The ongoing need for rates: can physiology and omics come together to co-design the measurements needed to understand complex ocean biogeochemistry?

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Abstract

The necessity to understand the influence of global ocean change on biota has exposed wide-ranging gaps in our knowledge of the fundamental principles that underpin marine life. Concurrently, physiological research has stagnated, in part driven by the advent and rapid evolution of molecular biological techniques, such that they now influence all lines of enquiry in biological and microbial oceanography. This dominance has led to an implicit assumption that physiology is outmoded, and advocacy that ecological and biogeochemical models can be directly informed by omics. However, the main modelling currencies continue to be biological rates and biogeochemical fluxes. Here we ask: how do we translate the wealth of information on physiological potential from omics-based studies to quantifiable physiological rates and, ultimately, to biogeochemical fluxes? Based on the trajectory of the state-of-the-art in biomedical sciences, along with case-studies from ocean sciences, we conclude that it is unlikely that omics can provide such rates in the coming decade. Thus, while physiological rates will continue to be central to providing projections of global change biology, we must revisit the metrics we rely upon. We advocate for the co-design of a new generation of rate measurements that better link the benefits of omics and physiology.



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28 Abstract

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The necessity to understand the influence of global ocean change on biota has exposed wide-30 ranging gaps in our knowledge of the fundamental principles that underpin marine life. 31 Concurrently, physiological research has stagnated, in part driven by the advent and rapid evolution 32 of molecular biological techniques, such that they now influence all lines of enquiry in biological 33 and microbial oceanography. This dominance has led to an implicit assumption that physiology is 34 outmoded, and advocacy that ecological and biogeochemical models can be directly informed by 35 omics. However, the main modelling currencies continue to be biological rates and biogeochemical 36 fluxes. Here we ask: how do we translate the wealth of information on physiological potential from 37 omics-based studies to quantifiable physiological rates and, ultimately, to biogeochemical fluxes? 38 39 Based on the trajectory of the state-of-the-art in biomedical sciences, along with case-studies from ocean sciences, we conclude that it is unlikely that omics can provide such rates in the coming 40 41 decade. Thus, while physiological rates will continue to be central to providing projections of global change biology, we must revisit the metrics we rely upon. We advocate for the co-design of a new 42 43 generation of rate measurements that better link the benefits of omics and physiology.

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45 Introduction

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A major challenge for ocean scientists is to address key questions on future ecosystem services. For 47 example, how will global climate change alter low latitude primary productivity and hence food 48 security? A powerful tool to address these global-scale questions is Earth system models, such as 49 those within the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project (CMIP6) (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). The 50 CMIP currencies are mainly the rates at which metabolism occurs in living organisms (i.e., 51 physiological rates) and the biogeochemical fluxes of bioactive elements. It is unlikely that these 52 currencies will change in the coming decade, for example when CMIP7 is developed. At present, 53 54 the accuracy of the model projections is hindered by two issues: 1) computational limitations to 55 developing more complex parameterisations for processes such as nitrogen (N) fixation (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020) and 2) our inability to untangle how marine life responds to complex 56 57 ocean change. For the latter, we need to decipher the fundamental physiological rules that govern biological responses to ocean change. These include the metabolic co-dependencies in response to 58 59 multiple stressors, and strategies to buffer responses to rapid change, such as phenotypic plasticity 60 and microevolution.

The physiological metrics used to quantify biological rates that are the cornerstones of Earth system 61 models, such as primary productivity, have not fundamentally changed in decades. In contrast, 62 omics techniques have evolved rapidly this century and have superseded physiological metrics as 63 the main approach to study the fundamental principles driving marine life. With this dominance has 64 65 come an implicit assumption by many that measuring physiological rates directly is obsolete, as they can be inferred from omics (Hellweger, 2020; McCain et al., 2021). However, omics provides 66 a surfeit of data, at a level of detail that is often difficult to relate to the information provided by 67 physiological rate measurements and the current needs of Earth system models. This growing 68 mismatch between the currencies of global-scale models (rates and fluxes) and the aspirations of 69 omics (coupling cellular potential via omics to Earth system model projections) must be addressed 70 urgently. 71

72 Here we ask: How do we translate the wealth of information on physiological potential from omicsbased studies to quantifiable physiological rates and, ultimately, to biogeochemical processes and 73 their representation in Earth system models? We employ three approaches to address this question. 74 First, we examine the evolution of research into ocean N₂ fixation from the perspective of advances 75 in physiology and omics (Fig. 1). Second, we examine the recent trajectory of biomedical research 76 to forecast how ocean sciences might evolve in the next decade. Third, we broaden our view by 77 78 examining insights that can be gained for understanding the ocean phosphorus (P) and iron (Fe) cycles by better linking omics and physiology. We conclude with advocacy for the co-design of 79 Zicz 80 better physiological tools.

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Lessons from marine diazotrophy 82

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Here, we use the history of N₂ fixation (diazotrophy) research to reveal the benefits and limitations 84 of physiological rate measurements, and how these measurements are complemented by more 85 86 recent omics approaches (Fig. 1).

87 The contribution of diazotrophy to the supply of new N is central to understanding ocean N cycling (Fogg, 1942; Dugdale et al., 1961). Physiological studies played an important early role by 88 89 quantifying rates of diazotrophy (e.g., Dilworth, 1966). These measurements provided the integrated rates necessary to estimate global biogeochemical fluxes of N (Karl et al., 2002), and to 90 91 identify the environmental drivers of N₂ fixation (see Carpenter and Capone, 2008), including how climate changes may affect future diazotrophy (Garcia et al., 2011; Hutchins et al., 2013). However, 92 93 imbalances in these N fluxes have uncovered unidentified N sources, and the subsequent application 94 of genetic tools has identified additional diazotrophic taxa that contribute to ocean N₂ fixation (Zehr

95 and Capone, 2020).

- 96 Nitrogen fixation provides clear examples of both the limitations and benefits of non-targeted
- 97 omics-based discoveries (Fig. 1). Nitrogenase (*nif*) genes can be used to detect N_2 fixation potential,
- and their expression is used as an index of N_2 fixation activity (Zehr et al., 1996; Zehr and
- Montoya, 2007). Omics has revealed diverse N_2 fixers including the unicellular cyanobacteria
- 100 *Crocosphaera* and UCYN-A, and endosymbiotic and heterotrophic diazotrophs (Mehta et al., 2003;
- 101 Church et al., 2005; Martinez-Perez et al., 2016). However, *nif* gene abundance does not directly
- equate to N₂ fixation rates (Turk-Kubo et al., 2013). Transcriptomics and proteomics targeting *nif*
- 103 genes provide more relevant information about nitrogenase *activity* than genomics. However, taxon-
- specific dynamics can complicate estimates of community N_2 fixation rates (Church et al., 2005),
- and measurements of *nif* expression are not well correlated with 15 N-based rates of N₂ fixation
- 106 (Turk et al., 2011).
- 107 Thus, despite the insights gained from omics, critical gaps remain in our understanding of the
- 108 phylogenies, distribution, and physiology of marine N_2 fixers, and accurate global estimates of N_2
- fixation remain elusive (Zehr and Capone, 2020). Measuring N_2 fixation remains critical to estimate
- the biogeochemical processing and ecological fates of new N. However, N_2 fixation is not included
- in the CMIP6 models, which presently project declining productivity in low latitude oceans in
- 112 coming decades (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). So, both rates and omics will be needed increasingly to
- reveal and quantify currently unknown (but biogeochemically important) pathways for the turnover
- 114 of N (Fig. 1) to improve global models.
- Resolving these unknowns will require combined measurements of *nif* gene expression with rate 115 measurements based on nitrogenase enzyme activity (e.g., Turk et al., 2011). Broader application of 116 117 flow-through high-throughput rate measurements can improve the spatial and temporal coverage of N₂ fixation (Cassar et al., 2018). Rates, when coupled with omics approaches to N₂ fixation 118 research (Tang et al., 2020), will continue to expand our understanding of diazotroph diversity and 119 could help focus N₂ fixation rate measurements on these emerging diazotrophic groups (Zehr and 120 Capone, 2020). Mechanistic controls on diazotrophy can be revealed through variations in nif gene 121 expression (Church et al., 2005), supporting prior conclusions that local environmental conditions 122 influence N₂ fixation rates (Carpenter and Capone, 2008; Capone, 1993). Such environmental 123 controls could be further explored using targeted proteomics analyses (e.g., Saito et al., 2011). 124 125
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129 The status of omics

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Both marine and biomedical sciences focus on the genome, transcriptome, proteome, and 131 metabolome, with most research on the first three. In the field of meta-omics, marine metagenomics 132 has set the pace, and is directly influencing research into the human microbiome (Poceviciute and 133 Ismagilo, 2019). Here, we focus on genomics through to proteomics at the cellular level where, in 134 contrast to meta-omics, biomedical research has led the way (Okada and Kuroda 2019). Genomics 135 demonstrates the breadth of possible gene functions, but only catalogues the functional potential of 136 an organism (Sunagawa et al., 2015). Transcriptomics is a popular approach to explore how 137 organisms respond to environmental change by characterizing shifts in mRNA abundance (Evans, 138 2015). Feder and Walser (2005) offered a pointed description of the major issues facing the use of 139 transcriptomics in finding the genes that matter for environmental adaptation. Their critique focused 140 on three major issues: (1) genes with large impacts on fitness are rare and therefore unlikely to be 141 142 identified with transcriptomics, (2) the relationship between gene expression and fitness is unreliable, and (3) fitness is primarily determined by proteins, and mRNA abundance is a poor 143 144 proxy for protein abundance. Proteomics, on the other hand, provides taxonomically specific information on structural and metabolic enzymes with tighter correlation to functional activity. 145 Proteomics has advanced methodologically, with more accurate standardized quantitative analyses 146 147 (Collins et al., 2017; Pino et al., 2020) and protein identifications that allow metabolic profiling (Nunn et al., 2013; Mikan et al., 2020). 148

Numerous efforts have been made to identify correlations between omics layers. However, evidence 149 from both marine and biomedical science reveals that making these linkages is not straightforward. 150 For example, in marine sciences it is well recognized that the amplitude and timing of the mRNA 151 pool does not align with protein expression. This misalignment was illustrated in Waldbauer et al. 152 (2012) while tracking diel changes in the transcriptome and proteome within a single cyanobacteria 153 species (Fig. 2). Subsequent research on the model diatom Phaeodactvlum tricornutum used 154 multiple omics layers to explore the regulation of N limitation and again reported mismatches 155 between transcript, protein, and metabolite abundance (Remmers et al., 2018). In the further 156 157 advanced biomedical field, it remains difficult to obtain mechanistic and functional insights by simply integrating multiomics data (Okada and Kuroda, 2019). As far back as the late eighties, 158 Kurland and Ehrenberg (1987) discussed the challenges of linking cellular design and molecular 159 design (such as via enzyme expression) in the context of physiology. More recently, Lalanne et al. 160 161 (2018) uncovered post-transcriptional controls that ensure the maintenance of the protein stoichiometries required for specific biological pathways. This compensatory mechanism rectifies 162

advanced biomedical research there are confounding issues, driven by post-transcriptional and post-

divergences in regulation driven by changes of internal promoters and terminators. Hence, even in

165 translational modifications to enzymes, in deriving metabolic rates from omics.

166 In the marine context, omics has clearly demonstrated large scale patterns in microbial diversity

across oceanic provinces and provided insights into which metabolic pathways are active (Fig. 1).

168 However, omics-based approaches provide static 'snap-shots' of physiological potential, and we

need to improve our quantitative, process-level understanding of the roles of marine microbes in

- 170 biogeochemical cycles. Indeed, it is physiological activity or realized potential the chemical
- 171 fluxes generated by cellular metabolism as modified by biological species differences, external
- environmental drivers, and the interactions between the two that drives biogeochemical cycles.

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174 Linking physiology and omics: the need for co-design

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We propose that physiological rates can bridge biogeochemistry and omics. Physiological rates 176 quantify the integrated activity of proteins that drive marine biogeochemical cycles in units that 177 modellers can use (Fig. 3). Research into the ocean's N cycle reveals the potential of using the joint 178 expertise of the physiology and omics communities (i.e., co-design) to guide future research (Fig. 179 1). We can extend this complementary approach to use omics datasets to develop new targeted 180 physiological metrics that improve the parameterisation of biogeochemical processes. Here, we 181 explore the feasibility of co-design using case studies of the ocean P and Fe cycles that illustrate 182 how physiological metrics may act as a 'currency converter' to link omics datasets and 183 184 biogeochemical models.

In the case of P, a lab study used proteomics and physiological metrics to explore the cumulative 185 effect of five climate-change stressors on a subpolar diatom (Boyd et al., 2015). A central finding 186 was that the effect of decreased nutrient supply in a future ocean was offset by warming. 187 Proteomics revealed that a decreased need for P was driven by the under-expression of P-containing 188 proteins associated with translation (Fig. 3). Physiological metrics corroborated this finding, with 189 190 lower cellular P quotas under warming. Hence, P quotas acted as a currency converter between protein synthesis and the biogeochemical cycle of P. They showed serendipitously a link between 191 192 protein synthesis and P quotas. In the future, we must actively seek conceptual linkages, rather than uncovering them by chance. Better links from omics via physiology to biogeochemistry would 193 benefit from input from the modelling and biogeochemical research communities. 194

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Physiology was established earlier than omics or biogeochemistry and so many of the conventional 195 metrics used preceded developments in these disciplines. This begs the question: are we currently 196 measuring the best physiological metrics to mesh omics with biogeochemistry? Two examples that 197 begin to straddle the gaps between omics and physiology come from Saito et al. (2011) and Wu et 198 199 al. (2019). The former revealed diel changes in the proteome, including Fe-metalloproteins involved in N₂ fixation and photosynthesis of *Crocosphaera watsonii* resulting in more efficient use of Fe, 200 which is essential for N₂ fixation. In the latter case, protein expression and physiological metrics 201 were coupled to examine the influence of Fe and manganese on Phaeocystis antarctica. 202

Although our current choice of physiological metrics needs urgent attention, there is compelling 203 evidence of the utility of long-established assays, such as those used to determine the 204 macromolecular P content of cells from Liefer et al. (2019), for more innovative phytoplankton 205 cellular P models (Inomura et al., 2020). But can we be inventive, and use omics to interpret P 206 physiology in a more holistic manner (Fig. 4)? Physiology can provide valuable insights, even when 207 considering only a few components of the cellular P cycle. Imagine the progress if we developed 208 better metrics jointly with omics (Feng et al., 2014; Lin et al. 2016). So, the way ahead may be to 209 use molecular biology to 'reverse engineer' the most pertinent physiological metrics (Fig. 4). For 210 example, a useful point of departure would be to select processes in which protein abundance 211 212 correlates with quantifiable metabolic activity. Such co-design, in our opinion, will further facilitate the transition from lab- to field-based omics and will lead in the coming decades to incorporation of 213 214 omics into biogeochemical models.

The transition to field studies will face additional challenges that centre on how marine biota 215 integrate environmental history (i.e., cellular status imposed by conditions encountered prior to 216 sampling; Fig. 2) (Prairie et al., 2012; Deutschmann et al., 2021). This requires a multi-stranded 217 approach. First, placing the sampling locale in a wider environmental context (Figure 5A). For 218 example, profiling robotic floats with multiple sensors are providing synoptic snapshots of spatial 219 variability in ocean properties along with the prior seasonal dynamics of key resources such as 220 nutrients (Claustre et al., 2021). Second, how do such prior oceanic conditions set cellular status, for 221 example the degree of Fe stress (Fig. 5B)? An open question is whether the relationship between 222 223 environmental forcing and cellular status is instantaneous or lagged (Fig. 2). Will such co-designed metrics reconcile a biological product with a chemical residual since different physiological metrics 224 display a range of response times (Boyd et al., 2005; Baker et al., 2018), as do different omics 225 layers (Waldbauer et al., 2012)? One promising approach to probe environmental history and 226 cellular status is physiological titration. For example, by manipulating Fe availability to 227 contextualize cellular Fe status (Fig. 5B). 228

230 Towards the future

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We conclude with recent field-leading examples from ocean sciences, that seek to derive metabolic 232 rates from omics, explored through the lens of biomedical sciences. Saito et al. (2020) conducted 233 234 metaproteomic analysis on subsurface biota in the Tropical North Pacific to pinpoint commonly occurring enzymes. They reported that nitrite oxidoreductase associated with the bacterium 235 *Nitrospina* was abundant in this stratum and explored whether they could estimate rates of nitrite 236 oxidation using wide-ranging methods, including biochemistry (specific activity), physiology 237 (Michaelis-Menten kinetics), and omics. Despite employing this innovative suite of approaches 238 derived rates ranged >200-fold, pointing to the need to develop targeted physiological assays (c.f. 239 Fig. 4). There are also promising initial developments from the emergence of phenomenological 240 models based on simple geochemical/taxonomic principles that yield phytoplankton growth rates 241 assuming steady-state growth (McCain et al., 2021). 242 The latest developments in biomedical and model-system omics suggest obtaining rates from omics 243 244 is still under development. First, holistic investigations of well-characterized model organisms have tracked every metabolite and protein to generate enzyme-directed functional rates in the bacterium 245 Escherichia coli (Taniguchi et al., 2010) and the yeast Saccharomyces cerevisiae (Ho et al., 2018), 246 but this approach is restricted to the organisms for which the function of every gene and protein is 247 known. Second, expression-fitness landscapes (linking enzyme expression with growth rate) have 248

revealed that enzyme expression can have a 'ripple' effect across layers of biological organisation

ranging from mechanistic, regulatory to systemic (Lalanne et al., 2021), which adds further
 complexity to deriving growth rates from enzymatic fluxes. Third, sophisticated microbiome studies

(from cheese to the human gut) (Poceviciute and Ismagilo, 2019), which are more akin to oceanic
microbial systems, reveal that there are still a high number of metabolic functions that remain
uncharacterized (Price et al., 2018). Fourth, progress in tackling cell regulatory mechanisms using
multiomic modelling has been made but requires complex computing using deep neural networks
such as GEMS (Genome-scale metabolic models) (Okada and Kuroda 2019).

These four categories of advanced well-resourced research point to challenges yet to be surmounted
in obtaining physiological rates from omics for biomedical sciences. But, they also provide
cautionary lessons for ocean sciences. In our opinion, it may be more straight-forward to co-design
targeted physiological metrics that better link omics with marine biogeochemistry.

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442 Figure legends

Figure 1. The contributions of physiology and omics to understanding the role of diazotrophy in the 443 ocean N cycle (based on Zehr and Capone, 2020). Key events in the physiology timeline (top green 444 line) include estimation of N fluxes through nitrogenase (Dugdale and Dugdale, 1962), initial 445 estimates of global marine N₂ fixation rates (Capone et al., 1982), and the combining of lab and 446 field measurements to understand individual diazotrophs and community contributions and 447 constraints. Pivotal events in the omics timeline (lower green line) include problem solving (Zehr 448 and Montoya, 2007) and discovery of diazotroph diversity including in unicellular cyanobacteria 449 group A (UNCYN-A) and diverse uncultured heterotrophic bacteria (UHB) (Martinez-Perez et al., 450 2016). Recent examples of more integrated physiological and omics co-designed studies (Walworth 451 et al., 2016; Held et al. 2020) offer an important way forward. 452

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Figure 2. Examples of the potential for mismatches in transcriptomics versus proteomics in a picoprokaryote over the diurnal cycle. A) The diel cycling and amplitudes of transcripts and proteins in *Prochlorococcus* for Ribonucleotide reductase (nrdJ), the large sub-unit of Rubisco (rbcL), and Geranylgeranyl diphosphate reductase (chIP). B) Histogram of lag-times for proteins and their transcripts for a 312 gene dataset. Antiphase refers to genes that are offset by ~12 h (i.e., 50%) of the diel cell cycle. Redrawn from Waldbauer et al. (2012).

460

Figure 3. An example illustrating the utility of physiological metrics as a 'currency converter' to 461 link omics and biogeochemical modelling. A) The under- (downward arrows) and over-expression 462 (upwards arrows) of proteins in 4 treatments within a climate change manipulation experiment 463 measured with proteomics (Boyd et al., 2015). Warming results in an under-expression of P-464 containing proteins associated with translation. B) Corresponding changes to the cellular P quotas 465 of the study subject, a lab culture of a subantarctic diatom, across the treatments A-D. This 466 physiological metric reveals the causal link between under-expression of translation proteins and 467 decreased P quotas (as previously described by Toseland et al., 2013). C) A subset of global model 468 projections of upper ocean phosphate (PO_4^{-}) stocks across biogeochemical models of different 469 complexity (Kriest et al., 2010). The approaches employed in panels A and C can be linked using 470 the cellular P quotas obtained from panel B. 471

472

Figure 4. The potential of reverse-engineering physiological metrics to provide better linkages with
molecular tools using the example of P. A) Findings of a physiological study (Leifer et al., 2019)

- using a cluster of long-established metrics (residual P pools/intracellular storage of inorganic P) to
- 476 compare the P allocation strategies of a diatom (*Thalassiosira pseudonana*) and a prasinophyte
- 477 (*Micromonas sp.*). B) Cartoon summarizing the known PO_4^- acquisition and metabolic pathways
- that may be present in most phytoplankton species (for details see Fig. 4 in Lin et al., 2016). C) A
- 479 KEGG map from I-PATH (Letunic et al., 2008; Darzi et al., 2018) overlaid with the functional
- 480 categories of differentially expressed proteins (mapped to KEGG pathways) involved in various
- 481 biological processes for P limitation by a *Phaeocystis* species (Feng et al., 2014). I-PATH is a web-
- application for the visualization and analysis of cellular pathways from omics (e.g., see Nunn et al.,
- 483 2013 for Fe replete versus Fe deplete proteomes).
- Figure 5. Utility of environmental context to define the present physiological status of cells in
- relation to prior oceanic conditions. A) Dissolved Fe time series for the upper ocean in the
- 486 subtropical Atlantic (BATS site) that reveals conspicuous aerosol Fe inputs (>0.5 nmol L⁻¹) along
- 487 with the influence of eddy activity ($< 0.3 \text{ nmol } L^{-1}$) on dissolved Fe concentrations (Sedwick et al.,
- 488 2020). B) Photosynthetic efficiency of PSII (F_v/F_m) measured in deckboard incubation experiments
- 489 'titrated' with dissolved Fe concentrations by either reducing bioavailable Fe using the fungal
- siderophore desferrioxamine B (DFB) or increasing it with chelated inorganic Fe addition (from
- 491 Wilhelm et al., 2013). The circles denote putative linkages between chemical stocks and biological

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492 responses (red = high Fe; green = low Fe).





Figure 2



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Figure 4

