



Ideas and perspectives: How sediment archives can improve model projections of marine ecosystem change

Isabell Hochfeld¹, Ben A. Ward², Anke Kremp³, Juliane Romahn^{4,5,6}, Alexandra Schmidt^{7,8}, Miklós Bálint^{4,5,6}, Lutz Becks⁹, Jérôme Kaiser³, Helge W. Arz³, Sarah Bolius³, Laura S. Epp⁷, Markus Pfenninger⁴, Christopher A. Klausmeier¹⁰, Elena Litchman¹⁰, and Jana Hinners¹¹

¹Institute of Marine Ecosystem and Fishery Science, University of Hamburg, Germany

²School of Ocean & Earth Science, University of Southampton Waterfront Campus, Southampton, United Kingdom

³Leibniz Institute for Baltic Sea Research Warnemünde IOW, Rostock, Germany

⁴Senckenberg Society for Nature Research, Frankfurt, Germany

⁵LOEWE Centre for Translational Biodiversity Genomics, Frankfurt, Germany

⁶Institute of Insect Biotechnology, Justus-Liebig University, Gießen, Germany

⁷Environmental Genomics, Department of Biology, University of Konstanz, Germany

⁸Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior, Radolfzell, Germany

⁹Aquatic Ecology and Evolution, Department of Biology, University of Konstanz, Germany

¹⁰Kellogg Biological Station, Michigan State University, U.S.A.

¹¹Hemholtz-Center Hereon, Geesthacht, Germany

Correspondence to: Isabell Hochfeld (isabell.hochfeld@uni-hamburg.de)

E-mail addresses and ORCIDs:

Isabell Hochfeld: isabell.hochfeld@uni-hamburg.de | 0000-0002-5705-0549

Ben A. Ward: b.a.ward@soton.ac.uk | 0000-0003-1290-8270

Anke Kremp: anke.kremp@io-warnemuende.de | 0000-0001-9484-6899

Juliane Romahn: juliane.romahn@senckenberg.de | 0009-0008-1464-8277

Alexandra Schmidt: alexandra.schmidt@uni-konstanz.de | 0000-0001-9262-0941

Miklós Bálint: miklos.balint@senckenberg.de | 0000-0003-0499-8536

Lutz Becks: lutz.becks@uni-konstanz.de | 0000-0002-3885-5253

Jérôme Kaiser: jerome.kaiser@io-warnemuende.de | 0000-0002-0290-9088

Helge W. Arz: helge.arz@io-warnemuende.de | 0000-0002-1997-1718

Sarah Bolius: sarah.bolius@io-warnemuende.de | 0000-0003-3542-6004

Laura S. Epp: laura.epp@uni-konstanz.de | 0000-0002-2230-9477

Markus Pfenninger: markus.pfenninger@senckenberg.de | 0000-0002-1547-7245

Christopher A. Klausmeier: klausme1@msu.edu | 0000-0002-6987-5871

Elena Litchman: litchman@msu.edu | 0000-0001-7736-6332

Jana Hinners: jana.hinners@hereon.de | 0000-0002-5145-2539



Abstract. Global warming is a major threat to marine biodiversity and ecosystem functioning, with consequences that are yet largely unknown. To frame these consequences, we need to understand how marine ecosystems respond to warming and related environmental changes. Ecosystem models have proven to be a valuable tool in this respect, but their projections vary considerably. A major limitation in current ecosystem models may be that they largely ignore evolutionary processes, which nonetheless can be relevant on the simulated time scales. In addition, ecosystem models are usually fit to contemporary data and used predictively afterwards, without further validation that they are equally applicable to past (and by inference, future) scenarios. A promising approach to validate evolutionary ecosystem models are biological archives such as natural sediments, which “collect” and archive long-term ecosystem changes. Since the ecosystem changes present in sediment records are affected by evolution, evolution needs to be represented in ecosystem models not only to realistically simulate the future but also the sediment record itself. The sediment record, in turn, can provide the required constraints on long-term evolutionary changes, along with information on past environmental conditions, biodiversity, and relative abundances of taxa. Here, we present a framework to make use of such information to validate evolutionary ecosystem models and improve model projections of future ecosystem changes. Using the example of phytoplankton, key players in marine systems, we review existing literature and discuss (I) which data can be derived from ancient sedimentary archives, (II) how we can integrate these data into evolutionary ecosystem models to improve their projections of climate-driven ecosystem changes, and (III) future perspectives and aspects that remain challenging.

1 Introduction

Driven by the reality of global warming as a major threat to marine biodiversity and ecosystem functioning, ecosystem models are increasingly used to estimate future changes in marine ecosystems. However, projected changes differ notably between models (Laufkötter et al., 2015, 2016), which may be due to the fact that evolutionary processes are generally neglected, even though they can be of great importance on the simulated time scales (Irwin et al., 2015; Jin and Agustí, 2018). The reliability of current model projections therefore remains questionable. Here, we propose to use data from sediment archives to validate evolutionary



ecosystem models before using them predictively, and discuss how this approach can improve model projections.

35 Compared with the period 1850–1900, global surface temperature has already increased by 1.25 °C and, under the most extreme emissions scenario, is expected to increase by up to a further 3.5 °C by the end of the century (IPCC scenario SSP5-8.5, Allan et al., 2021). The current state of warming has already caused changes in marine communities (Peer and Miller, 2014; Poloczanska et al., 2013; Wasmund et al., 2019), which perform ecosystem functions that are vital to human societies, including food production (Hollowed et al., 2013) and carbon sequestration (Hain et al., 2013). The response of these ecosystem services under ongoing
40 global warming remains subject to great uncertainty, and there is a real but unknown risk of positive feedbacks, irreversible tipping points, and ecosystem collapse (Lenton et al., 2008).

Dynamic ecosystem models currently represent the best tool to understand complex feedbacks between evolving ecosystems and their environment, but it is a considerable challenge to develop models that would apply equally well to past, present, and future
45 scenarios. Despite their great potential, current models project diverging changes in ecosystem functions like carbon cycling and net primary production (Laufkötter et al., 2015, 2016). Since models hardly agree on the direction of change, the validity of current model projections remains questionable.

To improve model projections, we need (I) to verify that all relevant processes are
50 considered and (II) to validate projections with long-term data. Regarding (I), current ecosystem models largely ignore a crucial process that can influence ecosystem responses to environmental changes on perennial time scales – evolutionary adaptation (Hattich et al., 2024; Irwin et al., 2015; O’Donnell et al., 2018). Some ecosystem models already consider adaptation (Beckmann et al., 2019; Le Gland et al., 2021; Sauterey et al., 2017), but only a small number
55 have been compared to empirical data, both from experiments (Denman, 2017) and from sediment archives (Gibbs et al., 2020; Hinnert et al., 2019). So far, however, testing against data has not been used to improve projections made by these models. With respect to (II), both experiments and marine monitoring studies cannot account for environmental changes on longer than decadal time scales, while experiments can hardly capture the complexity of real
60 ecosystems. Natural archives such as sediments, however, allow reconstructing long-term ecosystem responses to past environmental changes (Capo et al., 2021; Ellegaard et al., 2020). Sediments preserve abiotic and biotic environmental proxies (Hillaire-Marcel & De Vernal,



2007), other organismal remains such as DNA (Alsos et al., 2022; Monchamp et al., 2016; Zimmermann et al., 2023), and dormant resting cells and seeds that can be resurrected and used
65 for experiments (Bennington et al., 1991; Hinners et al., 2017; Isanta-Navarro et al., 2021). Since sediments can be dated, we can use the preserved information to derive long-term time series on past environmental conditions, biodiversity, relative taxa abundance, and adaptive changes in (functional) traits. Thus, sediment archives are well suited to constrain the long-term evolutionary changes needed to validate evolutionary ecosystem models. Evolution, in
70 turn, needs to be represented in ecosystem models to simulate how the sediment record has been influenced by evolution.

Here, we discuss how we can use data from sediment archives to improve evolutionary ecosystem models and their projections of marine ecosystem change. Our approach focuses on phytoplankton, key players in marine ecosystems and respective models. Phytoplankton
75 account for about half of global photosynthesis (Field et al., 1998), are the basis of the marine food web (Fenchel, 1988), represent an important component of biogeochemical cycles (Hutchins and Fu, 2017), and can even influence ocean physics (Hense, 2007; Sathyendranath et al., 1991). In addition, the large population sizes and short generation times of phytoplankton allow them to adapt quickly to changing environmental conditions (Aranguren-Gassis et al.,
80 2019; Hattich et al., 2024; O'Donnell et al., 2018). All these factors, together with their long-lived dormant resting stages (Delebecq et al., 2020; Sanyal et al., 2022), make phytoplankton ideal model organisms for the approach we present here. Based on existing literature, we discuss which data we can obtain from sediment archives, how we can use these data to improve evolutionary ecosystem models and their projections, and remaining challenges and
85 future perspectives.

2 Sediment archives – understanding phytoplankton responses to environmental change

Sediment archives provide information on past ecosystem status, including both environmental
90 and biological data (Fig. 1). Such data can be used to constrain evolutionary ecosystem models.

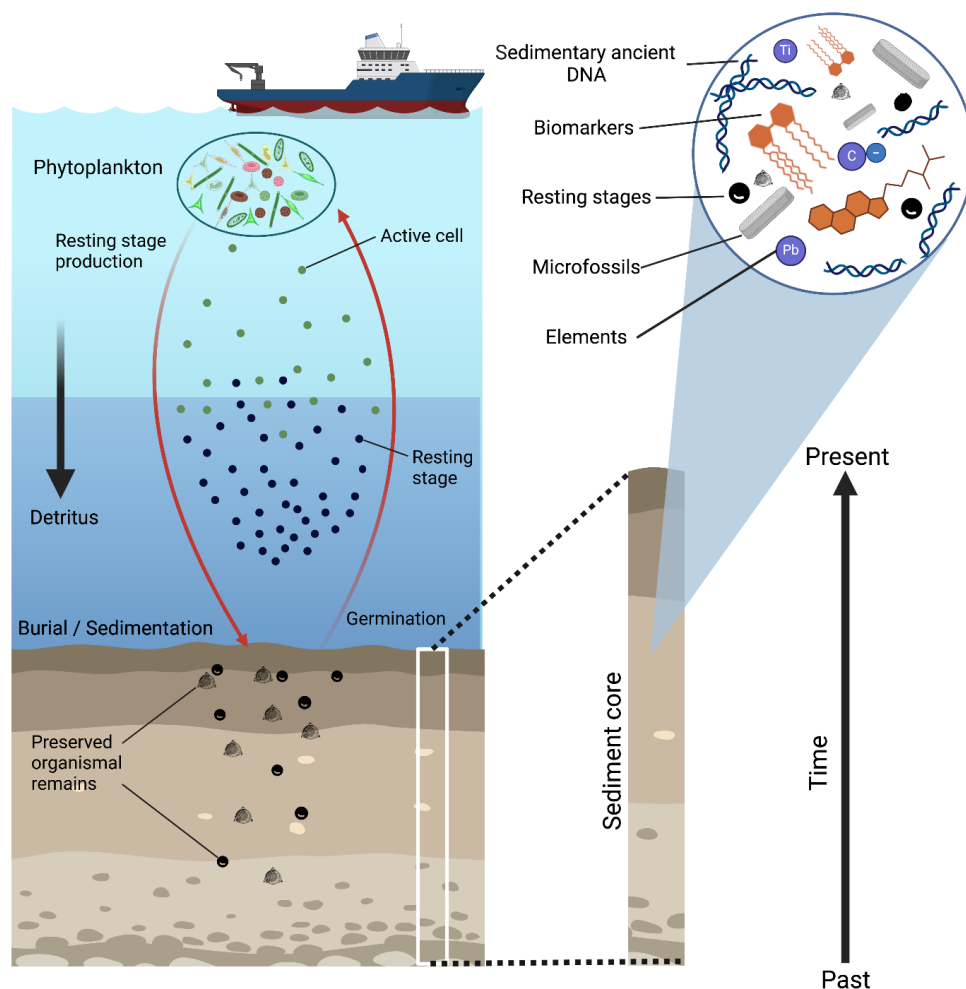


Figure 1: Overview of different types of data (environmental and biological) that can be obtained from sediment archives. **Left:** Schematic showing the deposition of organismal remains in the sediment. Red arrows indicate resting stage production, their deposition in the sediment, and the germination of resting stages from the sediment. The black arrow represents sinking of dead organic matter (detritus) to the seafloor. Preserved organismal remains, a mixture of resting stages and detritus, are shown in the sediment. **Right:** Close-up of the sediment core showing different types of data that can be obtained. The figure was created with BioRender.com.



2.1 Dating sediment archives

Before working with sediment archives, the sediments must be dated accurately to obtain a well-constrained relationship between age and sediment depth, a so-called age model. Common sediment dating methods include radiocarbon dating, lead isotope dating, and event stratigraphy. Radiocarbon (^{14}C) dating is based on ^{14}C half-life. Determining the amount of radioactive ^{14}C relative to the ^{12}C stable isotope allows estimating age ca. 50,000 years back in time (Hajdas et al., 2021). After 1950, radiocarbon dating is not applicable anymore due to the radiocarbon added artificially to the atmosphere by nuclear bomb tests. Therefore, sediments deposited after 1950 are dated using different methods such as lead isotope (^{210}Pb) dating and event stratigraphy. While the ^{210}Pb dating approach is based on the half-life of atmospheric ^{210}Pb (Appleby, 2001), event stratigraphy is based on the detection of specific events such as nuclear bomb tests, volcanic eruptions, and other distinct anthropogenic impacts that are registered in, for example, chemical parameters of the sediments (Hancock et al., 2011; Lowe and Alloway, 2015). By combining all the dating methods mentioned above, it is possible to obtain robust age models of sediment cores over the last ca. 50,000 years. Other stratigraphic methods, e.g., oxygen isotope stratigraphy, biostratigraphy, or paleomagnetic stratigraphy are applied to date older sediments deposited in aquatic environments (Bradley, 2015).

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2.2 Environmental data

Abiotic and biotic proxies, or indicators, preserved in sediment archives allow reconstructing physicochemical characteristics of past marine and limnic environments. For example, surface salinity can be estimated using lipids (alkenones) produced by micro-phytoplankton species of the order Isochrysidales (Kaiser et al., 2017; Medlin et al., 2008; Rosell-Melé, 1998). Some trace metals and their isotopes are indicators for past suboxic to euxinic conditions in the water column and/or the sediments (Brumsack, 2006; Dellwig et al., 2019). Relative assemblages of microfossils (e.g., resting stages of dinoflagellates, silica frustules of diatoms, calcareous shells of foraminifera) and their shell geochemistry provide important information not only on salinity, but also on pH, trophic state, and temperature, and are therefore powerful proxies (Cléroux et al., 2008; Hillaire-Marcel & De Vernal, 2007; Lear et al., 2002). Organic indexes based on biomarkers, e.g., alkenones (U^{K}_{37} , Prahl et al., 1988) or other membrane lipids derived

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from archaea (TEX₈₆, Schouten et al., 2013) can be used to reconstruct surface and subsurface temperature. These and many other physical methods, biological proxies, and geochemical tracers find their diverse applications in paleoceanography (Hillaire-Marcel & De Vernal, 2007).

Proxy-based reconstructions must be considered carefully as they may be biased due to preservation/degradation and influenced by local-to-regional environments. Using a multiproxy approach and calibration depending on the environment are important for reliable reconstructions. Reconstructed environmental conditions of the past can then be used as forcing for ecosystem models.

2.3 Biological data

Apart from information on environmental conditions, sediment archives provide a wide variety of biological information, such as biodiversity, relative taxa abundance, and trait adaptation. This biological information is valuable for validating evolutionary ecosystem models.

2.3.1 Microfossils

Traditionally, the focus of research on sediment archives has been on fossilized plankton remains. Fossil phytoplankton communities only represent species that consist of stable mineral structures (e.g., of silica or carbonate) or contain specific fossilizable molecules such as sporopollenin. Among dinoflagellates, only a fraction of the community produces resting cysts (Limoges et al., 2020; Van Nieuwenhove et al., 2020), which are preserved over time and can be used for quantitative paleoecological reconstructions and biostratigraphy. Diatoms, on the other hand, are well-represented in the fossil record due to their resistant silica frustules with their diverse species-specific structures (Weckström, 2006). Also some filamentous cyanobacteria produce resistant resting stages, akinetes, constituting long-term records in brackish-marine and lake sediments (Wood et al., 2021). In lakes, chrysophyte cysts can provide long-term records that reveal group-specific phytoplankton dynamics over long time scales (Korkonen et al., 2017). While microfossil data provide continuous (semi-)quantitative records of the relative biomasses of the represented taxa and larger taxonomic groups (e.g.,



cyanobacteria, diatoms, and dinoflagellates) over geological time scales, their biodiversity information is limited. Only a fraction of taxa within the phytoplankton community is usually represented in the fossil record, and therefore, respective data are likely biased (Bálint et al., 160 2018). Nevertheless, for those taxa that are suitable and sufficiently represented, highly informative demographic data can be generated from microfossil and resting stage records (Cermeño et al., 2013; Kremp et al., 2018; Matul et al., 2018). Furthermore, data on the temporal distribution of larger taxonomic groups as obtained from microfossil records can provide general information on trait composition and function of phytoplankton communities 165 through taxonomic identity (Blank and Sánchez-Baracaldo, 2010).

2.3.2 Sedimentary ancient DNA

To capture biodiversity dynamics of phytoplankton through time, recent advances in sedimentary ancient DNA approaches can increase taxonomic coverage and resolution. DNA 170 can be preserved for thousands or even millions of years in natural sedimentary archives, such as limnic sediments (Capo et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2019), marine sediments (Armbrecht et al., 2022; Coolen et al., 2009, 2013), paleosols (Frindte et al., 2020; Semenov et al., 2020), and permafrost (Kjær et al., 2022; Willerslev et al., 2003). Compared to microfossils, a distinctive characteristic of ancient DNA data lies in their capability for broad taxonomic coverage. 175 Because every organism contains DNA and the differences between species are defined by their DNA, in theory, DNA could be used to identify any organism that became part of the sediment deposits (Bálint et al., 2018). Establishing relative abundances of organisms from their DNA record is challenging though. While fossilized remains of certain phytoplankton taxa can inform us about cell counts, DNA records can be informative about copy numbers of 180 particular genes (Mejbel et al., 2021). Since gene copy numbers can vary by orders of magnitude across species, inferences about abundance can be challenging with methods that target many taxa at once (Vasselon et al., 2018). If the focus is on a narrow set of taxa, gene copy number information provided by quantitative analyses (qPCR or ddPCR) might be more readily translated into abundance information, especially if the range of gene copy numbers per 185 cell can be estimated for the focal species (Godhe et al., 2008). This approach potentially allows to obtain demographic information on a targeted taxon in specific sediment horizons.



2.3.3 Resurrection experiments

Living sediment archives are formed by temporal deposits of dormant resting stages, which
190 can be obtained from organisms that produce long-lived resting cells/seeds such as specific
plants (McGraw et al., 1991; Sallon et al., 2008), zooplankton (Kerfoot and Weider, 2004;
Pauwels et al., 2010), and phytoplankton (Härnström et al., 2011; Hinners et al., 2017).

Laminated sediments, which form under anoxic conditions due to the absence of mixing
by benthic fauna, contain distinct age cohorts of dormant or quiescent phytoplankton (Ellegaard
195 et al., 2017). Such resting stages can germinate when exposed to oxygen, and cells start
growing when suitable temperature, light, and nutrient conditions are provided. A number of
studies have demonstrated the “resurrection” potential of different phytoplankton taxa after
extended periods of resting, ranging from decades to millennia (Härnström et al., 2011; Kremp
et al., 2018; Sanyal et al., 2022).

Phytoplankton strains that have been re-established from germinated resting stages of
200 different temporal sediment layers can be characterized pheno- and genotypically (Härnström
et al., 2011; Hinners et al., 2017). Comparison of trait values among temporal cohorts provides
information on trait changes, their rates of change, and the mechanisms behind (Hattich et al.,
2024). Different traits, e.g., temperature-dependent growth and nutrient uptake (Hattich et al.,
205 2024), resting stage formation (Hinners et al., 2017), and toxicity (Wood et al., 2021) have
been measured in laboratory experiments on resurrected strains and resulting data have been
used in ecosystem models (Hinners et al., 2019). Traits that are of particular interest for
ecosystem modeling include growth characteristics dependent on environmental conditions
(reaction norms), cell size, mortality rates, grazing rates (of zooplankton), toxicity, as well as
210 triggers and rates of transition between life cycle stages.

Phenotypic trait data from resurrected cultures can also be linked to their genetic traits.
A common method for this is represented by genome-wide association studies (GWAS)
(Hirschhorn and Daly, 2005; Uffelmann et al., 2021; Visscher et al., 2017). GWAS connect
variations in the DNA sequence, known as single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), to a
215 specific trait. GWAS approaches can help to determine if certain functional groups of genes
(e.g., those involved in oxidation or CO₂ fixation) were selected for or lost over time. In
addition, GWAS approaches can help to determine whether the traits of interest are polygenic
and can thus be adequately modeled as continuous quantitative traits. The success of this



method depends on several factors, including the quality of the phenotypic data and the
220 accuracy of the genetic data.

3 Integration of data from sediment archives into evolutionary ecosystem models

Ecosystem models provide a powerful tool to study the functioning of marine ecosystems and
225 their responses to environmental change. For example, ecosystem models can be used to
understand global patterns of phytoplankton diversity (Dutkiewicz et al., 2020; Ward et al.,
2012). In addition, they can help to identify potential feedback loops (e.g., between
cyanobacteria and their environment, Hense, 2007) and trade-offs (e.g., between phytoplankton
diversity and productivity, Smith et al., 2016). Finally, ecosystem models can simulate how
230 phytoplankton (and zooplankton) respond to different biotic and abiotic factors, including
viruses (Krishna et al., 2024; Weitz et al., 2015), eutrophication (Gustafsson et al., 2012), ocean
acidification (Dutkiewicz et al., 2015), and temperature changes (Elliott et al., 2005; Lee et al.,
2018).

235 3.1 The neglected role of evolutionary adaptation in ecosystem models

Over the past few years, ecosystem models have been increasingly used to estimate the impact
of global warming on marine ecosystems and their functioning. Although the results of such
studies are relevant for stakeholders (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),
240 2022), current models vary widely in their formulations and predictions, with some models
even disagreeing on the direction of change (Laufkötter et al., 2015, 2016). We argue that a
major uncertainty in current models is that they do not account for the high adaptive potential
of phytoplankton.

Experiments and observations demonstrated that phytoplankton adaptation can be
245 important on perennial time scales (Aranguren-Gassis et al., 2019; Hattich et al., 2024;



O'Donnell et al., 2018) and may hence alter predicted ecosystem changes notably (Ward et al., 2019). Indeed, a recent modeling study revealed that adaptation can significantly reduce simulated warming-related changes in phytoplankton phenology and relative taxa abundance (Hochfeld and Hinners, 2024). Changes in phenology and relative taxa abundance, in turn, may have a direct impact on ecosystem functioning (Edwards and Richardson, 2004; Litchman et al., 2015). To conclude, it is becoming increasingly clear that adaptation cannot be neglected in global warming simulations, putting current models and their predictive ability into question.

Evolutionary adaptation can be integrated into ecosystem models by allowing for one or more phytoplankton traits to change on intergenerational time scales. In case of changing temperature, for example, phytoplankton thermal adaptation can be represented with an evolvable optimum temperature for growth (Beckmann et al., 2019; Kremer and Klausmeier, 2017). Different approaches exist to integrate adaptation into ecosystem models, with the most suitable approach depending on the research question. Overviews can be found in Beckmann et al. (2019) and Klausmeier et al. (2020b). However, integrating adaptation into ecosystem models brings new challenges, such as identifying the relevant traits and the associated limits and trade-offs (O'Donnell et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2019). One approach to obtain the necessary evolutionary information is represented by evolution experiments (Hinners et al., 2024; Ward et al., 2019). Since such experiments can neither replicate the complexity of real ecosystems nor long-term environmental change, we argue that sediment archives as “natural evolution experiments” represent a valuable complementary source of information, which we explain further below.

3.2 Building an evolutionary ecosystem model including data from sediment archives

It is a considerable challenge to develop ecosystem models that can be applied equally well to past, present, and future scenarios. Most state-of-the-art ecosystem models are developed in a two-step process that comprises the definition of prior estimates of parameter values (initialization) and the iterative fit to contemporary observations through parameter adjustment (calibration). We argue that this approach relies too heavily on how an ecosystem is structured in the present, so that models may no longer be applicable when ecosystem structure has



changed in the future. To avoid these problems, models should represent fundamental processes that apply more generally instead of being tailored to a specific ecosystem. The general applicability of a model can be tested with an additional step during model development, validation, which makes use of data from sediment archives. While validation is
280 already common for atmosphere and ocean models (Hollingsworth, 1994; Tonani et al., 2015), it has been largely ignored by the ecosystem modeling community. A recent study presented a validation approach for non-evolutionary terrestrial ecosystem models, which is mainly based on plant remains (Alsos et al., 2024). Our approach focuses on phytoplankton, key players in marine ecosystems and respective models. Due to the high evolutionary potential of
285 phytoplankton, we additionally consider evolutionary processes.

The development approach for evolutionary ecosystem models that we propose here comprises three different steps: initialization, calibration, and validation (Fig. 2). Both initialization and calibration are performed using contemporary data, while validation requires data from sediment archives. Only when all three steps have been completed should a model
290 be used to simulate future ecosystem changes.

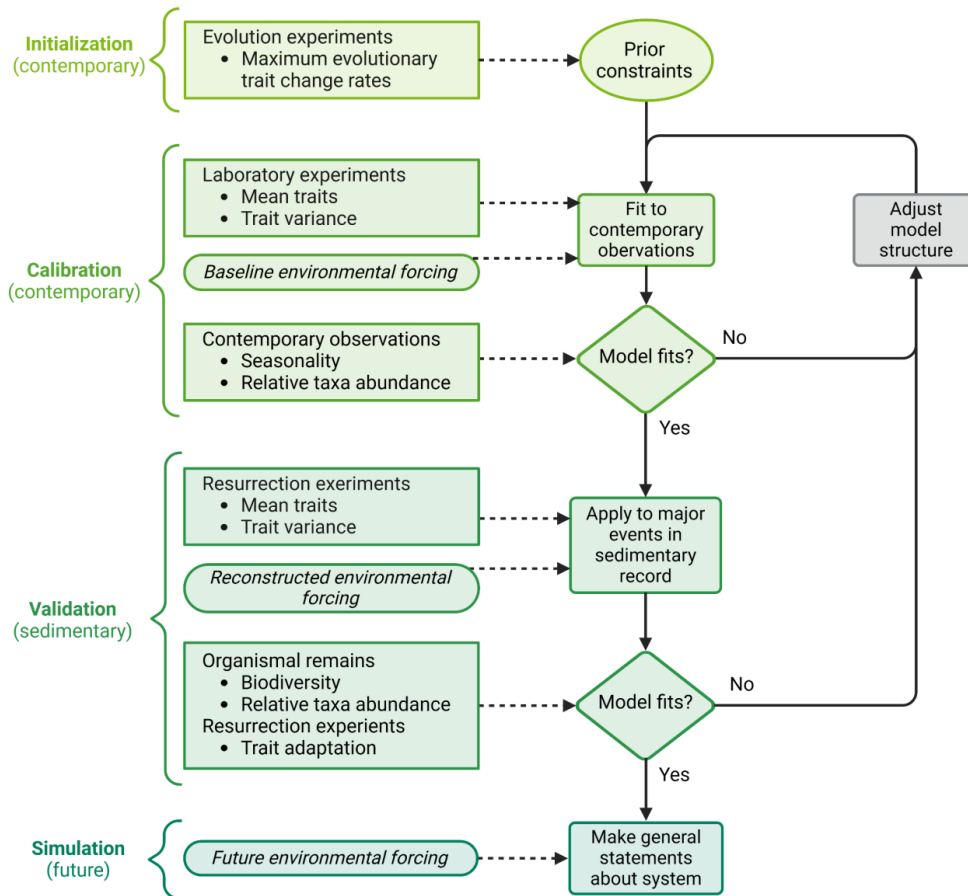


Figure 2: Conceptual framework for the development of an evolutionary ecosystem model that can be applied equally well to past, present, and future scenarios. Shown are the three different steps of model development (initialization, calibration, validation), the following application of the model (simulation), and the data required for each step. The figure was created with BioRender.com.

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Initialization requires prior estimates of parameter values that need to be valid regardless of the simulated environmental scenario. Such parameters include constraints on adaptation, such as maximum evolutionary trait change rates, which are, however, difficult to assess. For example, evolutionary trait change rates can be assessed by comparing ancestral trait values to those from populations evolved in a new environment for a specific time after accounting for plastic responses (Collins and Bell, 2004; Hutchins et al., 2015; Listmann et al., 2016). In addition, it is possible to measure changes in fitness proxies, most commonly

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population growth rate or lineage competitive ability (Elena and Lenski, 2003). However, interpretation is not straightforward since the relationship between fitness and its proxies may
305 change over time (Collins et al., 2020). Finally, genetic mutation rates can be estimated via
genome sequencing (e.g., Krasovec et al., 2019), but genetic mutation does not necessarily
translate into trait changes. While functional traits may depend on multiple genes (epistasis),
one gene may affect multiple traits (pleiotropy) (Lässig et al., 2017; Østman et al., 2011; Tyler
et al., 2009). To conclude, evolutionary trait change rates can only be assessed roughly and
310 require further adjustment in the next steps of model development.

The goal of model calibration is to fine tune the model parameters and the model
structure until the model reproduces contemporary observations. To do so, initial values for
mean traits and trait variance are required (Fig. 2). These parameters can be measured in the
laboratory for recently sampled organisms (Lehtimäki et al., 1997; Vincent & Silvester, 1979).
315 The model is then forced with a baseline environmental forcing, usually a steady seasonal
forcing that represents present-day conditions. Using this forcing, the model is run until it
reaches a steady state, where phenology and taxa abundances repeat each season. Simulated
phenology and taxa abundances are then compared to contemporary observations from
seagoing research and remote sensing. If the model does not reproduce the observations, model
320 parameters and structure are adjusted iteratively until model output and observations match.

As the final step, model validation aims to test if the model is equally applicable to past,
present, and (by implication) future scenarios by comparing the model output to independent
validation data. We argue that data from sediment archives are ideally suited for validation,
with a contemporarily calibrated model being successfully validated if it can represent major
325 shifts in community structure and/or function that are present in the sediment record. As a first
step, validation needs initial values for the mean and variance of the relevant traits. These
parameters can be measured in the laboratory for resurrected organisms sampled from the
sediment layer that corresponds to the beginning of the validation period. In addition,
environmental conditions during the validation period must be reconstructed to create a forcing
330 for the model. Extreme climate periods such as the Holocene thermal maximum (8,000–5,000
years ago, up to 5 °C above preindustrial levels) would be ideally suited to test the model's
validity in extreme and changing climates (Renssen et al., 2012; Tierney et al., 2020). The
simulated biodiversity and relative taxa abundances can then be compared to organismal
remains from different sediment layers throughout the validation period. Similarly, simulated



335 trait changes can be compared to results from resurrection experiments, which are performed
with organisms from different sediment layers of the validation period. If the contemporarily
calibrated model cannot reproduce major events in the sediment record, this implies that the
model's structure and parameterization are not general to both contemporary and past systems
and should therefore not be used to make predictions.

340 For example, Gibbs et al. (2020) used an evolutionary ecosystem model that was
parameterized in accordance with contemporary laboratory measurements to reproduce an
observed shift in the trophic status of coccolithophores after the end-Cretaceous mass
extinction. However, while the model produced an evolutionary response that was qualitatively
consistent with the sediment record, the simulated evolutionary response progressed at a rate
345 that was orders of magnitude too fast. This indicates that the model structure would require
further adjustments until both contemporary and sedimentary data are reproduced before the
model could be used predictively.

While such a model could be recalibrated to fit the past data, we do not recommend this
approach, because the ad hoc adjustment of the model parameters does not fix the underlying
350 problem. In addition, calibration is not possible when making predictions. Therefore, instead
of recalibrating the model to past data, we advocate refining the model structure to better
represent processes that do apply generally, across past, present, and future systems. After
recalibration to contemporary data, the refined model could be tested again against past data.
Repeating this process iteratively until both contemporary and past data can be reproduced with
355 the same model assures that the model can provide meaningful statements about an ecosystem's
possible response to future climate changes.

4 Challenges and potential of using data from sediment archives for evolutionary ecosystem modeling

360 Our approach has the potential to increase the informative value of model projections of future
changes in marine ecosystems. However, there are still some challenges associated with it.



A major challenge is posed by the low temporal resolution of sediment records, which can range from multi-centennial to annual depending on the sedimentation rate (Abrantes et al., 2005; Maslin et al., 2005). Thus, phenological information is missing even in high-
365 resolution records, meaning that simulated phenology cannot be validated using data from sediment archives. Instead, simulated phenology can be validated using monitoring data, which may go back several decades (Wasmund et al., 2019). In addition, preservation issues can lead to sediment horizons being lost for analysis due to low concentrations of total organic carbon. Proxies for the reconstruction of environmental conditions and DNA also suffer from
370 preservation/degradation biases and are therefore not independent from each other (Dommain et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2005; Wakeham and Canuel, 2006; Zonneveld et al., 2010). Preservation/degradation biases in biological data may lead to incomplete information on mean traits and trait variance. Resting stages that have been preserved in the sediment record and could be revived for experiments may not be representative of the entire population at the time
375 of deposition, and therefore may not be representative of its traits. However, assuming that the fittest individuals of a population were most abundant in the past and hence are most abundant in the sediment, we should be able to measure representative mean trait values for the population. To obtain reliable estimates of trait variance, experimental studies on phytoplankton traits should aim to characterize as many strains as possible, e.g., using high-
380 throughput methods (Argyle et al., 2021).

Evolutionary models require knowledge of how rapidly and how far the aforementioned traits can change from generation to generation, as well as of the trade-offs between traits (Levins, 1962; Litchman et al., 2007) and ultimate constraints on adaptation (Klausmeier et al., 2020b). Such information is available from evolution experiments (Hinnert et al., 2024), but it
385 is still unclear how applicable such information will be when moving from a highly simplified evolution experiment to a more complex community context. A major challenge is to link trait changes to changes in fitness. While the relationship between a fitness proxy and actual fitness may change over time (Collins et al., 2020), fitness is largely determined by species interactions (Schabhüttl et al., 2013). Based on the assumption that the fittest phytoplankton taxa are also
390 the most abundant in the sediment, sediment archives make it possible to estimate the relative fitness of different taxa.

Despite limitations and knowledge gaps, sediment archives represent a valuable source of information that has the potential to advance ecosystem model development and hence



395 model projections of marine ecosystem change. As pointed out above, a crucial step in
ecosystem model development is to make sure that models are equally applicable to past,
present, and future scenarios before using them predictively. This requires validation data that
are independent of the data used for calibration. Moreover, validation data need to cover the
complexity of marine ecosystems and long-term environmental changes over hundreds to
thousands of years. While data from laboratory, mesocosm, or marine monitoring studies only
400 partly fulfill these criteria, sediment archives fulfill all of them. Furthermore, the approach
presented here is not limited to phytoplankton, but can be applied to other organisms that are
well-represented in the sediment record, such as zooplankton (Isanta-Navarro et al., 2021;
Wersebe and Weider, 2023), viruses (Coolen, 2011), and terrestrial plants (Alsos et al., 2024).

405 **5 Conclusions**

Marine communities perform functions that are essential for the environment and for humanity.
However, it is largely unknown how these functions will change under global warming, and
the possibility of positive feedbacks, irreversible tipping points, and ecosystem collapse must
be considered. It is therefore crucial to develop tools that provide reliable estimates of future
410 changes in marine ecosystems.

Ecosystem models represent a promising tool for predicting marine ecosystem change,
but their current projections are largely inconsistent. Here, we present a promising approach
that can increase the informative value of ecosystem model projections. We argue that a major
uncertainty in current ecosystem models is that they largely ignore evolutionary processes,
415 which can be highly relevant on perennial time scales. In addition, current ecosystem models
are typically calibrated to contemporary data and then used for projections without validating
that they are equally applicable to past (and by implication, future) scenarios. We suggest not
only to calibrate evolutionary ecosystem models against contemporary observations, but also
to validate the calibrated models against major evolutionary ecosystem changes that are present
420 in sediment records. Compared to data from conventional experiments and marine monitoring,
sediment records make it possible to map the complexity of real ecosystems and long-term
environmental changes. Only if a contemporarily calibrated evolutionary ecosystem model can



reproduce observations from sediment records, can we have some confidence in its projections of future ecosystem change.

425 Some challenges remain, especially regarding the low temporal resolution of sediment
archives and their partly biased information. Nevertheless, data from sediment archives provide
a unique opportunity to learn from the past and hence have the potential to take ecosystem
models and their projections of future ecosystem change a crucial step forward. The approach
presented here is not limited to phytoplankton, but can be applied to other organisms and
430 ecosystems.

Author contribution

Isabell Hochfeld: Conceptualization; project administration; visualization; writing – original
draft; writing – review and editing. **Ben A. Ward:** Conceptualization; writing - original draft;
435 writing – review and editing. **Anke Kremp:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing
– review and editing. **Juliane Romahn:** Conceptualization; visualization; writing – original
draft; writing – review and editing. **Alexandra Schmidt:** Conceptualization; visualization;
writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Miklós Bálint:** Conceptualization;
writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Lutz Becks:** Conceptualization; writing
440 – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Jérôme Kaiser:** Conceptualization; writing –
original draft; writing – review and editing. **Helge W. Arz:** Conceptualization; writing – review
and editing. **Sarah Bolius:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Laura S. Epp:**
Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Markus Pfenninger:** Conceptualization;
writing – review and editing. **Christopher A. Klausmeier:** Conceptualization; writing –
445 review and editing. **Elena Litchman:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Jana
Hinners:** Conceptualization; project administration; writing - original draft; writing – review
and editing.

Competing interests

450 The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.



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