

The Cryosphere Discuss., referee comment RC3
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Comment on tc-2021-355

Matthew Johnson (Referee)

Referee comment on "Impacts of post-depositional processing on nitrate isotopes in the snow and the overlying atmosphere at Summit, Greenland" by Zhuang Jiang et al., The Cryosphere Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/tc-2021-355-RC3>, 2022

Review of Atmospheric and snow nitrate isotope systematics at Summit, Greenland: the reality of the post-depositional effect by Jiang et al.

As said in the title this paper sets out to document the reality and state of knowledge of the post-depositional effect which changes the isotope distributions in nitrate after deposition and before archiving. The paper presents some nice data, but unfortunately it is not always strong enough to make definite conclusions. The discussion is sometimes too speculative as detailed below.

Please define exactly what is meant by 'post-depositional'. I presume it means 'after deposition to the surface and before becoming part of the permanent archive'. How long is this period? Why does post-depositional processing end? What evidence is there that there are not also long-term changes in deep ice? What is the physical mechanism ending post depositional processing?

The abstract should do a better job of communicating the impact and implications of the study. What is known now that was unknown or uncertain before?

It is clear that this research group is quite accomplished at the methods used. The main issue is in the value and implications of the results that are obtained. After decades of research on isotopic abundances in snowpack nitrate, I would ask the authors to make a clear statement in the discussion or conclusion about the state of the field, both what has been learned, and what the information could be used for if only post depositional processing could be understood in detail. I get the impression that there will always be some uncertainty. For example the uncertainties in delta values in the abstract are around 50%, and similar large uncertainties are shown in Figure 2. How much would these uncertainties have to be reduced in order to be able to derive useful numbers from the nitrate record, and is it reasonable to believe that this can be achieved?

Line 109, add a reference for the cage effect mechanism.

Line 380, are there physical mechanisms that could explain the spring-summer differences such as recrystallization?

Please discuss the origin of the time lag between the mean SZA and the PIE plot shown in Figure 3. Very nice data here, thank you.

At line 498, it is not clear what 'kinetic adsorption' is and how this is different from 'adsorption'. Do you mean to say that at Summit, given higher snowfall, scavenging of nitrate is complete, while it is incomplete at Dome-C? Please rewrite and clarify, to benefit those outside your immediate research field.

At times the discussion is speculative and I would encourage the authors to keep it tight and focused - give numbers and reasons and try to conserve ink.

Line 714, 'We analysed the relationships and found that the linearity of ..in snowpack is different from that of atmospheric and surface snow.' I am confused because isn't linearity always linearity? Maybe there is another word such as slope or curvature, that would be more appropriate.

Technical

The writing is generally fine with only some minor issues that are easily addressed with a good proofreading.

Line 130, I suggest change to read '...post-depositional processing, snow samples covering the entire photic zone must be considered.'

Line 132, check the sentence 'To thoughtfully evaluate', in simplified form it seems to say, 'Nitrate isotopes are necessary.' Please rewrite, just simply and clearly.