

Clim. Past Discuss., referee comment RC2  
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## Comment on cp-2021-122

Anonymous Referee #2

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Referee comment on "Late Paleocene CO<sub>2</sub> drawdown, climatic cooling, and terrestrial denudation in the southwest Pacific" by Christopher J. Hollis et al., *Clim. Past Discuss.*, <https://doi.org/10.5194/cp-2021-122-RC2>, 2021

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### General Comments:

Hollis et al report new stable carbon isotope measurements of organic matter from sediments deposited on the continental shelf and slope of New Zealand and eastern Australia during the late Paleocene (termed the Waipawa organofacies). The authors identify unusually high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values measured within the Waipawa organofacies, consistent with measurements made by others on contemporaneous sections in China and Argentina. The authors use a detailed suite of geochemical analyses (including bulk and compound specific stable isotope analysis) to claim the unusually high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values are caused by a combination of lignin degradation and low CO<sub>2</sub> levels. Associated with this event is global cooling (and growth of ice sheets and fall in sea level) that likely resulted from lower atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> (evidenced by the high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values), which may have been caused by reduced volcanism and increased carbon burial.

The authors make the connection between the high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values and low CO<sub>2</sub>, but a quantitative estimate of CO<sub>2</sub> is lacking. Using the terrestrial  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  data to quantify CO<sub>2</sub> would allow for a more useful comparison of CO<sub>2</sub> and temperature, and greatly improve what is presently a very qualitative comparison (high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  = low CO<sub>2</sub> and cooling = low CO<sub>2</sub>). This is particularly important given that "The relationship between temperature and atmospheric greenhouse gas levels through the Paleocene is very poorly resolved..." (40) and the authors state (75), "we explore the possibility that this <sup>13</sup>C enrichment of bulk OM reflects a short-lived drawdown in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, reflecting the relationship in carbon isotope discrimination between atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and C<sub>3</sub> plant biomass (Cui and Schubert, 2016, 2017, 2018; Schubert and Jahren, 2012, 2018)." Yet, any determination of CO<sub>2</sub> using this relationship is conspicuously absent.

Furthermore, the authors later state (290), "Only by accounting for potential processes of <sup>13</sup>C-enrichment during OM transportation, deposition and early diagenesis it is possible to

identify any residual enrichment that may be related to a drawdown in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels." Why do all this if CO<sub>2</sub> is not going to be estimated quantitatively (even if only a back of the envelope calculation to show a possible range of CO<sub>2</sub> drawdowns, given possible marine influences, and autogenic processes)?

Alternatively, the authors could calculate CO<sub>2</sub> given their interpretation that (376-377), "the pristane CIE implies that the primary terrestrial substrate is enriched in <sup>13</sup>C by ~4‰." The authors could also calculate CO<sub>2</sub> for a range of CIE magnitudes, to show the magnitude of CO<sub>2</sub> change that would be required to get any size CIE. It would certainly help to better answer the question of whether a drawdown in CO<sub>2</sub> is a plausible explanation for the δ<sup>13</sup>C trends and the observed cooling (the current assumption is there was cooling therefore CO<sub>2</sub> must have decreased). Is the purported 20-30% decrease in CO<sub>2</sub> required for a 1 °C decrease in deep sea temperature (455) consistent with CO<sub>2</sub> estimated assuming a +4‰ terrestrial CIE (based on the terrestrial CIE)? If so, that would greatly support the stated conclusions linking high δ<sup>13</sup>C to low CO<sub>2</sub> (and the various processes indicated within). If not, it may suggest climate sensitivity differed from the 3 °C assumed here, which would also be an interesting result. Much of the work to assess climate sensitivity in the Paleogene has focused on the warmest periods.

Besides, the aquatic sources show a similar 2-4‰ shift to the terrestrial sources (380-382). If so, why does the relative terrestrial vs aquatic influences matter? Both show similar magnitude CIE, so why would the % terrestrial affect determination of CO<sub>2</sub> based on the CIE?

(453-455) "We refrain from estimating a CO<sub>2</sub> change due to the complex mixing of OM sources. However, the deep-sea benthic δ<sup>18</sup>O record indicates that deep sea temperatures decreased by 1°C in the POIM (Barnet et al., 2019), which is consistent with a modest (20–30%) decline in CO<sub>2</sub>, assuming a climate sensitivity of 3°C." Given all the work that was done to quantify the various OM sources and degradation, this statement is a bit disappointing (besides, the authors do assign values, e.g., 550-553, where they identify a residual excursion of ~2.5‰, exclusive of degradation processes, or the purported 4‰ CIE measured in phytane, 376). As noted above, even a back-of-the-envelope calculation given a few assumptions (or a range of CIE sizes) would be useful to see if a CO<sub>2</sub> decline is even a plausible interpretation from the δ<sup>13</sup>C data. Otherwise the entire premise of a CO<sub>2</sub> decline is based solely on data separate from this study (deep-sea benthic δ<sup>18</sup>O data and climate sensitivity estimates).

Specific Comments:

82: "From these analyses, we estimate the magnitudes of the δ<sup>13</sup>C excursion in both primary terrestrial and marine OM and use these values to infer broad changes in the concentration of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>." Where is the calculation of CO<sub>2</sub> from the δ<sup>13</sup>C data?

Many of the geochemical methods are repeatedly simply cited back to Naeher et al. (2019), rather than being reported here. At least, a brief summary of the methods used here would be useful to the reader. For example, some important details on the standards used for IRMS and the analytical precision of these measurements, which may differ from the previous work? This was done for the compound specific work, but would make reading this paper easier as a stand-alone product, without needing to read back to Naeher et al. (2019) for the methods.

The summary paragraph of Section 5.4 "<sup>13</sup>C enrichment attributable to drawdown of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>" lacks any description of how <sup>13</sup>C enrichment relates to drawdown of CO<sub>2</sub>.

Conclusions. I think a calculation of CO<sub>2</sub> from the δ<sup>13</sup>C data would go a long way towards bolstering the linkages between CO<sub>2</sub>, cooling, C burial, volcanism, and sea level, etc proposed in the conclusions.

Technical Corrections:

Throughout, delta values (δ<sup>13</sup>C, δ<sup>18</sup>O) are commonly described as heavy/enriched (or depleted), rather than as being higher/lower. It is my understanding that a sample is enriched (or depleted) in one isotope (e.g., <sup>13</sup>C), but cannot be enriched/depleted in δ<sup>13</sup>C (or δ<sup>18</sup>O). Some examples of these various permutations are noted here:

17: enriched in δ<sup>13</sup>C --> enriched in <sup>13</sup>C

19: heaviest δ<sup>13</sup>C values --> greatest δ<sup>13</sup>C values

70: δ<sup>13</sup>C<sub>OM</sub> value of -20‰, which is ~7‰ heavier --> ~7‰ greater

236/249: more depleted δ<sup>13</sup>C<sub>OM</sub> values --> lower δ<sup>13</sup>C values

527: depleted δ<sup>18</sup>O values --> lower δ<sup>18</sup>O values

263-264: citation?

308-310: See also Lukens et al. (2019): The effect of diagenesis on carbon isotope values of fossil wood: *Geology*, v. 47, p. 987–991, <https://doi.org/10.1130/G46412.1>.

486: It difficult --> it is difficult