



Tom Kleindinst, WHOI

WHOI scientist Justin Ries grew marine animals in tanks under today's atmospheric carbon dioxide levels and at higher levels forecast in the future.

Ocean acidification: a risky shell game



A new study has yielded surprising findings about how the shells of marine organisms might stand up to an increasingly acidic ocean in the future, caused by the continuing buildup of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere.

Subjected to very high CO₂ conditions, the shells of clams, oysters, and some snails and urchins partially dissolved. But other species seemed as if they would not be harmed, and crustaceans, such as lobsters, crabs, and prawns, appeared to increase their shell-building.

Excess CO₂ dissolves into the ocean and is converted to corrosive carbonic acid, a process known as “ocean acidification.” At the same time, the CO₂ also supplies carbon that combines with calcium already

dissolved in seawater to provide the main ingredient for shells—calcium carbonate (CaCO₃), the same material found in chalk and limestone.

“Marine ecosystems—particularly those based on calcium-carbonate shell-building, such as coral or oyster reefs—could change with increasing atmospheric CO₂,” said Justin Ries, a marine biogeochemist and lead author of the study, published in the December 2009 issue of *Geology*. In a future ocean that continues to absorb excess CO₂ from industrial emissions, deforestation, and other human activities, sensitive species could lose their protective shells and eventually die out, while other species that build stronger shells could become dominant.

While a postdoctoral scholar at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Ries worked with WHOI scientists Anne Cohen and Dan McCorkle. In tanks filled with seawater, they raised 18 species of

marine organisms that build calcium carbonate shells or skeletons. The scientists exposed the tanks to air containing CO₂ at today's level (400 parts per million, or ppm), at levels forecast by climate models for 100 years from now (600 ppm) and 200 years from now (900 ppm), and at a level (2,850 ppm) that should cause calcium carbonate in shells to dissolve in seawater.

The test tanks' miniature atmospheres produced elevated CO₂ in the tiny captive oceans, generating higher acidity. The researchers measured the rate of shell growth for a range of species from both temperate and tropical waters. They included organisms such as corals and coralline algae, which form foundations for critical habitats, and popular seafoods such as clams, oysters, scallops, conchs, urchins, crabs, lobsters, and prawns.

In water containing more CO₂, organisms have more carbon to use as raw material

for shells. But they can benefit from the high CO₂ only if they can convert the carbon to a form they can use to build shells and can also protect their shells from dissolving in the more acidic seawater. The scientists found that different organisms responded in strikingly different ways to higher CO₂—from extremely positive to extremely negative, Ries said.

As expected, at the highest CO₂ levels the shells of some species, such as large, sturdy Caribbean snails called conchs, noticeably deteriorated. The spines of tropical pencil urchins dissolved away to nubs. And clams, oysters, and scallops built less and less shell as CO₂ levels increased.

However, two species of calcifying algae actually did better at 600 ppm (predicted for the year 2100) than at present-day CO₂ levels, but fared worse at even higher CO₂ levels. Temperate (cool-water) sea urchins, unlike their tropical relatives, grew best at 900 ppm, as did a temperate limpet.

Crustaceans provided the biggest surprise. All three species that were tested—blue crabs, American lobsters, and a large prawn—defied expectations and grew heavier shells as CO₂ levels rose.

“We were surprised that some organisms didn’t behave in the way we expected under elevated CO₂,” said Anne Cohen, second author on the *Geology* paper. “Some organ-



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The urchin on the right, grown under present-day conditions, is healthy and has normal spines. The urchin on the left, grown under higher CO₂ levels, is substantially damaged by more acidic seawater conditions.

isms were very sensitive [to CO₂ levels], but there were a couple [of species] that didn’t respond until it was sky-high—about 2,800 parts per million. We’re not expecting to see that [CO₂ level] any time soon.”

The scientists found that species with more protective coverings on their shells and skeletons—crustaceans, the temperate

urchins, mussels, and coralline red algae—are less vulnerable to the acidified seawater than those with less protective shells, such as conchs, hard clams, and tropical urchins.

All of the test organisms continued to create new shell throughout the experiment, said Ries, now an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina. But some suffered a net loss of shell because older, more massive portions of their shells dissolved under the highest CO₂ conditions.

The results, Ries said, suggest that the predicted rise in CO₂ over the coming centuries could cause changes in marine ecosystems, with some organisms building more massive skeletons and others becoming less successful at defending themselves from predators.

“Given the complex relationships that exist amongst benthic marine organisms,” said Ries, “it is difficult to predict how even subtle changes in organisms’ abilities to calcify will ultimately work their way through these ecosystems.”

—Kate Madin



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In a surprising finding, American lobsters grown under very high levels of carbon dioxide (at right) grew larger, heavier shells than lobsters (left) grown under today’s levels.

Justin Ries is a former postdoctoral scholar of the WHOI Ocean and Climate Change Institute. This work was also funded by the WHOI Tropical Research Initiative and the National Science Foundation.