REPUBLIC of KOREA** (South Korea)

The Korea Science and Engineering Foundation is funding the 5-year Korea Mesocosm Project to examine the effects of elevated CO$_2$ and temperature on natural phytoplankton assemblages, which involves five Korean laboratories.

**JAPAN**

Five major programmes in Japan fund research relevant to ocean acidification. Japan’s Ministry of Environment supports research programmes to elucidate the future impact of ocean acidification on various marine organisms using sophisticated mesocosm facilities (e.g. AICAL, Acidification Impact on CALcifiers). MEXT (Ministry of Education, Science, Sport and Culture) and JAMSTEC (Japan Agency for Marine Science and TECHnology) also support ocean acidification research such as modelling efforts on the Earth Simulator supercomputer to predict future ocean conditions.
Ocean acidification in Australia focuses on the Antarctic and Australasian regions. The Antarctic Climate & Ecosystems Cooperative Research Centre (a partnership of AAD, University of Tasmania, CSIRO, DCCEE, NIWA (New Zealand) and AWI (Germany)) is sponsoring research in the Southern Ocean that includes monitoring sea water chemistry changes and the responses of key species. In the tropics, a collaborative observational and modelling programme between CSIRO, NOAA (USA), NIES (Japan) and University of Queensland has begun in the Great Barrier Reef and South Pacific regions. The vulnerability of the Great Barrier Reef to ocean acidification is also being addressed by the Australian Institute of Marine Science and several universities (Australian National University, University of Queensland, University of Sydney, James Cook University), through large-scale monitoring of reef waters, palaeontological reconstructions from coral cores, and field and laboratory experiments on reef organisms.

UNITED STATES
The Federal Ocean Acidification Research and Monitoring Act: of 2009. The FOARAM Act in U.S. Public Law 111-11 was signed by President Obama in March 2009. In accordance with the Act, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Science Foundation, and other federal agencies are working together with the Ocean Research and Resources Advisory Panel (ORRAP) Task Force on Ocean Acidification to develop a national programme on ocean acidification. Starting this year, the Interagency Working Group on Ocean Acidification has been gathering these groups’ inputs and assembling a national plan for ocean acidification monitoring, research, assessment of implications, and strategies for conservation that will be submitted to Congress in March 2011. Several of the agencies have already begun to fund some of the ocean acidification research, monitoring and outreach activities outlined in the FOARAM Act.

UNITED KINGDOM
In 2004 – 2007 a study was undertaken on the Implication for the Marine Environment of CO₂ (IMCO₂), funded by the Government departments of Defra and DTI. In spring 2009 the UK announced a 5-year £12 million programme to investigate changes in ocean ecosystems in response to ocean acidification (costs shared by the Natural Environment Research Council and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC)). The programme involves 21 research institutions across the UK and this programme collaborates with EPOCA and BIOACID.
For many who encounter ocean acidification for the first time two key questions arise – what is it, and is it real?

Such a reaction is shaped by a genuine lack of familiarity about the ocean; confusing perspectives about whether climate change is real; and surprise that there is another big issue ‘out there’ alongside climate change that we are only just hearing about.

Most people react with the view that whatever ocean acidification is it can’t be any less or more real than climate change, and can’t really be anything very different. So they couple it to climate change and the changing fortunes of that issue as reported in the press. People can only cope with a finite list of issues to worry about and as this appears distant to them they simply move on with their day-to-day lives. They remain largely unaware that whilst the uncertainty around some aspects of climate change may be difficult to quantify, there is much less uncertainty around the basic concepts of what ocean acidification is and whether it is happening.

**What is ocean acidification?**

The shift in the ocean towards more acidic (or less basic) conditions is happening because of the ever-increasing amount of CO$_2$ in the atmosphere. This is known as ocean acidification. It occurs when CO$_2$ reacts with sea water to produce an acid. The faster the increase of CO$_2$ in the atmosphere, the faster the acidification of the ocean.

**Understanding ‘carbonate’ and ‘acidity’**

Ocean acidification is very different from climate change. Climate change represents a much larger set of consequences of human activity affecting a range of processes in ways whose frequency, scale and effects range from predictable to highly uncertain. Ocean acidification is the effect of CO$_2$ on the ocean as it is absorbed by the sea water. The term ‘ocean acidification’ summarises several processes that occur when CO$_2$ reacts with sea water. Two reactions are particularly important. Firstly, the formation of carbonic acid with subsequent release of hydrogen ions:

\[
\text{CO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \leftrightarrow \text{H}_2\text{CO}_3 \leftrightarrow \text{H}^+ + \text{HCO}_3^- \]

The burning of fossil fuels result in increased CO$_2$ in the atmosphere being taken up by the ocean resulting in it becoming more acidic. Source University of Maryland.
The above reaction and release of hydrogen ions increases acidity thus reducing pH (see box above). A second reaction, between carbonate ions, $\text{CO}_3^{2-}$, and water producing bicarbonate ions also occurs:

$$\text{CO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{CO}_3^{2-} \leftrightarrow 2\text{HCO}_3^{-}$$

The combined effect of both these reactions is not only to increase acidity but also to lower the availability of carbonate ions. Carbonate ions are needed for calcification, the process describing the production of calcareous shells and skeletons. Such a reduction in carbonate ions has great biological significance, since it can affect the rate at which marine organisms – such as corals, molluscs, crustaceans, sea urchins and some algae – build their calcareous shells or skeletons. Under low pH conditions (higher acidity), carbonate ions are less available and calcification is therefore harder to achieve, and may be prevented altogether. This impact of ocean acidification may therefore have potentially catastrophic consequences for ocean life and many species of economic importance.

**The concept of ‘acidification’**

The ocean currently has a pH greater than 7.0 and is therefore ‘basic'; it is nearly impossible, chemically, for all of it to actually become ‘acidic’. Why do we therefore refer to ‘ocean acidification'? That is because acidification is the direction of travel, the trend, regardless of the starting point. The same term is used elsewhere, for example in wine making, blood chemistry and soil science, to refer to increasing acidity, regardless of whether the initial conditions are acidic or basic. A direct comparison can be made to the words we use to describe temperature changes: an increase from 0°C to 5°C is still cold (for most of us), yet is called ‘warming’.

Various factors can locally influence the main chemical reactions of $\text{CO}_2$ with sea water and add to the effects of ocean acidification. For example, acid rain, which consists of sulphuric and nitric acids originally derived from fossil fuel combustion, falls on the coastal ocean. Acid rain can have a pH between 1 and 6; its impact on surface ocean chemistry may be important locally and regionally but is very small globally. Coastal waters are also affected by excess nutrient inputs, mostly nitrogen, from agriculture, fertilizers and sewage. The resulting eutrophication leads to large plankton blooms, and when these blooms collapse and sink to the sea bed the subsequent respiration of bacteria decomposing the algae leads to a decrease in sea water oxygen and an increase in $\text{CO}_2$ (a decline in pH).
How sure are we that ocean acidification is really happening?

**A very high degree of certainty**

There is very high certainty that sea water chemistry is changing due to rising atmospheric CO$_2$, and that human activities are the root cause.

The strongest evidence is provided by detailed measurements in many parts of the world; for example, the 20-year record from the Pacific (off Hawaii) as shown below. Although there is high seasonal variability, there is an unambiguous trend for increasing dissolved CO$_2$ in the upper ocean, whilst pH is falling. These trends closely match the changes in atmospheric CO$_2$. Because the pH scale is logarithmic, the observed, apparently small pH drop of about 0.1 units since the pre-industrial era actually already represents a 30% increase in the abundance of hydrogen ions.

Computer models that explicitly include the recent, anthropogenic CO$_2$ releases closely simulate the observed decreases in sea water pH and carbonate levels. There is no other cause that can possibly be responsible for the worldwide effects that are observed.

![A NOAA mooring in the Pacific used to measure CO$_2$ fluxes.](image)

**Time series records of atmospheric CO$_2$ at Mauna Loa and surface pH and pCO$_2$ at Pacific Ocean station Aloha.** Source after Feely et al., Oceanography (2009).
Different oceans, different rates

Whilst ocean acidification will occur everywhere, it will happen more rapidly in some parts of the world than others, and impacts will also vary, because of differences in temperature and circulation patterns. Carbonate levels in sea water which are presently high enough to allow calcium carbonate structures like shells and skeletons to stay intact (‘oversaturated’ conditions), can drop to levels that will mean these hard structures will begin to dissolve (‘undersaturated’ conditions). Model-based predictions show that the Arctic Ocean will be first to cross this ocean acidification-related chemical threshold, when waters change from ‘oversaturated’ with calcium carbonate to ‘undersaturated’. If levels of atmospheric (and oceanic) CO₂ continue to rise at current rates, then by 2018 around 10% of the Arctic Ocean is projected to have crossed this threshold, rising to one-half of the Arctic Ocean by 2050. By 2100 it is likely that the entire Arctic Ocean will be in a state that can dissolve unprotected calcium carbonate structures.

There is a very high certainty that sea water chemistry is changing due to rising atmospheric CO₂, and that human activities are the root cause.

Mesocosm experiments are vital to help understand the implications of ocean acidification at the community and ecosystem levels.

National Center for Atmospheric Research Community Climate System Model 3.1 (CCSM3) modelled decadal mean pH at the sea surface for 1875, 1995, 2050 and 2095.

Source after Feely et al., Oceanography (2009).
Calcite and aragonite

Calcite and aragonite are two different forms of calcium carbonate. Calcite is the mineral form found in the shells of coccolithophores (planktonic algae), foraminifera (amoeboid protists), some corals, echinoderms, and some molluscs (e.g. oysters); it is relatively less soluble.

Aragonite is a more soluble form of calcium carbonate; it is found in most corals, most molluscs (including free-swimming pteropods (small planktonic snails)), as well as some species of algae.

Estimated historical, plus projected future changes in ocean chemistry assuming a business-as-usual CO₂ emissions scenario. Map plots show carbonate saturation state for six illustrative regions (shaded red) – values above the red horizontal dotted line represent oversaturated conditions, and below, undersaturated conditions for both calcite and aragonite. The thickness of the saturation lines indicates the seasonal range. Global ocean surface averages of atmospheric pCO₂, pH, and calcite and aragonite saturation, are shown bottom right. Source after Turley et al., Marine Pollution Bulletin (2010).
Saturation horizons

Deep, cold ocean waters are naturally undersaturated with carbonate ions causing the shells of most calcifying organisms to dissolve. Surface waters are oversaturated with carbonate ions and do not readily dissolve shells. The saturation horizon is the level below which calcium carbonate minerals undergo dissolution. Those organisms that can survive below the saturation horizon do so due to special mechanisms to protect their calcium carbonate from dissolving. As ocean acidification causes this horizon to rise vertically in the water column so more and more calcifying organisms will be exposed to undersaturated water and thus vulnerable to dissolution of their shells and skeletons. The saturation horizon of calcite occurs at a greater ocean depth than that for aragonite, but both horizons have moved closer to the surface by between 50 and 200m compared to the 1800s.

Ocean acidification and the short and long-term fate of carbon in the system

On long timescales (>100,000 years) there is a natural balance maintained between the take-up and release of CO$_2$ on Earth; the CO$_2$ produced by volcanoes, the main natural source of CO$_2$, is taken up by the production of organic matter by plants and by rock weathering on land. However, rock weathering takes tens of thousands of years so will not remove the current anthropogenic input of CO$_2$ to the atmosphere and ocean fast enough. On shorter time scales (>1,000 years), the ocean has an internal stabilising feedback linking the ocean carbon cycle to the underlying carbonate rich sediment known as carbonate compensation.

The upper layers of the ocean tend to be supersaturated with CaCO$_3$ so little dissolution takes place, whilst the deep ocean is undersaturated and carbonate readily dissolves. The first boundary between these two states is known as the lysocline, the depth at which dissolution strongly increases in the deep ocean. The CaCO$_3$ in the form of dead shells sink to the sea bed; at shallow water depth the majority is buried in the sediment and trapped for a long time, but where the shells sink in deep water nearly all the CaCO$_3$ is dissolved, thereby not locking the carbon away for millions of years.

The current increased rate of dissolution of atmospheric CO$_2$ into the ocean is resulting in an imbalance in the carbonate compensation depth (CCD), the depth at which all carbonate is dissolved. As the pH of the ocean falls this results in a shallowing of the lysocline and the CCD, thus exposing more of the shells trapped in the sediments to understaturated conditions causing them to dissolve, which will help buffer ocean acidification but over a long time scale of a thousand years.
Higher latitudes, lighter plankton?

Aragonite undersaturation (i.e. the chemical state where dissolution starts) is predicted to start occurring in Southern Ocean waters between 2030–2070. Laboratory experiments and direct observations suggest that the decreasing carbonate levels occurring well before then will make it increasingly difficult for many organisms to make and/or maintain their shells. Samples from the Southern Ocean suggest that the shells of present-day planktonic foraminifera are already 30-35% lighter than their pre-industrial counterparts. With CO₂ emissions continuing to increase, the observed weight loss in the shells of foraminifera such as *Globigerina bulloides*, and other planktonic species in polar waters, such as pteropods, whose shells are made from the more soluble aragonite form of calcium carbonate is a cause of concern. Pteropods play important roles in Antarctic food webs, feeding many organisms, including fish; they help create a long term storage of atmospheric carbon to the deep ocean on their death through their shells acting as a ballast to carry organic carbon of the dead animals to the ocean floor.

Average shell weights of *Globigerina bulloides* (300 – 355 µm) collected from various depths above the calcite saturation horizon (red squares) are lighter compared with those collected from pre-industrial era sediment cores (grey circles). Source after Moy et al., *Nature Geoscience* (2009).

Shell weights of *Globigerina bulloides* were highest when atmospheric CO₂ levels were lowest (around 18,000 years ago), and are lowest now when atmospheric CO₂ levels are at their highest. Source after Moy et al., *Nature Geoscience* (2009).
Ocean problems coming to the surface

Coastal regions periodically experience upwelling events where deeper ocean water circulates onto continental shelves and near-shore areas. This exposes productive upper ocean ecosystems to colder water containing more nutrients but also more CO$_2$.

As ocean acidification makes the upper oversaturated layer of sea water shallower each year, these natural upwelling events will more often cause undersaturated water to well up and flow to the shore. Coastal marine organisms that form shells are unaccustomed to such events, and periodic exposures to these significantly different conditions may affect these communities. Upwelling of undersaturated water is already occurring on the west coast of North America, and it may start to occur elsewhere where ocean conditions allow.

Seasonal invasion of undersaturated waters such as is already occurring on the west coast of North America could have serious impacts on important fisheries such as the oyster industry.

Learning from history

The chemistry of the Earth’s ocean has not always been constant and there have been periods in the distant past where the ocean has been more acidic. So what can we learn from these previous ocean acidification events, and can we use these to help predict the severity of future impacts stemming from the current episode of ocean acidification?

What can past events of ocean acidification teach us?

In the recent history of the Earth the acid/base balance of the ocean has been relatively constant. This knowledge comes from both being able to indirectly measure the pH of the ocean and to calculate it from the bubbles trapped in ice and being able to examine past conditions using records preserved in the Earth’s glaciers and sediments.

Air bubbles trapped in glaciers provide a vital record of past atmospheric conditions.

Deep sea cores from the South Atlantic for different palaeodepths show how at the time of the PETM the calcite saturation horizon shoaled by over 2km in just a few thousand years, and then took ~100,000 years to recover to pre-PETM levels. This event is potentially a contributing factor to the mass extinction of benthic foraminifera at this time.


History from the ice

Air bubbles trapped in ice sheets provide a record of past atmospheric CO₂ levels from which ocean pH can be calculated. Long cores extracted from the ice can be ‘read’ somewhat like tree rings: surface layers reflect recent conditions while deep ice layers were deposited long ago. Such ice core records show that over the last 800,000 years until the mid-1800s, atmospheric CO₂ levels were never more than 280ppmv, generating a sea water pH of 8.2. Current atmospheric CO₂ concentrations are ~390ppmv and ocean surface water pH is now 8.1.

Distant similarities

Further back in history there were long periods and abrupt events where ocean pH was lower than even today’s conditions. What can these previous events tell us about what we now face? The most frequently discussed event occurred 55 million years ago in the Cenozoic Era (the Palaeocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM)). This dramatic event in Earth’s history saw global temperatures rise by around 6°C (11°F) over less than 10,000 years, with a corresponding rise in sea level as the ocean warmed. Atmospheric CO₂ concentrations rose, causing the depth of calcium carbonate saturated water to become much shallower. The event was possibly linked to a large input of carbon into the system due to ocean warming, which oxidized in the sea water to form CO₂ which gassed-off into the atmosphere.

This period may help us understand what the future may hold for us. Although many of the benthic deep water calcifiers died out, some claim that because surface-dwelling marine species survived the conditions 55 million years ago, they should survive perfectly well through our current ocean acidification event. The danger of this claim is that it ignores the primary, fundamental difference between the PETM and today: these ocean acidification events span vastly different timescales. Today’s event is
Can the past be a guide to the future?

It is possible to compare what is happening now with what happened many millions of years ago when the ocean was more acidic. Acidification today is occurring faster and to a greater extent than anything seen in the fossil record over the past 65 million years. It is estimated for example that ocean acidification is happening 10 times faster than that which preceded the extinction 55 million years ago during the Palaeocene Eocene Thermal Maximum, the largest ocean acidification event since the extinction of the dinosaurs. Sediment cores from the sea floor of the south-east Atlantic Ocean show a dramatic change in composition due to the dissolution of carbonate organisms leaving just the red clay. This is the result of increased levels of acidity that drove many deep ocean living species with calcium carbonate bodies to extinction. From the sea floor cores it appears that it took more than one hundred thousand years for the oceans to recover.

Can the past be a guide to the future? Over Earth’s history, ocean life has recovered from numerous sudden extinction episodes by adaptation and evolution of new species, but the time scales for extinction and repopulation are millions of years, not a few hundred years. Human-driven ocean acidification is affecting the ocean far faster than the Earth’s natural recovery pace can accommodate. Today’s rate of acidification is 10 times faster than anything experienced since the demise of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

Ten times faster

Over Earth’s history, ocean life has recovered from numerous sudden extinction episodes by adaptation and evolution of new species, but the time scales for extinction and repopulation are millions of years, not a few hundred years. Human-driven ocean acidification is affecting the ocean far faster than the Earth’s natural recovery pace can accommodate. Today’s rate of acidification is 10 times faster than anything experienced since the demise of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.
Can we predict the future severity of ocean acidification?

It is inevitable that atmospheric CO\textsubscript{2} levels will rise from the current level of 391 ppmv, and this will continue to decrease surface sea water pH. However, the rate and extent of any future increase is difficult to predict because it depends on whether we cut our emissions of CO\textsubscript{2} and if we do by how much. If the increase in atmospheric CO\textsubscript{2} continues unabated, by the end of the 21st century it is possible that these concentrations will have reached 800ppmv and ocean pH will have dropped by a further 0.3 – 0.4 units, equivalent to a further 150 – 200% increase in hydrogen ions.

There is less certainty, however, on possible biological impacts from ocean acidification because we have not experienced such changes and different groups of marine organisms appear to be more or less sensitive to changing sea water chemistry.

Life-long impacts

For many marine organisms, their gametes, larval stages, juveniles, and adults may be affected differently by ocean acidification; thus, it is important to consider the life-cycle impacts on survival and reproduction. In general, studies suggest that early stages (gametes, larvae, and juveniles) are expected to be sensitive to ocean acidification. Stress usually limits the performance of organisms – for example, stressed organisms grow slower and smaller, predators will be less effective and prey perhaps less able to avoid capture. For adults, stress caused by ocean acidification may affect performance and will ultimately reduce their rates of growth and reproduction. Even though individuals may survive, reduced reproductive capacity can result in fewer progeny so that populations are affected too.

Amongst those species threatened by ocean acidification are tropical and deep-sea corals, calcareous plankton and free-swimming pteropods where changing conditions will make building and maintaining their skeletons and shells more difficult. These species play key roles in the ocean either

Corals – complex issues

Coral host tiny single-celled algae called zooxanthellae within their cells which through their photosynthesis are an important source of carbon for the coral and for coral calcification (skeleton building). The coral-algal relationship is delicately balanced and if the algae do too well and their numbers greatly increase, the transfer of carbon to the coral host can be disrupted. So even if the single-celled algae photosynthesis were to increase under high CO\textsubscript{2}, this wouldn’t necessarily be good for the coral hosts. However, even though studies have shown that the photosynthesis of some other species of algae is enhanced by the levels of CO\textsubscript{2} projected for the end of this century, about 700-800 ppmv, zooxanthellae photosynthesis has not been shown to significantly increase at this CO\textsubscript{2} level. Experiments have shown that in most cases there is a decrease in coral calcification rate when the CO\textsubscript{2} level increases, so it is clear that the rise in CO\textsubscript{2} is actually decreasing the corals’ ability to build their skeletons and hence their ability to withstand storms rather than protecting them. What this means is that reef growth will eventually be less than natural reef erosion and reefs will decline.
A lobster’s tale

One experimental study has showed that shell mass of several crustaceans including lobster, reared in culture for 60 days, actually increased with increased CO$_2$, while another showed that the shell growth of lobster larvae was reduced. This underlines the need to study the whole life cycle as well as the physiological health of the organisms. Without more study, it is premature to say that crustaceans will be ‘safe’ from ocean acidification for two principal reasons.

1) Shell-making requires energy, but each organism only has a finite energy budget, so the increased shell mass almost certainly occurs hand-in-hand with reduced energy for other functions like growth and reproduction. These factors were outside the scope of this study, so ocean acidification’s effects on the overall health and longevity of these organisms is still unknown.

2) Lobsters (and crustaceans in general) have a different type of shell and a different mechanism for growing their shells from molluscs and corals. Lobster shells are exoskeletons containing a large proportion of chitin along with calcium carbonate minerals, and they are shed periodically instead of added to continuously. When preparing to moult, lobsters are thought to remove a lot of the minerals from old shells and preserve them in their bodies to deposit into the new skeleton later. It is presently unclear whether this difference in growth mechanism will affect how lobsters respond to ocean acidification.

Winners and losers

The growth and level of photosynthesis of certain marine phytoplankton and plant species may increase with higher CO$_2$ levels, but this is by no means a general rule. For others, higher CO$_2$ and rising acidity may have either negative or neutral effects on their physiology. Therefore, particular marine plants will be ‘winners’, while others will be ‘losers’ and some may show no signs of change. Some of the experiments that have been done so far suggest that the likely new dominant phytoplankton and plant species in the future acidified ocean may be less able to support the productive, diverse food chains that we presently rely on to support healthy ocean ecosystems and fisheries resources.
Exposing the consequences

Although it is difficult to precisely forecast the consequences of ocean acidification because there remain so many unknowns about human behaviour and ocean ecosystems’ responses, we can learn from history what the likely outcome will be, and we can look at areas of the ocean that have been subjected to natural long-term acidification.

Communities of organisms found at cold water volcanic CO$_2$ vents on the sea floor (not the extremely hot deep-sea vents) with lower pH than predicted for the next few decades show that certain species of microalgae, seaweeds and seagrasses can grow very well in such areas, but in comparison to other similar areas, not subject to reduced pH levels, overall biodiversity is reduced and shell corrosion is evident.

Won’t species simply adapt to ocean acidification?

It can be expected that as sea water pH and carbonate levels continue to fall there will be ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in ocean ecosystems, but it is inevitable that marine communities will change. The animals and plants most likely to be affected first are those that have calcium carbonate-based shells or skeletons. Organisms can respond to harmful changes in their environment in one of three ways: they can acclimate, adapt or go extinct.

Projections for atmospheric CO$_2$ and surface global mean pH difference from pre-industrial levels for various IPCC 2007 emission scenarios indicating some experimentally determined biological impacts and the years when the first localised seasonal occurrence of aragonite undersaturation is projected to occur. Source after Turley et al., Marine Pollution Bulletin (2010).
Making it clear

Seabed community in area of Mediterranean Sea with bubbles from volcanic CO₂ vents makes an ideal natural laboratory for studying ocean acidification.

Photo © Jason Hall-Spencer

Severely eroded limpet shell from a naturally high CO₂ area.

Natural high CO₂ laboratories

Most species possess some capacity to acclimate. All species have a certain ability to tolerate changing conditions, although the resulting increased stress may affect their ability to compete in their environment. An organism’s ability to conduct essential activities depends on its energy budget.

If an organism spends more energy maintaining protective shells or a protective skeleton, it will have less energy for other vital functions like reproduction or growth. Similarly, if an organism without a shell spends more energy breathing and excreting waste in a higher-CO₂, lower-pH ocean, it may have less energy for seeking food or other important survival activities.

Coral polyps introduced to an area of naturally low pH showing erosion of their calcareous skeleton.

Seawater contains dissolved CO₂ and bicarbonate, and these react to form carbonic acid, which can lower the pH of the seawater. Carbonic acid also reacts with calcium carbonate, which is the main component of the shells of many marine organisms, to produce calcium bicarbonate and carbon dioxide. This process has been occurring for millions of years, with carbon dioxide being released to the atmosphere. However, the current rate of increase of atmospheric CO₂ is unprecedented, and this is causing ocean acidification.

As pH and carbonate levels continue to fall there will be ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ – but change is inevitable.

Photo © Jason Hall-Spencer
Keeping pace with change

Evidence from the current distribution of coral reefs is that it is related to the ocean’s saturation state with respect to aragonite and that they could keep up with the pace of naturally changing conditions. It is highly unlikely that they may be able to adapt to the acceleration in changing conditions predicted in the next few decades.

An acidification arms race?

The key question is not whether ocean life on the whole will adapt and evolve in response to ocean acidification. What is questionable is its ability to adapt and evolve quickly enough in the face of ‘rapid’ ocean acidification and to do so in such a way that the ‘new’ communities that arise are able to provide the same essential goods and services that we use and that support us.

Previous acidification events in the geological record were often associated with extinctions of many species. Whilst the cause of such extinction episodes is often complex, it is notable that the recovery took hundreds of thousands and, after mass extinctions, millions of years.

Speed of change

Species can adapt to environmental change as small genetic variations emerge that make some individuals more suited to the new conditions. Short-lived species potentially have a greater capacity to respond to rapid environmental change, because generation times are short, each new generation experiences conditions only slightly different from the preceding one, and because there are a greater number of individuals which can develop helpful variations. In comparison, long-lived species tend to have far less capacity to adapt quickly. However, the changes that are already being observed in shell thickness of pteropods, which have an annual life-cycle, illustrates that even for relatively short-lived species the current rate of change in ocean pH may be too fast for them to be able to adapt. More research will be needed to confirm this is the case.

The tropical pteropod *Limacina bulimoides*.

Previous acidification events in the geological record were often associated with extinctions of many species. Whilst the cause of such extinction episodes is often complex, it is notable that the recovery took hundreds of thousands and, after mass extinctions, millions of years.

**An acidification arms race?**

The key question is not whether ocean life on the whole will adapt and evolve in response to ocean acidification. What is questionable is its ability to adapt and evolve quickly enough in the face of ‘rapid’ ocean acidification and to do so in such a way that the ‘new’ communities that arise are able to provide the same essential goods and services that we use and that support us.

**Speed of change**

Species can adapt to environmental change as small genetic variations emerge that make some individuals more suited to the new conditions. Short-lived species potentially have a greater capacity to respond to rapid environmental change, because generation times are short, each new generation experiences conditions only slightly different from the preceding one, and because there are a greater number of individuals which can develop helpful variations. In comparison, long-lived species tend to have far less capacity to adapt quickly. However, the changes that are already being observed in shell thickness of pteropods, which have an annual life-cycle, illustrates that even for relatively short-lived species the current rate of change in ocean pH may be too fast for them to be able to adapt. More research will be needed to confirm this is the case.

**Previous acidification events in the geological record were often associated with extinctions of many species.**

Whilst the cause of such extinction episodes is often complex, it is notable that the recovery took hundreds of thousands and, after mass extinctions, millions of years.
Understanding our options

The effects of ocean acidification will increase incrementally and although the impacts that are already apparent are relatively minor, they are growing along with the rate of acidification. Furthermore, there is a lag between CO\(_2\) emissions and reaching an equilibrium state, so even if emissions were to be capped and subsequently reduced the pH of the ocean would continue to fall for some time to come. A reduction in atmospheric CO\(_2\) levels is essential if we are to first reduce, then halt ocean acidification before it is too late.

Would cutting emissions of CO\(_2\) make a difference?

Over the past 250 years, atmospheric CO\(_2\) levels have increased by nearly 40% from 280 ppmv to 391ppmv today, and this level continues to rise at about 2ppmv per year. The levels of atmospheric CO\(_2\) have been tempered by the ocean’s uptake of CO\(_2\) (which causes ocean acidification) and would otherwise today be close to 460ppmv, a level that would have led to even greater climate change.

Reversible in the long term

Although we are already seeing changes in ocean water chemistry as a result of the absorption of atmospheric CO\(_2\) and impacts of this on marine ecosystems, these changes are reversible in the long term. Any such reversal would, however, be dependent on a significant reduction over a prolonged period in atmospheric CO\(_2\) levels. Reducing the emissions of CO\(_2\) from the burning of fossil fuels, cement manufacturing and deforestation are the only realistic ways of beginning to achieve such a reduction.

The level at which atmospheric CO\(_2\) concentrations will peak is predicted to be well above 400ppmv and the effects on ocean pH will continue to be seen for some considerable time after any reduction in atmospheric CO\(_2\) levels is achieved. The CO\(_2\) absorbed by the surface waters of the ocean will continue to penetrate into the deep ocean for the next few centuries.
There are few current geoengineering options for tackling climate change that are both highly effective and highly affordable. Only carbon capture and storage (CCS) would have any impact on atmospheric CO$_2$ levels. A green dot represents a safer option than those with a high risk shown in red; the size of the dot indicates their timeliness (large if they are rapidly implementable and effective, small if they are not). Black bars indicate the degree of uncertainty concerning affordability (horizontal) and effectiveness (vertical). Source after The Royal Society Geoengineering the Climate (2009).

Some changes resulting from ocean acidification are already being seen and more are likely, even if rapid steps are taken to cap and significantly reduce atmospheric CO$_2$ levels in the next few years. It is not too late, however, to begin to try and minimize further damage. The technological and economic means are available to significantly reduce CO$_2$ emissions if we choose to do so. The longer we take to act, the greater the ultimate impacts will be, and the greater the legacy of ocean acidification will be.

Can we solve ocean acidification with geoengineering?

The concept of geoengineering is the deliberate manipulation of the Earth’s climate. Most proposed geoengineering approaches to limit climate change impacts attempt to relieve the symptoms of climate change without addressing the root cause of the problem – excess CO$_2$ in the atmosphere. As such they fail to address the chemical consequences of these emissions. For example, strategies that seek to cool the Earth by reflecting additional sunlight into Space would have little direct effect on ocean chemistry and therefore would not significantly diminish threats posed by ocean acidification.
Making it clear

Unknown consequences

There have been proposals to diminish changes in ocean chemistry by adding compounds to the ocean that would chemically neutralize acids. The main problem with these approaches is that the amount of material that would need to be added is very large. In fact it has been calculated that the amount that would be needed is something more than the tonnage of CO$_2$ we have already emitted to the atmosphere. Thus, these proposed solutions would require a new and significant mining and chemical processing infrastructure with unknown environmental consequences.

It has also been suggested that ocean fertilization could help reduce climate change and ocean acidification. The fertilization would stimulate phytoplankton growth, resulting in a net increase in the biological uptake of atmospheric CO$_2$. Reducing the concentration of atmospheric CO$_2$ near the ocean surface would decrease surface ocean dissolved inorganic carbon concentrations.

Global ocean carbon cycle models predict that with fixed emissions of CO$_2$ to the atmosphere, ocean fertilization would have a moderate mitigating effect on ocean acidification near the surface but would cause further acidification in the deep ocean, as sinking organic particles are decomposed back to CO$_2$ at greater depths. If emissions of atmospheric CO$_2$ continue to rise the deep ocean would continue to acidify. The scale and longevity of the effort that would be required for such approaches would be cost-prohibitive, and the benefits would be minimal at best.

Prevention better than cure

Many observers have concluded that the resources that could be spent on geoengineering would be better applied to transforming our energy system – preventing CO$_2$ from entering the environment in the first place rather than attempting to neutralize its effects after it is already spreading through the atmosphere and oceans.

Online guide

Download a copy of this new guide to ocean acidification and learn more about this issue at: http://www.epoca-project.eu/index.php/Outreach/RUG/

What is the Ocean Acidification Reference User Group?

A key challenge is ensuring that ground-breaking science on issues such as ocean acidification addresses the questions that need to be answered and that these answers get quickly and effectively into the hands of policy advisers and decision makers so that action can be taken. The Ocean Acidification Reference User Group (RUG) draws on UK, European and international experience in fast-tracking the exchange of information between scientists and end users.

The RUG was established in 2008 to support the work of the European Project on Ocean Acidification (EPOCA), and now supports complementary studies in Germany (BIOACID) and the UK (the UK Ocean Acidification Research Programme), with strong links in similar processes in the USA. The RUG draws together a wide range of end users to support the work of leading scientists on ocean acidification, to facilitate the rapid transfer of knowledge, and help the effective delivery of quality science.

This guide draws on the experience of the RUG, coupled with the knowledge of the leading experts on ocean acidification, to provide an introduction for policy advisers and decision makers on this most critical and urgent of issues.

The RUG is formed of representatives from: Alfred Wegener Institute of Polar and Marine Research, BP, Euro-Mediterranean Center on Climate Change (CNRS), Canadian Tourist Industry Authority, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Climate Central (Princeton University), Conservation International, Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra), Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), Directorate of Fisheries (Norway), European Science Foundation (ESF), Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM), Greenpeace, International Atomic Energy Agency, International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Laboratoire des Sciences du Climat et de l’Environnement (LSCE), Leibniz Institute of Marine Sciences (IFM – GEOMAR), Marine Institute (Ireland), Natural England, Observatoire National sur les Effets du Réchauffement Climatique (ONERC), Plymouth Marine Laboratory (PML), Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), Rolls Royce, Royal Institution, Scientific Committee on Oceanic Research (SCOR), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Shellfish Association of Great Britain (SAGB), Stockholm Resilience Center, The Nature Conservancy, UK Climate Impacts Programme (UKCIP), UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Center, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Observers

European Commission, the UK Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership, the Oak Foundation, Ocean

Further details and contacts

Further details on the work of the Ocean Acidification Reference User Group and the European Project on Ocean Acidification can be found on our website: http://www.epoca-project.eu/index.php/Outreach/RUG/ and the UK Programme at www.oceanacidification.org.uk

For BIOACID please see http://www.bioacid.de/

If you have any further enquiries please contact us at: policyguide-epoca@obs-vlfr.fr
Sources and contributors
This document borrows from Frequently Asked Questions about Ocean Acidification, www.whoi.edu/OCB-OA/FAQ: representing the latest scientific consensus on the answers to 37 detailed questions. The following scientists contributed responses to that document: Jim Barry, Senior Scientist, Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, USA Jelle Bijma, Biogeochemist, Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research, Germany Ken Caldeira, Senior Scientist, Carnegie Institution for Science, USA Anne Cohen, Research Specialist, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, USA Sarah Cooley, Postdoctoral Investigator, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, USA Scott Doney, Senior Scientist, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, USA Richard A. Feely, Senior Scientist, NOAA Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, USA Helen Findlay, Lord Kingsland Fellow, Plymouth Marine Laboratory, UK Jean-Pierre Gattuso, Director of Research, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and Université Pierre et Marie Curie-Paris 6, France Jason Hall- Spencer, Marine Biology Lecturer, University of Plymouth, UK Michael Holcomb, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Centre Scientifique de Monaco, Monaco David Hutchins, Professor of Marine Environmental Biology, University of Southern California, USA Debora Iglesias-Rodríguez, Lecturer, National Oceanography Centre of the University of Southampton, UK Robert Key, Research Oceanographer, Princeton University, USA Joan Kleypas, Scientist III, National Center for Atmospheric Research, USA Chris Langdon, Associate Professor, University of Miami, USA Daniel McCorkle, Associate Scientist, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, USA James Orr, Senior Scientist, Laboratory for the Sciences of Climate and Environment, France Hans-Otto Pörtner, Professor, Alfred Wegener Institute, Germany Ulf Riebesell, Professor for Biological Oceanography, Leibniz Institute of Marine Sciences IFM-GEOMAR, Germany Andy Ridgwell, Royal Society University Research Fellow, University of Bristol, UK Christopher L. Sabine, Supervisory Oceanographer, NOAA Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, USA Daniela Schmidt, Royal Society University Research Fellow, University of Bristol, UK Brad Seibel, Assistant Professor of Biological Sciences, University of Rhode Island, USA Carol Turley, Senior Scientist, Plymouth Marine Laboratory and KE Coordinator for the UK Ocean Acidification Research Programme, UK Steve Widdicombe, Benthic Ecologist, Plymouth Marine Laboratory, UK Richard Zeebe, Associate Professor, University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA Andy Ridgwell, Royal Society University Research Fellow, University of Bristol, UK Ulf Riebesell, Professor for Biological Oceanography, Leibniz Institute of Marine Sciences IFM-GEOMAR, Germany Donna Roberts, Antarctic Climate & Ecosystems Cooperative Research Centre, Australia Daniela Schmidt, Royal Society University Research Fellow, University of Bristol, UK Carol Turley, Senior Scientist, Plymouth Marine Laboratory and KE Coordinator for the UK Ocean Acidification Research Programme, UK Ed Urban, Scientific Committee on Oceanic Research, University of Delaware, USA Phil Williamson, Science Coordinator for the UK Ocean Acidification Research Programme, UK

We are also grateful to the following that provided the multilanguage translations:
Arabic: Haifa Abdulhalim, edited by Nashat Hamidan and reviewed by Khaloud Aloman.
French: Stéphanie Reynaud, Eric Béraud, François Simard and Jean-Pierre Gattuso.
Spanish: Juancho Movilla, Elisa Fernandez-Gualart, Carlos Pelegero and Marta Estrada.
We thank them all for helping disseminate this information beyond English speakers.
The guide was produced with financial support from Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation, Scottish Natural Heritage, Natural England, IUCN, EPOCA and the UK Ocean Acidification Research Programme, and is based on best practice communication approaches pioneered by the UK’s Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership.