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The North Atlantic

INSIGHTS FROM THE OCEAN OBSERVATORIES INITIATIVE IRMINGER SEA

By Hilary L. **ABSTRACT**
and David P. Nicholson

The biological pump plays a key role in the global carbon cycle by transporting photosynthetically fixed organic carbon into the deep ocean, where it can be sequestered from the atmosphere over annual or longer time scales if exported below the winter ventilation depth. In the subpolar North Atlantic, carbon sequestration via the biological pump is influenced by two competing forces: a spring diatom bloom that features large, fast-sinking biogenic particles, and deep winter mixing that requires particles to sink much further than in other ocean regions to escape winter ventilation. We synthesize biogeochemical sensor data from the first two years of operations at the Ocean Observatories Initiative Irminger SeaArray of moorings and gliders (September 2014–July 2016), providing the first simultaneous year-round observations of biological carbon cycling processes in both the surface ocean and the seasonal thermocline in this critical but previously undersampled region. These data show significant mixed layer net autotrophy during the spring bloom and significant respiration in the seasonal thermocline during the stratified season ($\sim 5.9 \text{ mol C mineralized between } 200 \text{ m and } 1,000 \text{ m}$). This respired carbon is subsequently ventilated during winter convective mixing ($>1,000 \text{ m}$), a significant reduction in potential carbon sequestration. This highlights the importance of year-round observations to accurately constrain the biological pump in the subpolar North Atlantic, as well as other high-latitude regions that experience deep winter mixing.



Photo credit: Sheri White, © Woods Hole
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INTRODUCTION

Export of biologically fixed organic carbon from the surface to the deep ocean, known as the biological pump, plays an important role in the global carbon cycle (Volk and Hoffert, 1985). Photosynthesis by marine phytoplankton fixes carbon dioxide into organic carbon at a global rate of $\sim 50 \text{ Pg yr}^{-1}$ (Field et al., 1998). A fraction of this fixed organic carbon escapes being respired by organisms in the surface ocean and is transferred as sinking particles, by mixing of dissolved and suspended organic matter, and by vertical animal migration to the ocean interior, where it is sequestered from the atmosphere on time scales of months to centuries (Volk and Hoffert, 1985; DeVries et al., 2012). This process of biological carbon export is commonly known as the biological pump because it transfers carbon against a concentration gradient (e.g., Church et al., 2013). However, the existing time-series sites are representative of only a small fraction of the global ocean (estimated at 9%–15% of the total ocean area; Henson et al., 2016), and year-round study sites are largely limited to the subtropical and tropical ocean (e.g., Church et al., 2013). Current understanding suggests that the anthropogenic carbon uptake to date has been predominantly driven by the abiotic solubility pump as the surface ocean equilibrates with rising atmospheric CO_2 concentrations, rather than by biological carbon cycling (Sabine and Tanhua, 2010). However, estimates of the current global rate of carbon transfer from the surface ocean to the interior via the biological pump, amounting to $\sim 6\text{--}13 \text{ Pg C yr}^{-1}$ (Laws et al., 2011; Siegel et al., 2014), significantly exceed the current rate at which the ocean absorbs atmospheric CO_2 (estimated at $2.6 \pm 0.5 \text{ Pg C yr}^{-1}$; Quéré et al., 2016), indicating that even a small perturbation to the biological pump could have a large influence on the global carbon cycle. Changes to the strength of the biological pump would also influence the distribution of nutrients and oxygen in the ocean, with broad implications for ocean ecosystems.

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Year-round sampling of the biological pump is especially critical in high-latitude regions because a large fraction of the carbon exported seasonally during the productive season but also during the winter ventilation depth depends not only on export from the euphotic zone but also on respiration rates within the seasonal thermocline and the depth of physical mixing the subsequent winter.

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In order to effectively monitor and predict future changes to the ocean's

biological pump, accurate baseline measurements of current rates of biological carbon export are necessary to validate rates predicted by remote-sensing algorithms and global climate models (e.g., Stukel et al., 2015; Palevsky et al., 2016b), as well as to refine our understanding of the processes controlling the biological pump. Our current understanding is limited, however, by the difficulty of measuring biological carbon export and the processes that drive it over the entire annual cycle. Our most detailed understanding of the biological pump comes from time-series sites with robust sampling programs for both primary production and export production, often with additional observations of ecosystem composition and structure useful for determining mechanistic controls on export (e.g., Church et al., 2013). However, these existing time-series sites are representative of only a small fraction of the global ocean (estimated at 9%–15% of the total ocean area; Henson et al., 2016), and year-round study sites are largely limited to the subtropical and tropical ocean (e.g., Church et al., 2013). Current understanding suggests that the anthropogenic carbon uptake to date has been predominantly driven by the abiotic solubility pump as the surface ocean equilibrates with rising atmospheric CO_2 concentrations, rather than by biological carbon cycling (Sabine and Tanhua, 2010). However, estimates of the current global rate of carbon transfer from the surface ocean to the interior via the biological pump, amounting to $\sim 6\text{--}13 \text{ Pg C yr}^{-1}$ (Laws et al., 2011; Siegel et al., 2014), significantly exceed the current rate at which the ocean absorbs atmospheric CO_2 (estimated at $2.6 \pm 0.5 \text{ Pg C yr}^{-1}$; Quéré et al., 2016), indicating that even a small perturbation to the biological pump could have a large influence on the global carbon cycle. Changes to the strength of the biological pump would also influence the distribution of nutrients and oxygen in the ocean, with broad implications for ocean ecosystems.

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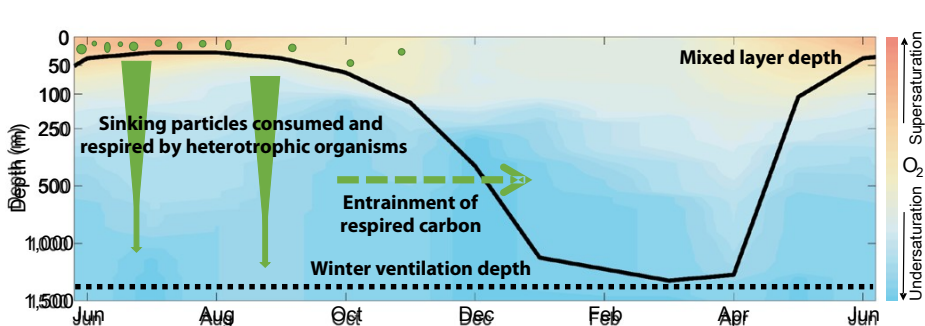


FIGURE 1. Schematic seasonal cycle of organic carbon export and winter ventilation in the North Atlantic (oxygen saturation and mixed layer depth based on World Ocean Atlas 2013 data for the OOI Irminger Sea Array site). Phytoplankton growth in the spring and summer leads to export from the seasonally stratified mixed layer. This surface net autotrophy is evident in mixed layer oxygen supersaturation. However, much of the seasonally exported carbon is remineralized in the seasonal thermocline and entrained back into the mixed layer during deep winter mixing. This ventilates the respired carbon (and waters undersaturated with oxygen due to net respiration) back to the atmosphere. In order for carbon to be sequestered on annual or longer time scales, it must sink below the winter ventilation depth prior to remineralization.

In this paper, we focus on the Irminger et al., 2004; Khatiwala et al., 2009), making stratification (Dall’Omo et al., 2016). Sea region of the subpolar North Atlantic is a region of critical importance for understanding the ocean’s role in carbon cycle below the deepest winter mixing logical pump. The subpolar North Atlantic is a strong carbon sink region where the biological carbon pump’s annual cycle features two pronounced and competing processes: a spring diatom bloom that produces large, fast-sinking particles, and deep winter mixing that exports carbon that reaches below the ventilated carbon remineralized in the seasonal thermocline and ventilated back to the atmosphere during the subsequent winter (Figure 1; Oschlies and Tanhua, 2010), and also increases the sequestration time for biologically produced carbon that reaches below the winter ventilation depth (DeVries et al., 2012). However, the amount of carbon sequestered annually by the biological pump and its role in driving ocean carbon cycle throughout the North Atlantic sub-polar gyre. Strong wintertime atmospheric forcing over the Irminger Sea subpolar North Atlantic biological carbon pump throughout the year within the North Atlantic seasonal cycle is the large winter convective mixing to depths of up to 1,400 m, forming a water mass that extends throughout the mid-depth North Atlantic (Pickart et al., 2003; de Jong et al., 2012; de Jong and de Steur, 2016; de Jong et al., 2018, in this issue). There is significant interannual variability in the full annual cycle of biologically driven export from the surface ocean during the Irminger Sea convective mixing, with carbon cycling processes in both the surface ocean and the seasonal thermocline (e.g., Buesseler et al., 1992; Quay et al., 1992). Fast-sinking particles and aggregates can transfer this organic carbon to depth, with significant particle fluxes observed between the base of the euphotic zone and 1,000 m (Antia et al., 2001; Briggs et al., 2011; P. Martin et al., 2011). Dissolved and suspended organic matter can also be transferred from a delayed bloom and lower maximum in the North Atlantic at approximately the surface mixed layer to the thermocline by episodic mixing followed by North Atlantic Oscillation years (Sabin et al., 2012). Anthropogenic carbon has accumulated in the North Atlantic at approximately the surface mixed layer to the thermocline three times the global average rate (Sabine et al., 2002).

THE SUBPOLAR NORTH ATLANTIC AND THE IRMINGER SEA

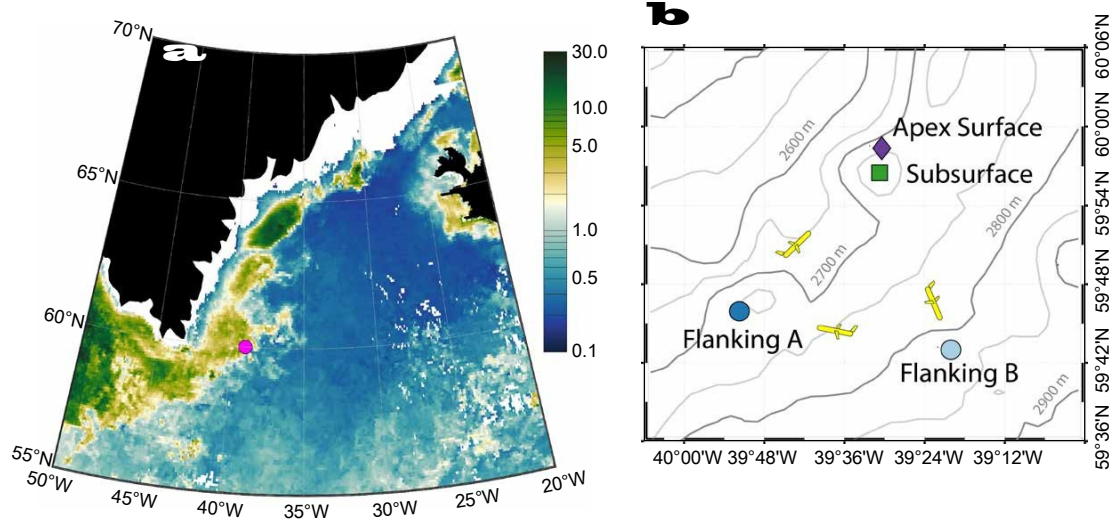


FIGURE 1 (a) Sea surface chlorophyll a ($\mu\text{g l}^{-1}$; 9 km MODIS Aqua) in the Irminger Sea from May 2015. The pink dot indicates the location of the OOI Irminger Sea Array. (b) Configuration of moorings and gliders at the OOI Irminger Sea Array, overlain on bathymetric contours.

that have stronger cooling and deeper mixed layer depths (Henson et al., 2006, 2009). This located on all moorings and gliders oxygen measurements. This enables us interannual variability in bloom dynamics within the OOI Array, and provide a continuous picture of biologically mediated processes and physical forcing likely also influence surface and subsurface carbon cycling. To correct for in situ drift by assuming that oxygen concentrations on deep isotherms (2,000 m and below) should be stable over time, and that observed oxygen exported carbon ventilated during winter on all moorings and gliders, and chlorophyll *a* concentrations determined from surface mooring fluorometers (see online Supplementary Text for full details on all measurements are subject to greater uncertainty than the thermocline measurements due to greater uncertainty in their pre-deployment drift gain corrections and the faster drift of optodes measuring surface properties (Tables S1 and S2). We therefore do not use surface oxygen measurements to calculate air-sea oxygen flux or net community production, which require highly accurate surface oxygen measurements (Emerson and Bushinsky, 2014). Further study with that is stoichiometrically related to net more accurately constrained surface dissolved oxygen measurements will be needed to determine the relative roles of losses due to respiration dominate and air-sea oxygen flux, biological production, and physical influences on mixed layer dissolved oxygen. Here, we qualitatively interpret the mixed layer seasonal cycle and focus quantitative interpretation on the spring bloom signal that is large enough to overwhelm uncertainty and on the more accurately constrained measurements of the seasonal thermocline from the profiler mooring. Quantitative interpretation of dissolved oxygen sensor data requires that sensors be calibrated to account for two primary sources of error: (1) rapid drift to recover all moorings and gliders from factory calibrations prior to deployment, and (2) in situ drift after deployment, as well as conduct shipboard calibration casts for sensors on all moorings and gliders.

OOI IRMINGER SEA ARRAY

The OOI Irminger Sea Array was first deployed in September 2014, beginning an ongoing time series of observations planned to continue for 25 to 30 years. The array is arranged in a triangular configuration (nominally 20 km a side), with an Apex surface mooring co-located with a subsurface profiler mooring at the north point of the triangle and two flanker moorings located at the southern corners (Figure 2b). Up to three open-ocean gliders continually transit around the array triangle, diving from the surface to 1,000 m. Annual summertime cruises recover all moorings and gliders from the previous year and deploy replacement, as well as conduct shipboard calibration casts for sensors on all moorings and gliders.

Here, we synthesize data collected over the first two years of OOI Irminger Sea Array deployment (September 2014–July 2016) to trace organic carbon production, remineralization, and ventilation. We focus in particular on dissolved oxygen, as stable response and accurate mixing (Henson et al., 2006, 2009). This located on all moorings and gliders oxygen measurements. This enables us interannual variability in bloom dynamics within the OOI Array, and provide a continuous picture of biologically mediated processes and physical forcing likely also influence surface and subsurface carbon cycling. To correct for in situ drift by assuming that oxygen concentrations on deep isotherms (2,000 m and below) should be stable over time, and that observed oxygen exported carbon ventilated during winter on all moorings and gliders, and chlorophyll *a* concentrations determined from surface mooring fluorometers (see online Supplementary Text for full details on all measurements are subject to greater uncertainty than the thermocline measurements due to greater uncertainty in their pre-deployment drift gain corrections and the faster drift of optodes measuring surface properties (Tables S1 and S2). We therefore do not use surface oxygen measurements to calculate air-sea oxygen flux or net community production, which require highly accurate surface oxygen measurements (Emerson and Bushinsky, 2014). Further study with that is stoichiometrically related to net more accurately constrained surface dissolved oxygen measurements will be needed to determine the relative roles of losses due to respiration dominate and air-sea oxygen flux, biological production, and physical influences on mixed layer dissolved oxygen. Here, we qualitatively interpret the mixed layer seasonal cycle and focus quantitative interpretation on the spring bloom signal that is large enough to overwhelm uncertainty and on the more accurately constrained measurements of the seasonal thermocline from the profiler mooring. Quantitative interpretation of dissolved oxygen sensor data requires that sensors be calibrated to account for two primary sources of error: (1) rapid drift to recover all moorings and gliders from factory calibrations prior to deployment, and (2) in situ drift after deployment, as well as conduct shipboard calibration casts for sensors on all moorings and gliders.

Oscillation index, which drove unusually concentrations reach supersaturation of 1.4; Laws, 1991). Previous estimates of strong surface cooling and deep winter late April 2015, they remain super-oxygen flux to the atmosphere during the convection as compared with the pre-saturated through early October. This, subpolar North Atlantic spring bloom are ous 12 years, pre-conditioning the region as well as chlorophyll a concentra- of comparable magnitude (Quay et al., for similarly deep mixing in the winter of tions elevated above baseline values 2012, and references therein), suggest- 2015/2016 (de Jong and de Steur, 2016). Figure 3b), suggests that productive coring that the total NCP during the bloom is likely considerably greater than our spring bloom is evident in elevated surface net autotrophy extend throughout this period. lower bound estimate.

face chlorophyll a concentrations from April to early June in both 2015 and 2016. Although oxygen measurements are not sufficiently accurate to estimate the total net community production (NCP) (Figures 2a and 3b).

Observed mixed layer dissolved oxygen in the surface mixed layer, the rapid increase in dissolved oxygen during the 2015 spring bloom from a baseline value of $305 \pm 2 \mu\text{mol kg}^{-1}$ during April 1–10 to a maximum value of $402 \mu\text{mol kg}^{-1}$ on May 11 reflects an increase in the mixed layer oxygen inventory of $\sim 3.0 \text{ mol C m}^{-2}$ integrated through the $\sim 30 \text{ m}$ mixed layer to determine the base of the mixed layer ventilation, indicating ventilation of oxygen-undersaturated deeper waters with a net increase in oxygen inventory places a respiration signature. Oxygen undersaturation persists until the beginning of the spring bloom, when surface oxygen rapidly increases in tandem with the net production of $\sim 2.1 \text{ mol C m}^{-2}$, or increase in chlorophyll a. Once oxygen $\sim 70 \text{ mmol C m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$ (based on a α_{OC} ratio

SEASONAL CYCLES OF THE THERMOCLINE AND WINTER VENTILATION

Observations below the mixed layer allow us to see the seasonal evolution of respiration and ventilation within the seasonal thermocline. Profiler mooring temperature data (Figure 4a) were compared with sea surface temperature (Figure 3a) oxygen concentrations remain below saturation, integrated through the $\sim 30 \text{ m}$ mixed layer to determine the base of the mixed layer ventilation, indicating ventilation of oxygen-undersaturated deeper waters with a net increase in oxygen inventory places a respiration signature. Oxygen undersaturation persists until the beginning of the spring bloom, when surface oxygen rapidly increases in tandem with the net production of $\sim 2.1 \text{ mol C m}^{-2}$, or increase in chlorophyll a. Once oxygen $\sim 70 \text{ mmol C m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$ (based on a α_{OC} ratio of 1.4; Laws, 1991). Previous estimates of strong surface cooling and deep winter late April 2015, they remain super-oxygen flux to the atmosphere during the convection as compared with the pre-saturated through early October. This, subpolar North Atlantic spring bloom are of comparable magnitude (Quay et al., 2012, and references therein), suggest- Figure 3b), suggests that productive coring that the total NCP during the bloom is likely considerably greater than our lower bound estimate.

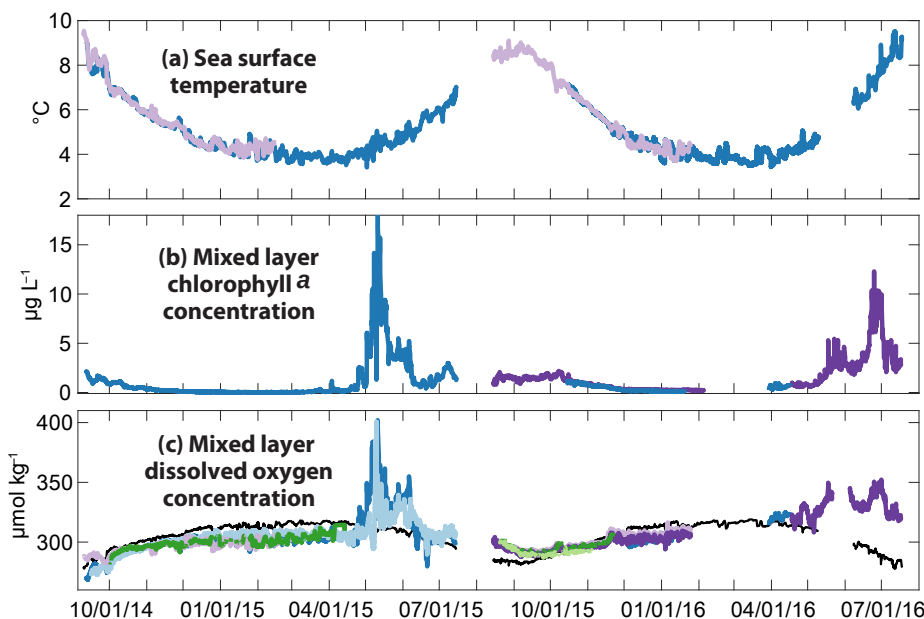


FIGURE 3. Surface mixed layer (a) sea surface temperature, (b) chlorophyll a concentration, and (c) dissolved oxygen from the OOI Irminger Sea Array over the first two years of deployment. Data are compiled from multiple array assets (see Figure 2b) to provide nearly continuous data. The oxygen concentration expected if the mixed layer were in equilibrium with the atmosphere, calculated from sea surface temperature and salinity following the equation of Garcia and Gordon (1992), is provided in (c) for comparison with observed concentrations.

The dates of initial winter ventilation (the time that the mixed layer first penetrates to a given depth within the thermocline) correspond with a rapid increase in dissolved oxygen concentration at depth as the oxygen-undersaturated thermocline waters are exposed to the atmosphere (Figure 4b,c). Once ventilation has penetrated to a given depth, oxygen concentrations at that depth continue to increase throughout the period of winter convection until stratification is reestablished in spring (Figure 5). Because the

depth of active mixing often decreases in then ventilated back to the atmosphere (Pavlovsky et al., 2016a), consistent with the spring prior to stratification of the mixed layer during winter. Integrated through the 200–1,000 m layer within the seasonal thermocline, the date of re-stratification in spring thermocline, $\sim 5.9 \text{ mol C m}^{-2}$ was removed (8.3 mol C m^{-2} consumed by respiration) over the 2015 stratified season prior to being entrained back into the mixed layer during winter ventilation. Carbon sequestration via the biological pump can be thought of as a “tug of war” between downward flux of organic matter from the surface during the stratified productive season and upward flux of remineralized organic matter during wintertime ventilation. Both of these

CONCLUSIONS

Respiration in the seasonal thermocline in 2015/2016. This magnitude of winter ventilation is greater than that previously observed in other deep mixing regions where layers are isolated from contact with the atmosphere, and the seasonal-scale influence of advection is low because the profiler mooring is located near the center of the gyre where the mean currents are relatively weak (de Jong et al., 2018, in this issue). Thus, oxygen decline over the stratified season reflects respiration of organic matter by heterotrophic organisms. We calculate the respiration over the stratified season at each depth interval as the oxygen decrease from the oxygen maximum at the onset of re-stratification (yellow dots in Figure 5) to the oxygen minimum at the end of the stratified season (cyan dots in Figure 5), yielding total respiration rates for all depths from 200–1,000 m within the seasonal thermocline (Figure 6).

Consistent with previous oxygen-based estimates of subsurface respiration (Martz et al., 2008; Hennon et al., 2016) and with canonical expectations for attenuation of organic matter flux with depth (J.M. Martin et al., 1987), total seasonal respiration is greatest near the top of the thermocline and decreases with depth (Figure 6). The duration of the stratified season over which this respiration occurs increases with depth, as re-stratification begins earlier and winter ventilation begins later deeper in the water column (stratification duration ranges from 194 ± 1 days at depths from 200–300 m to 280 ± 3 days at depths from 750–1,000 m; Figures 4 and 5). The total respiration within each depth interval is stoichiometrically related to an increase in dissolved inorganic carbon due to organic matter remineralization over the course of the stratified season, which

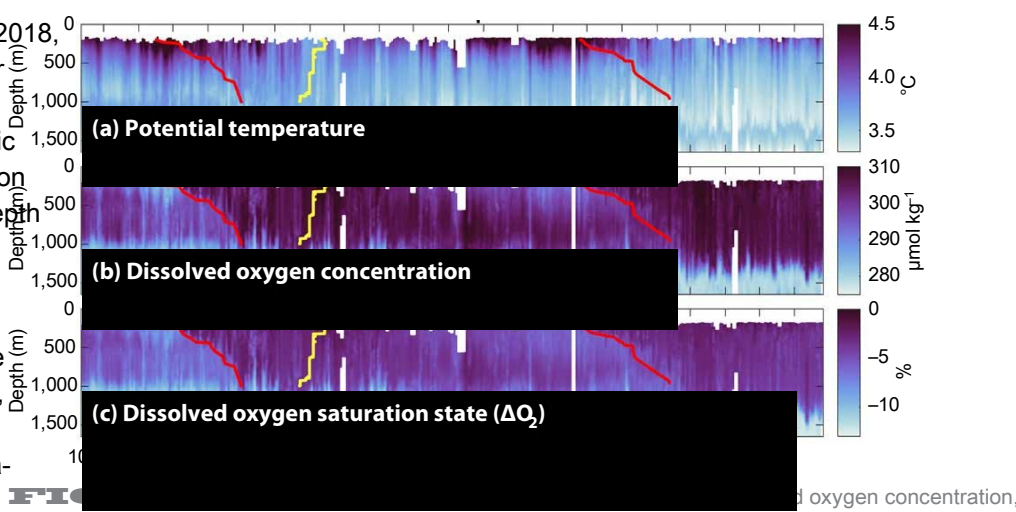


FIGURE 5. Examples of dissolved oxygen time series at (a) 200 m, (b) 500 m, and (c) 800 m from the profiler mooring. Red lines indicate the beginning of winter ventilation in each year (determined as the time that the mixed layer first penetrates to a given depth), and yellow lines indicate the end of winter ventilation in 2015 (determined as the date of the late winter-early spring oxygen maximum at each depth; see Figure 5).

$$(\Delta O_2 = \left(\frac{O_{2, \text{observed}}}{O_{2, \text{equilibrium}}} - 1 \right) \times 100)$$

from the profiler mooring. Red lines indicate the beginning of winter ventilation in each year (determined as the time that the mixed layer first penetrates to a given depth), and yellow lines indicate the end of winter ventilation in 2015 (determined as the date of the late winter-early spring oxygen maximum at each depth; see Figure 5).

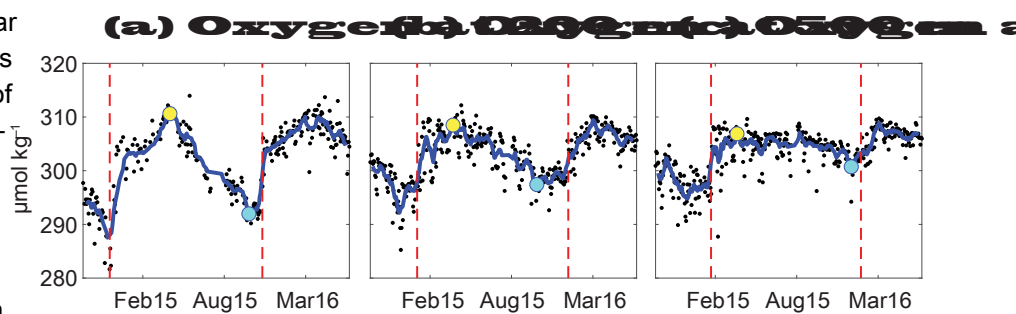


FIGURE 5. Examples of dissolved oxygen time series at (a) 200 m, (b) 500 m, and (c) 800 m from the profiler mooring over the first two years' deployment of the OOI Irminger Sea Array. Blue lines show the smoothed time series, determined as a 10-point filtered mean of all dissolved oxygen values gridded to each depth (black points). Red dashed lines indicate the date of initial winter ventilation in each year, determined as the time that the mixed layer first penetrates to the given depth. The end of winter ventilation (cyan dots) in spring 2015 is determined as the maximum dissolved oxygen concentration. The oxygen decrease from the end of winter ventilation (yellow dots) to the minimum oxygen concentration at the end of the stratified season (cyan dots) shows respiration of organic carbon within the seasonal thermocline.

Total stratified season respiration

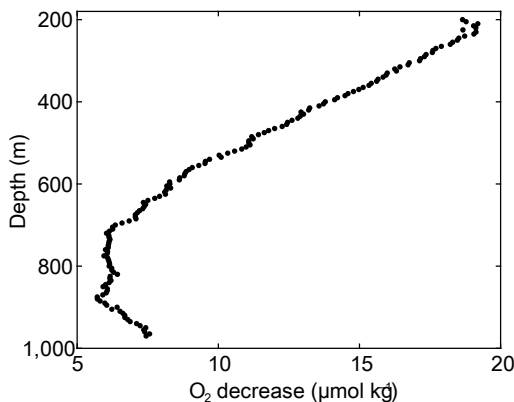


FIGURE 6. Total respiration integrated through the seasonal thermocline (200–1,000 m depth) over the 2015 stratified season, calculated as the oxygen decrease from the end of winter ventilation in spring 2015 to the oxygen minimum at the end of the stratified season (from the yellow to the cyan dots in Figure 5). Thermocline respiration integrated through this full layer is $8.3 \text{ mol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2}$, representing 5.9 mol C m^{-2} ventilated back to the atmosphere the subsequent winter ($\text{O}_2\text{:C}$ ratio of 1.4; Laws, 1991).

players “tug” especially hard in the subarctic North Atlantic (Figure 1). Data from the first two years of the new OOI Irminger Sea Array provide the first simultaneous observations of the seasonal progression of the biological pump in both the surface mixed layer and thermocline in the subarctic North Atlantic Ocean. The spring bloom during April–May each year was associated with a dramatic increase in mixed layer dissolved oxygen, reflecting significant net autotrophic production during this period (Figures 2 and 3). Below the mixed layer, oxygen decline over the 2015 stratified season indicated high remineralization rates within the seasonal thermocline totaling $\sim 5.9 \text{ mol C m}^{-2}$ between 200 m and 1,000 m—greater than the total annual export from the surface in most parts of the ocean (Figures 5 and 6; Emerson, 2014). Deep winter convection extending below 1,000 m ventilated this respiration signature from the seasonal thermocline, maintaining surface dissolved oxygen concentrations below saturation throughout the winter months despite vigorous gas exchange acting to return mixed layer oxygen to saturation (Figures 3c and 4).

These results highlight the importance of accounting for remineralization within the seasonal thermocline and ventilation of respired carbon back to the atmosphere during winter mixing in order to accurately determine the influence of the biological pump on carbon sequestration terms (e.g., Biogeochemical Argo floats; Johnson and Claustre, 2016) provide a powerful tool for investigating carbon

cycling throughout the full annual cycle in the previously undersampled high-latitude ocean.

SUPPLEMENTARY

Supplementary Text, Figures S1 and S2, and Tables S1 and S2, include details on all data used in this analysis and are available online at <https://doi.org/10.5670/oceanog.2018.108>.

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