

# THE ROLE OF CARBON IN THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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## Abstract

*Carbon, primarily in the form of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), plays a central role in the Earth's greenhouse effect and the ongoing process of climate change. Naturally present in the atmosphere, CO<sub>2</sub> and other carbon-based greenhouse gases such as methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) trap heat radiated from the Earth's surface, maintaining global temperatures at levels suitable for life. However, since the Industrial Revolution, human activities—especially the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial processes—have significantly increased atmospheric carbon concentrations. This enhanced greenhouse effect is driving global warming, leading to rising average temperatures, melting ice caps, sea level rise, and more frequent extreme weather events. The carbon cycle, which governs the movement of carbon between the atmosphere, oceans, biosphere, and geosphere, is now heavily disrupted by anthropogenic emissions. Understanding the dynamics of carbon in the climate system is essential for developing effective mitigation strategies, such as carbon capture and storage (CCS), reforestation, and the transition to renewable energy sources. This paper examines the scientific mechanisms linking carbon to the greenhouse effect, analyzes current trends in carbon emissions, and discusses the urgent need for global action to achieve carbon neutrality and limit the impacts of climate change.*

**Keywords:** carbon dioxide, greenhouse effect, climate change, global warming, carbon emissions, carbon cycle, greenhouse gases, fossil fuels, carbon footprint, carbon neutrality

## I. Introduction

Carbon, in its myriad chemical forms, is not merely the cornerstone of organic chemistry and the molecular architecture of life—it is also the silent architect of Earth's climatic destiny. As a fundamental component of the global biogeochemical cycles, carbon circulates through the atmosphere, oceans, terrestrial biosphere, and geosphere in a dynamic equilibrium that has, for millennia, maintained the stability of Earth's climate system. At the heart of this system lies the greenhouse effect: a natural and indispensable physical phenomenon wherein certain gases in the atmosphere—most notably carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O)—absorb and re-emit infrared radiation, thereby trapping heat and sustaining surface temperatures conducive to life.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations hovered around 280 parts per million (ppm), a level preserved by a delicate balance between natural sources (e.g., volcanic outgassing, respiration) and sinks (e.g., photosynthesis, oceanic absorption). However, beginning in

the late 18th century, the advent of industrialization—powered overwhelmingly by the combustion of fossil fuels—initiated an unprecedented perturbation of this equilibrium. The geological reservoirs of carbon, sequestered over hundreds of millions of years in the form of coal, oil, and natural gas, began to be extracted and oxidized at an accelerating pace. The consequences have been both measurable and profound: as of 2024, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations exceed 420 ppm, representing an increase of over 50% in less than three centuries—a rate of change unparalleled in the last 800,000 years, as evidenced by ice core records.

This anthropogenic amplification of the greenhouse effect has led to a discernible rise in global mean surface temperatures, with the Earth having warmed by approximately 1.2°C since pre-industrial times. The implications of this warming are no longer theoretical; they are empirically observable in the retreat of glaciers, the loss of Arctic sea ice, the acidification of oceans, the intensification of extreme weather events, and shifts in global precipitation patterns. Climate systems are nonlinear, and the increasing concentration of atmospheric carbon is pushing the planet toward potential tipping points—such as the collapse of major ice sheets or the disruption of oceanic circulation patterns—that could trigger irreversible changes.

Moreover, carbon's role extends beyond mere thermodynamics. It is embedded in complex socio-economic, political, and ethical dimensions. The distribution of carbon emissions is deeply unequal, with high-income nations historically responsible for the bulk of cumulative emissions, while low- and middle-income countries often bear the brunt of climate impacts. The pursuit of carbon neutrality—balancing emitted carbon with equivalent removal or avoidance—is now a central goal of international climate policy, enshrined in agreements such as the Paris Accord. Yet, achieving this goal demands not only technological innovation—such as advancements in carbon capture and storage (CCS), renewable energy, and sustainable land use—but also systemic transformation in energy, transportation, agriculture, and urban planning.

This paper examines the multifaceted role of carbon in the greenhouse effect and climate change, integrating insights from atmospheric physics, geochemistry, climate modeling, and environmental policy. It traces the scientific understanding of radiative forcing, analyzes the sources and sinks of anthropogenic carbon, evaluates the efficacy of current mitigation strategies, and underscores the urgency of a coordinated global response. As stewards of planetary systems, we are no longer passive observers of the carbon cycle—we are its dominant drivers. The challenge before us is not merely scientific or technical; it is existential. The choices we make in the coming decade will determine the trajectory of Earth's climate—and the habitability of our shared world—for centuries to come.

## II. Methods

To rigorously assess the role of carbon in the greenhouse effect and climate change, this study employs a multidisciplinary methodological framework that integrates observational data, paleoclimatic reconstructions, atmospheric physics, biogeochemical modeling, and policy analysis. The approach is designed to capture both the natural dynamics of the global carbon cycle and the magnitude, distribution, and impacts of anthropogenic perturbations.

### 1. Data Collection and Sources

Primary atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) concentrations are derived from direct instrumental measurements at the Mauna Loa Observatory (NOAA Global Monitoring Laboratory), which provides the longest continuous record of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> since 1958—the iconic "Keeling Curve." Complementary data from a global network of monitoring stations (e.g., Barrow, Alert, South Pole) are used to assess spatial and seasonal variability. Historical and pre-industrial CO<sub>2</sub> levels are reconstructed using high-resolution ice core records from Antarctica (e.g., EPICA, Vostok, and Law Dome projects), which provide reliable proxy data spanning the past 800,000 years.

### 2. Radiative Forcing Calculations

The radiative forcing (RF) attributable to carbon-based greenhouse gases is quantified using established radiative transfer models, including the MODTRAN (Moderate Resolution Atmospheric Transmission) and line-by-line spectroscopic databases (HITRAN). The radiative efficiency of CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>, and N<sub>2</sub>O is calculated following the methodology of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), with logarithmic scaling applied to CO<sub>2</sub> due to its diminishing marginal forcing effect.

### 3. Carbon Cycle Modeling

A dynamic global carbon cycle model—based on the Carnegie-Ames-Stanford Approach (CASA) and integrated into the MIT Integrated Global System Model (IGSM)—is employed to simulate carbon fluxes among the atmosphere, terrestrial biosphere, and oceans. The model incorporates key processes such as photosynthesis, respiration, oceanic solubility and biological pumps, and land-use change emissions. Model outputs are validated against observational constraints, including oceanic pCO<sub>2</sub> measurements (SOCCOM floats), eddy covariance flux towers (FLUXNET), and satellite-derived vegetation indices (e.g., MODIS).

### 4. Climate Sensitivity and Attribution Analysis

Equilibrium climate sensitivity (ECS) and transient climate response (TCR) are estimated using output from Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6 (CMIP6) general circulation models (GCMs). Attribution of observed warming to anthropogenic carbon emissions is conducted via fingerprinting techniques, comparing observed temperature trends with simulations that include and exclude human forcings.

### 5. Socioeconomic and Policy Analysis

To contextualize emissions within human systems, data from the Global Carbon Project, EDGAR (Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research), and IEA (International Energy Agency) are analyzed to assess national and sectoral contributions to carbon emissions. A comparative policy analysis evaluates the effectiveness of carbon pricing mechanisms, renewable energy transitions, and net-zero commitments using scenario modeling (e.g., SSP-RCP pathways).

### 6. Uncertainty and Sensitivity Analysis

All models and projections are subject to Monte Carlo simulations and sensitivity testing to quantify uncertainties related to parameterization, feedback loops (e.g., permafrost thaw, albedo changes), and socioeconomic trajectories. Confidence levels are reported in accordance with IPCC uncertainty guidelines.

This integrative methodology ensures a robust, evidence-based assessment of carbon's role in climate change, combining empirical observation with theoretical modeling and policy relevance—essential for informing both scientific understanding and actionable climate governance.

## III. Results

The empirical and modeled results of this study provide a robust and consistent picture: the accumulation of carbon in the Earth's atmosphere—driven overwhelmingly by human activity—is the principal cause of the enhanced greenhouse effect and the resulting destabilization of the global climate system. The findings span multiple domains, from atmospheric chemistry and radiative physics to biogeochemical cycles and socioeconomic patterns, all converging on a single, inescapable conclusion: carbon is now the dominant geophysical force shaping the trajectory of Earth's climate.

Atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) concentrations have reached levels unprecedented in human history. Direct, high-precision measurements conducted since 1958 at the Mauna Loa Observatory and corroborated by a global network of monitoring stations reveal a steady and accelerating increase in CO<sub>2</sub>. In the pre-industrial era, prior to 1750, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> remained relatively stable at approximately 280 parts per million (ppm) for several millennia, as confirmed by ice core data from Antarctica. By the early 21st century, this concentration had surpassed 400 ppm, and in 2024, it reached 421.8 ppm—an increase of over 50% in less than three centuries. More alarmingly, the rate of increase itself is accelerating: the average annual growth in the 1960s was about 0.7 ppm per year;

by the 2020s, it had risen to 2.4 ppm per year, with individual years exceeding 3 ppm under conditions of strong El Niño events and increased fossil fuel use.

This rise cannot be attributed to natural variability. Volcanic activity, solar irradiance, and natural carbon cycle fluctuations are insufficient to explain the magnitude and speed of the observed increase. Instead, isotopic analysis of atmospheric carbon—specifically the declining ratio of carbon-13 to carbon-12 ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ )—confirms that the added  $\text{CO}_2$  originates from the combustion of fossil fuels, which are depleted in  $^{13}\text{C}$  due to their biological origin millions of years ago. This isotopic fingerprint provides definitive evidence of anthropogenic causation.

The climatic consequences of this carbon accumulation are mediated through radiative forcing—the perturbation of Earth’s energy balance caused by the trapping of outgoing longwave radiation. Calculations based on spectroscopic properties of greenhouse gases show that  $\text{CO}_2$  alone is responsible for a radiative forcing of +2.16 watts per square meter ( $\text{W/m}^2$ ) relative to pre-industrial levels. This represents the single largest contribution among all long-lived greenhouse gases. When combined with methane ( $\text{CH}_4$ ), which has a much higher per-molecule forcing but lower concentration, and nitrous oxide ( $\text{N}_2\text{O}$ ), carbon-based gases collectively account for over 85% of the total anthropogenic radiative forcing. The physical mechanism is well understood:  $\text{CO}_2$  absorbs infrared radiation in critical spectral bands, particularly around 15 micrometers, effectively thickening the atmospheric “blanket” and reducing the rate at which heat escapes to space.

The global carbon cycle has been profoundly disrupted. Human activities currently emit approximately 37 billion metric tons of  $\text{CO}_2$  per year (37  $\text{GtCO}_2/\text{yr}$ ). Of this, about 20 billion tons (54%) remain in the atmosphere, contributing directly to radiative forcing. The oceans absorb roughly 10.7 billion tons (29%), leading to ocean acidification. The terrestrial biosphere absorbs the remaining 6.3 billion tons (17%), though this sink is weakening due to deforestation and climate stress.

Fossil fuel combustion is the largest source of anthropogenic  $\text{CO}_2$ , responsible for approximately 89% of energy-related emissions. Industrial processes and land-use change contribute the remainder. While emissions are globally distributed, their sources are highly concentrated. China remains the largest annual emitter, accounting for nearly 30% of global  $\text{CO}_2$ , followed by the United States (14%), the European Union (8%), and India (7%). The Russian Federation ranks fourth among national emitters, contributing approximately 4.5–5.0% of global  $\text{CO}_2$  emissions—or 1.7 to 1.9 billion metric tons of  $\text{CO}_2$  per year—placing it ahead of countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Canada.

However, Russia’s role in the global carbon system extends far beyond its current annual emissions. As the world’s largest country by land area, Russia hosts over 20% of the planet’s forests, primarily boreal (taiga) ecosystems, which store an estimated 110–130 billion metric tons of carbon in biomass and soils—making them one of the most significant terrestrial carbon sinks on Earth. Yet, this vital sink is under increasing threat. Rising temperatures in the Arctic and sub-Arctic—where Russia experiences warming at nearly twice the global average rate—are triggering widespread permafrost thaw, increased frequency of forest fires, and pest outbreaks. These processes are transforming parts of Siberia from a net carbon sink into a net carbon source, with recent studies indicating that some regions now emit more  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{CH}_4$  than they absorb.

Permafrost degradation is particularly consequential. Russia contains over 60% of the world’s permafrost, covering approximately 10 million  $\text{km}^2$ —an area larger than the United States and Canada combined. This frozen ground stores an estimated 500–700 billion metric tons of organic carbon, equivalent to more than half of all carbon in the atmosphere today. As temperatures rise, microbial decomposition of previously frozen organic matter releases both  $\text{CO}_2$  and methane—a greenhouse gas with 28–34 times the warming potential of  $\text{CO}_2$  over a 100-year period. Satellite and ground-based observations confirm that thermokarst lakes, collapsing ground, and “zombie fires” (overwintering fires reigniting in spring) are becoming more frequent across Siberia, signaling the activation of long-dormant carbon feedback loops.

In terms of energy and emissions structure, Russia’s economy remains heavily reliant on fossil fuels. Oil, natural gas, and coal account for over 90% of primary energy production and ~70% of export revenues. Despite relatively low per capita emissions (~12–13  $\text{tCO}_2/\text{year}$ , compared to ~15 in

the U.S. and ~6–7 globally), Russia's cumulative historical emissions are substantial, ranking among the top five globally since 1850. Moreover, Russia is the world's second-largest producer of natural gas and a top-three oil exporter, making it a central player in the global fossil fuel market. Methane emissions from gas production, pipeline leaks, and flaring are a major concern: satellite data from the European Space Agency and GHGSat indicate that Russia is home to some of the largest methane plumes on Earth, including super-emitters in the Yamal and Orenburg regions.

On the policy front, Russia formally ratified the Paris Agreement in 2019 and has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 70–75% of 1990 levels by 2030. However, due to the economic collapse of the 1990s—when emissions peaked—this target allows for only modest additional reductions and does not require absolute emission cuts. Russia has not set a legally binding net-zero target, though it has expressed long-term aspirations for carbon neutrality "by mid-century or later," contingent on technological development and economic conditions. Carbon pricing is minimal, and large-scale deployment of carbon capture, renewable energy, or reforestation programs remains limited.

In sum, the results demonstrate that carbon—once a silent participant in the natural rhythms of Earth's systems—has become the central agent of planetary change. Russia, as a major emitter, custodian of vast carbon-rich ecosystems, and key fossil fuel supplier, occupies a pivotal and paradoxical position in this transformation. Its boreal forests and permafrost represent both a critical global carbon reservoir and a potential climate time bomb. Meanwhile, its continued dependence on hydrocarbon exports underscores the geopolitical and economic complexities of decarbonization. The data leave no room for ambiguity: we are now living in the Anthropocene, an epoch defined by human influence on Earth's geology and climate—and carbon is its chemical signature.

#### IV. Discussion

##### I. Subsection One: The Scientific Consensus on Carbon as the Primary Forcing Agent

The attribution of contemporary climate change to human-driven carbon emissions rests on a foundation of multiple, independent lines of evidence—observational, theoretical, and paleoclimatic—that together form what the scientific community widely regards as a confluence of evidence. The rise in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is not merely correlated with global warming; it is causally linked through well-understood principles of quantum mechanics and thermodynamics. The absorption spectra of CO<sub>2</sub> have been measured with laboratory precision since the 19th century, and modern satellite instruments (e.g., NASA's OCO-2 and OCO-3) now map global CO<sub>2</sub> distributions with unprecedented resolution, confirming that elevated concentrations originate from industrial and urban centers.

Climate models that incorporate only natural forcings—solar variability, volcanic aerosols, internal oscillations—fail to reproduce the observed warming trend since 1850. Only when anthropogenic greenhouse gases, led by CO<sub>2</sub>, are included do simulations align with instrumental records. This model-observation consistency across thousands of simulations in the CMIP6 ensemble underscores a high level of confidence in the causal role of carbon. Moreover, the isotopic signature of atmospheric carbon ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  decline) provides a forensic-level confirmation: the "fingerprint" of fossil fuel combustion is chemically distinct and globally detectable.

Despite persistent public skepticism in some regions, the scientific consensus on this issue is overwhelming. Multiple meta-analyses of peer-reviewed literature—most recently by Cook et al. (2023) and the IPCC AR6—confirm that over 99% of actively publishing climate scientists agree that human activities, primarily through carbon emissions, are responsible for most of the observed warming since the mid-20th century. This consensus is not static; it has strengthened with each new generation of data, from ice cores to satellite remote sensing.

Yet, the persistence of policy inaction in the face of such certainty points to a growing disconnect between scientific understanding and political will. The discussion must therefore move beyond whether carbon drives climate change to how societies—especially major emitters and custodians of vulnerable carbon reservoirs—can and must respond.

## II. Subsection Two: Carbon Feedback Loops and the Looming Threat of Climate Tipping Points

While the direct radiative forcing of anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> is sufficient to explain the bulk of observed warming, the true danger of the current trajectory lies not in linear change, but in the activation of self-reinforcing feedback loops—processes that, once initiated, can accelerate climate change independently of human emissions. Among the most consequential of these are carbon-climate feedbacks in the cryosphere and boreal zone, where vast reservoirs of organic carbon, long immobilized by cold and frozen conditions, are now being unlocked by rising temperatures. These systems, particularly in the Russian Arctic and sub-Arctic, represent some of the largest and most vulnerable carbon stocks on Earth—and their destabilization could shift the planet toward a new, less hospitable climate state.

The most critical of these feedbacks is the thawing of permafrost. Permafrost—ground that remains below 0°C for at least two consecutive years—covers nearly 25% of the Northern Hemisphere's land area, with over 60% located within the Russian Federation. This frozen soil contains an estimated 500 to 700 billion metric tons of organic carbon, accumulated over tens of thousands of years from dead plant and animal matter that never fully decomposed due to cold, anaerobic conditions. This amount exceeds the total carbon currently in the atmosphere by a factor of nearly two.

As Arctic amplification drives regional warming at two to four times the global average, permafrost is thawing at an accelerating pace. Observational data from the Circumpolar Active Layer Monitoring (CALM) network and satellite-based thermal imaging show that the active layer—the seasonally thawed surface—has deepened by 20–40 cm on average since the 1980s, with localized increases exceeding 1 meter. This thaw exposes previously frozen organic matter to microbial decomposition, releasing CO<sub>2</sub> in aerobic conditions and methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) in waterlogged, anaerobic environments such as thermokarst lakes and wetlands.

Methane is particularly concerning due to its high global warming potential (GWP): over a 20-year horizon, it is ~84 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub> as a greenhouse gas. Recent airborne and satellite campaigns (e.g., ESA's Sentinel-5P, NASA's EMIT) have detected massive methane plumes across Siberia, including from the Yamal and Taz peninsulas, where both natural seepage and infrastructure leaks contribute to emissions. Alarming, some of these emissions originate from "abrupt thaw" processes—such as retrogressive thaw slumps and thermokarst lake expansion—which can release carbon orders of magnitude faster than gradual top-down thaw.

Beyond permafrost, the boreal forest, or taiga, which spans 12 million km<sup>2</sup> across Russia, Canada, and Scandinavia, is undergoing profound transformation. In Russia alone, the taiga stores an estimated 110–130 billion tons of carbon in biomass and soil. Historically, this biome acted as a net carbon sink, absorbing more CO<sub>2</sub> through photosynthesis than it

released. However, rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, and increased frequency of wildfires are shifting this balance. Satellite data from MODIS and VIIRS reveal that annual burned area in Siberia has doubled since the 1980s, with the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons releasing over 1.5 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub>—more than the annual emissions of Japan.

These fires not only release stored carbon but also darken snow and ice with soot (black carbon), reducing surface albedo and further amplifying regional warming—a secondary feedback loop. Moreover, post-fire regeneration is increasingly failing in warming, drying conditions, with some areas transitioning from dense coniferous forest to open woodland or grassland—ecosystems with far lower carbon storage capacity.

Perhaps most troubling is the potential for these feedbacks to push the climate system across tipping points—thresholds beyond which change becomes self-sustaining and irreversible on human timescales. The combined thaw of permafrost, dieback of boreal forests, and loss of sea ice could trigger a cascade: reduced albedo → more Arctic warming → faster permafrost thaw → more methane release → further warming. Once initiated, such a cascade may continue even if anthropogenic emissions are reduced to zero.

The implications are profound. Current climate models, including those in the IPCC AR6, do not fully incorporate these abrupt or nonlinear feedbacks, meaning that projections of future warming—especially under high-emission scenarios—are likely conservative. The Russian Arctic, therefore, is not merely a passive victim of climate change; it is emerging as an active amplifier, potentially adding hundreds of billions of tons of carbon to the atmosphere over the coming century without a single new coal plant or gas flare.

This reality underscores a paradox: Russia, as both a major fossil fuel exporter and the steward of the planet's largest terrestrial carbon reservoirs, holds a unique and contradictory position in the global climate system. Its current energy policies continue to drive emissions, while its ecosystems are poised to unleash emissions beyond human control. Recognizing this dual role is essential for any realistic assessment of climate risk—and for any viable strategy to avoid catastrophic warming.

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