Global ensemble projections reveal trophic amplification of ocean biomass declines with climate change

Heike K. Lotze1,1, Derek P. Tittensor1,3, Andrea Bryndum-Buchholz2, Tyler D. Eddy4,5, William W. L. Cheung3, Eric D. Galbraith6,6, Manuel Barange1, Nicolas Barriot6, Danièle Bianchi6, Julia L. Blanchard7, Laurent Bopp8, Matthias Bünker9, Catherine M. Bulman3, David A. Carozza2, Willy Christensen8, Marta Coll9,10, John P. Dunne1, Elizabeth A. Fulton1, Simon Jennings4,5, Miranda C. Jones1, Steve Mackinson1, Olivier Maury2,13, Susa Niiranen12, Ricardo Oliveros-Ramos8, Tilla Roy1, José A. Fernandes1,10, Jacob Schewe10, Yunne-Jai Shin1,11, Tiago A. M. Silva1, Jeroen Steenbeek8, Charles A. Stock1, Philip Verley3, Jan Volkho1, Nicola D. Walker1, and Boris Worm14

1Department of Biology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS B3H 4R2, Canada; 2Science, UN Environment World Conservation Monitoring Centre, CB3 0DL Cambridge, United Kingdom; 3Nippon Foundation-Nereus Program, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada; 4Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats, 08010 Barcelona, Spain; 5Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Barcelona, Spain; 6Fisheries and Aquaculture Department, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 00153 Rome, Italy; 7Marine Biodiversity, Exploitation and Conservation (MARBEC) Research Unit, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, University of Montpellier, Institut Français de Recherche pour l’Exploitation de la Mer, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 34203 Sète cedex, France; 8Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1565; 9Department of Marine and Antarctic Studies, University of Tasmania, Hobart, TAS 7001, Australia; 10Centre for Marine Socioecology, University of Tasmania, Hobart, TAS 7004, Australia; 11Institut Pierre-Simon Laplace, Laboratoire de Météorologie Dynamique, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris Sciences et Lettres University, Sorbonne Université, Ecole Polytechnique, 75231 Paris, France; 12Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 14473 Potsdam, Germany; 13Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, Marine and Atmospheric Research, Hobart, TAS 7001, Australia; 14Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, McGill University, Montreal, QC H3A 0B8, Canada; 15Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada; 16Institute of Marine Science, Ecoapath International Initiative, 08003 Barcelona, Spain; 17Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08540; 18Lowestoft Laboratory, Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, NR33 0HT Lowestoft, United Kingdom; 19School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, NR4 7TT Norwich, United Kingdom; 20Science Committee, International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, 1553 København V, Denmark; 21Heritage House, Scottish Pelagic Fishermen’s Association, AB43 9BP Fraserburgh, United Kingdom; 22Department of Oceanography, Marine Research Institute, University of Cape Town, 7701 Rondebosch, South Africa; 23Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, 11419 Stockholm, Sweden; 24Instituto del Mar del Perú, 07021 Callao, Perú; 25Ecosystem, Climate and Ocean Analysis, 75019 Paris, France; 26Marine Research Division, AZTI Tecnalia, 20110 Pasaia, Spain; 27Plymouth Marine Laboratory, PL13 4DT Plymouth, United Kingdom; 28Department of Biological Sciences, Marine Research Institute, University of Cape Town, 7701 Rondebosch, South Africa; and 29AMAP Research Unit, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, 34896 Montpellier, France.

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While the physical dimensions of climate change are now routinely assessed through multimodel intercomparisons, projected impacts on the global ocean ecosystem generally rely on individual models with a specific set of assumptions. To address these single-model limitations, we present standardized ensemble projections from six global marine ecosystem models forced with two Earth system models and four emission scenarios with and without fishing. We derive average biomass trends and associated uncertainties across the marine food web. Without fishing, mean global animal biomass decreased by 5% (±4% SD) under low emissions and 17% (±11% SD) under high emissions by 2100, with an average 5% decline for every 1 °C of warming. Projected biomass declines were primarily driven by increasing temperature and decreasing primary production. Notably, climate change impacts are amplified at higher food web levels compared with phyttoplankton. Our ensemble projections provide the most comprehensive outlook on potential climate-driven ecological changes in the global ocean to date and can inform adaptive management and conservation of marine resources under climate change.

Climate change is altering the abundance and distribution of marine species (1–5), with consequences for ocean ecosystem structure and functioning, seafood supply, and marine management

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and conservation (6–8). Quantifying future trends and uncertainties is critical to inform ongoing global assessments (1), including the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) and Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, and guide viable pathways toward achieving key policy objectives, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Various modeling approaches exist to assess current and future impacts on marine ecosystems (8–12), yet each individual model is necessarily an incomplete simplification of the natural world, with different assumptions, structures, and processes (13). One approach to overcoming any single-model limitations is to force a suite of models with standardized climate change scenarios and combine them into ensemble projections to estimate mean future trends and associated intermodel spread (13). Such model intercomparison projects (MIPs) have become a “gold standard” in climate science and have proven critical for enhancing credibility and understanding of the physical and biochemical climate change projections (14) and associated impacts on Earth’s terrestrial biosphere (15–17), yet can only now be attempted for the global ocean ecosystem (13).

Over the past decade, a number of global fisheries and marine ecosystem models (MEMs) have been developed (13). Some of these have been used individually to project future changes in species distribution, biomass, or potential fisheries catch (8–12), but remain under the constraint of comparability these results are, and thus how applicable for providing robust insight and advice. The Fisheries and Marine Ecosystem Model Intercomparison Project (Fish-MIP; ref. 13) was created to bring these various models and modeling groups together to produce ensemble projections under standardized climate change scenarios.

Here we assess projected changes in global marine animal biomass over the 21st century through ensemble projections with six published global MEMs from Fish-MIP, forced with standardized outputs from two contrasting Earth system models (ESMs) and four emission scenarios [Representative Concentration Pathways (RCPs)]. The MEMs range from size-structured [Bioeconomic Marine Trophic Size-spectrum (BOATS), Macroeconomic] and trait-based [Dynamic Pelagic Benthic Model (DPBM), Apex Predators Ecosystem Model (APECOSM)] to species distribution [Dynamic Bioclimatic Envelope Model (DBEM)] and trophodynamic models (EcoOcean) (SI Appendix, Tables S1 and S2). The ESMs range from a low-emission strong mitigation scenario (RCP2.6) to a midcentury, after which they began to diverge. Projected mean biomass declines were similar for animals of >10 cm and >30 cm (Fig. 1C), albeit slightly lower and more variable for those of >30 cm (SI Appendix, Fig. S5 and Table S3). Thus, the consequences of different emission scenarios may not be distinguishable over the next two to three decades but differ markedly in the long term.

### Climate Change Effects in a Fished and Unfished Ocean.

Three MEMs were also able to run simulations with fishing, including time-varying historical and constant future fishing pressure (SI Appendix, SI Methods), which we used to compare projected climate change effects (RCP8.5 vs. RCP2.6) with and without fishing. The magnitude and variability of the climate change effect were similar (Fig. 1D), suggesting that fishing, at least under current levels of intensity, may not substantially alter the relative effect of climate change. The slightly weaker climate change effects with fishing (mean difference 2 to 3%; Fig. 1D and SI Appendix, Fig. S64) may be due to an indirect effect: Warming enhances both growth and predation rates, yet predation rates are reduced due to selective fishing of larger animals and lower predator abundance (20, 21) which may indirectly enhance prey biomass and weaken the relative climate change effect (19). This is a relatively small effect, however, compared with the large direct effect of fishing itself, which resulted in 16 to 50% lower biomass for animals of >10 cm and 48 to 92% for animals of >30 cm compared with unfished conditions in 2100 under RCP2.6, and slightly lower values under RCP8.5. We note that the absolute magnitude of the fishing effect is not directly comparable across MEMs, due to inherent differences in how fishing pressure and commercial versus noncommercial taxa are incorporated (SI Appendix, SI Methods). We also caution that our future constant fishing scenario is simplistic and does not incorporate potential changes in effort, technology, management, and conservation (11, 21–23), which are likely to strongly affect future biomass trends. Nevertheless, a possible consistent climate change effect is an important consideration in the context of marine management and conservation.

### Variability among Model Projections.

Although ensemble means revealed global biomass declines across all emission scenarios (Fig. 1A), there was considerable variation among MEMs and ESMs (Fig. 1B). The latter largely reflects differences in SST increases and NPP reductions among ESMs (SI Appendix, Fig. S1), in addition to other physical and biochemical drivers (14), and reinforces previous work highlighting the importance of ESM and scenario uncertainty in future projections of fish biomass or fisheries production (24, 25). Interestingly, the variability in projected biomass changes among ESMs was of similar magnitude to that among MEMs (Fig. 1E), suggesting similar levels of uncertainty associated with physical and biological models. Since the field of global ecosystem modeling is relatively new compared with Earth system modeling (13, 14), one might have expected higher variability across MEMs. Other MIPs also found that uncertainties in both ESMs and climate impact models contribute to overall projection
uncertainty, with similar contributions from ESMs and global hydrological models (15), yet much higher uncertainty in global crop and vegetation models than ESMs (16, 17).

The variability among MEMs can be attributed to differences in fundamental structures, taxonomic groups, and ecological processes. Generally, some MEMs respond strongly to temperature changes affecting metabolic rates (BOATS, Macroeocological); while others are strongly driven by NPP changes affecting trophic dynamics (EcoOcean), or a combination of temperature, NPP, and additional drivers (e.g., pH, oxygen, ice cover) affecting habitat niches and species distribution (DBEM) or food web dynamics (DPBM, APECONS) (13, 26). The MEMs also differ in whether niches and species distribution (DBEM) or food web dynamics (EcoOcean), or a combination of temperature, NPP, and others are strongly driven by NPP changes affecting trophic dynamics (BOATS, Macroecological), while some MEMs respond strongly to temperature changes among both MEMs and ESMs was higher under RCP8.5 than RCP2.6 (Fig. 1E), and the variability among MEMs was higher in animals of >30 cm than other size groups, suggesting greater projection uncertainty with stronger warming and for larger animals.

Empirical Validation. All MEMs included in this study have been individually tested across a range of physical and biogeochemical variables, and outputs have been compared with empirical data across multiple temporal and spatial scales (SI Appendix, SI Methods and Fig. S3). In addition, we compared our ensemble projections against biomass trends of scientifically assessed fish populations globally in the absence of fishing (Fig. 2). Temporal trends matched those of our ensemble projections without fishing (n = 10 MEM–ESM combinations), and correlations suggest a good fit for the ensemble mean ($R^2 = 0.44$), which was higher than for most individual models (0.13 ≤ $R^2 ≤ 0.47$), reflecting the strength of the ensemble approach. We also compared biomass projections with fishing (n = 6 MEM–ESMs) to average biomass relative to biomass at MSY ($B/B_{MSY}$) across 331 assessed and exploited fish stocks (ref. 29 and SI Appendix, Fig. S4). Again, temporal trends and correlations for the ensemble mean showed a better fit ($R^2 = 0.96$) than individual models (0.80 ≤ $R^2 ≤ 0.94$). These analyses suggest that our ensemble projections reflect observed trends for assessed fish stocks, providing confidence in our historical and future projections.

Trophic Amplification of Marine Biomass Declines. Although we did not find major differences in biomass changes among our three size groups (Fig. 1C), the combined biomass of higher trophic levels from our MEMs declined more strongly than that of lower trophic levels from ESMs across all RCP scenarios (Fig. 3). This trophic amplification of biomass declines has been previously shown for phytoplankton and zooplankton across a range of ESMs (18), and our results suggest this effect may extend to higher food web levels. Such amplification of the climate signal from primary producers to higher trophic levels arises from multiple factors that vary among ESMs and MEMs, including changes in phytoplankton size composition, lengthening of food chains, reduced trophic efficiencies, and higher metabolic costs with increased body size (18). In addition to larger mean biomass declines, we also observed larger variability for higher trophic levels, particularly at higher RCPs (Fig. 3). Mean NPP, phytoplankton, and zooplankton declines and variability from our two ESMs were comparable to those of other ESM ensembles (14, 18). We caution that many MEMs only use NPP or phytoplankton biomass as forcing variables directly influencing higher trophic levels (SI Appendix, Table S2), and cannot resolve all underlying food web mechanisms. Nevertheless, the consistency of the response across diverse ESMs and MEMs does suggest a general pattern of higher trophic levels being more likely to show larger biomass declines than lower trophic levels. This raises concerns about wider impacts of climate change on the structure, function, and stability of ocean ecosystems (31, 32), especially in combination with other human stressors, such as fishing, that disproportionately affect higher trophic levels, a process called trophic downgrading (33).

Trends in Relation to Global Temperature Changes. Many policy processes use the change in global air temperature since pre-industrial times as a reference for the effects of climate change (34, 35). For our ensemble projections, this revealed a consistent linear relationship with an average 5% drop in total animal biomass with every 1 °C of Earth surface warming in the absence of fishing.
A similar to climate warming (Fig. 5 and change mitigation according with the Paris Agreement (34, 35). to 6% by 2100, underscoring the potential impact of climate 2.0 °C above preindustrial levels would limit biomass declines to 4 in biomass per 1 °C of warming throughout the 21st century. This reconstructed rate of change is consistent with our 5% drop mass of 235 assessed fish stocks found a 4.1% drop in MSY from response. Recent results hindcasting temperature effects on bio-
complex responses to warming (3, 36), but these simple relations-
ships represent well-founded approximations for a global average response. Recent results hindcasting temperature effects on biomass of 235 assessed fish stocks found a 4.1% drop in MSY from 1950 to 2010, a period that saw an average 0.6 °C of warming (30). This reconstructed rate of change is consistent with our 5% drop in biomass per 1 °C of warming throughout the 21st century. According to these results, limiting future warming to 1.5 °C to 2.0 °C above preindustrial levels would limit biomass declines to 4 to 6% by 2100, underscoring the potential impact of climate change mitigation according with the Paris Agreement (34, 35).

Spatial Patterns of Biomass Change. Not all ocean regions respond similarly to climate warming (Fig. 5 and SI Appendix, Fig. S8). Our ensemble projections revealed strong increases in total animal biomass in polar regions and widespread declines in temperate to tropical regions under RCP8.5 (Fig. 5B), with qualitatively similar but less pronounced patterns under RCP2.6 (Fig. 5A). The climate change effects were spatially similar with and without fishing (SI Appendix, Fig. S9). However, our ensemble projections differed spatially from previous single-model results highlighted in the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report (1): We found strong biomass declines (not increases) in many temperate to subtropical regions and increases (not declines) around Antarctica. The magnitude of regional changes also varied from other single-model results (8–11). Generally, warming waters and enhanced primary production are expected to facilitate species expansions and biomass increases in polar regions, while tropical areas may experience pronounced species losses as thermal thresholds are exceeded. In temperate regions, warming is expected to change species composition, and reduced primary production due to enhanced stratification will result in biomass declines (3, 4, 30). Our ensemble projections showed high model agreement on the direction of change in many ocean regions (75 to 100%; Fig. 5 C and D), providing confidence in our multimodel results that combine different ecosystem structures and processes. Many models also agreed relatively well on the magnitude of projected changes in temperate to tropical regions but showed considerable intermodel variability in many polar and coastal regions (Fig. 5 C and D), reflecting differences among ESMs and MEMs (SI Appendix, Figs. S10 and S11). These results again underscore the importance of model intercomparison in identifying uncertainties and constraining expected outcomes of ecosystem changes in the ocean.

Conclusions

Our ensemble projections demonstrate that global ocean animal biomass consistently declines with climate change, and that impacts are amplified at higher trophic levels. Our hindcasts support recent empirical work that shows ongoing climate impacts on fish biomass (30, 37), and project elevated climate-driven declines in ocean ecosystems, with magnitudes dependent on emission pathways. Amplification of biomass declines for higher trophic levels represents a particular challenge for human society, including meeting the SDGs for food security (SDG2), livelihoods (SDG1), and well-being (SDG3) for a growing human population while also sustaining life below water (SDG14). Our ensemble projections indicate the largest decreases in animal biomass at middle to low latitudes, where many nations depend on seafood and fisheries, and where marine biodiversity is already threatened by multiple human activities (6, 38). In turn, the largest increases are projected at high latitudes, highlighting new opportunities for—and potential conflict over—resource use, but also an urgent need for protecting sensitive species and rapidly changing ecosystems. Overall, our results clearly highlight the benefits to be gained from climate change mitigation, as all impacts were substantially reduced under
By providing estimates of global biomass changes and associated uncertainties, our ensemble projections represent the most comprehensive outlook on the future of marine animal biomass to date. Our results are robust in terms of the direction of change, yet the substantial spread in the magnitude of projections illustrates considerable uncertainty in both ESMs and MEMs. The challenge is to address these uncertainties and improve our ability to predict marine ecosystem responses to climate change at different temporal and spatial scales. Projections based on global models are often less certain for coastal and polar regions but may be improved through regional downscaling to incorporate higher-resolution climate and ecosystem features (7, 39). The next round of CMIP6 projections with improved representation of biochemical parameters may also advance future ensemble projections (13, 40).

The expansion of global observational datasets provides further opportunities to better constrain and validate models. The incorporation of additional MEMs based on novel paradigms or reflecting alternative structures and processes may also be informative (13), along with regional ecosystem or fish stock models that more accurately capture processes at management-relevant scales (21, 41, 42). Future MEMs could also further explore how species interactions and potential acclimatization or adaptation of marine organisms modify projected distribution and abundance.

Finally, a large component of future change will depend on the trajectories of fisheries, aquaculture, and other human impacts on the ocean (6, 11, 29, 38). Incorporating standardized temporally and spatially resolved scenarios of human activities and alternative management approaches will improve our understanding of the future of marine animals and ocean ecosystems (13, 23), and identify the points of greatest leverage for mitigating impacts. Improved dynamic and adaptive ecosystem-based management may mitigate some future climate change impacts and maintain ecosystem health and service provision (6, 21, 22, 43). However, this can only happen if the international community, including national and regional bodies, strengthens the required institutions and management approaches (6, 44).

Methods

Model Selection. The six global MEMs varied in their model structure, processes, representation of functional groups, size classes or commercial taxa, and how they incorporated ESM-derived climate forcings and fishing (SI Appendix, SI Methods and Tables S1 and S2). Our ensemble thus includes a greater variety of ecosystems components and processes than any single model.

Fig. 4. Projected biomass trends in relation to global air temperature changes. Shown is the relationship of the change in marine animal biomass to increasing global surface air temperature since preindustrial times (1860s). Each dot represents an annual ensemble mean (n = 10) relative to 1990–1999 across historical and future emission scenarios (RCPs) in the absence of fishing. Vertical lines frame expected changes between 1.5 °C and 2 °C of warming.

Fig. 5. Spatial patterns of projected biomass changes. Shown are global ensemble projections at a 1 × 1 degree resolution for (A, C, and E) RCP2.6 and (B, D, and F) RCP8.5. (A and B) Multimodel mean change (percent, n = 10) in total marine animal biomass in 2090–2099 relative to 1990–1999 without fishing. (C and D) Variability among different ecosystem model and ESM combinations expressed as 1 SD. (E and F) Model agreement (percent) on the direction of change.
Climate Change Scenarios. The two ESMs from CMIP5 (https://pcmdi.llnl.gov/cmip5) provided the necessary physical and biochemical outputs to force our MEMs, particularly monthly depth-resolved fields of phytoplankton and zooplankton size groups (SI Appendix, SI Methods and Table S2). Average trends of GFDL-ESM2M and IPSL-CM5A-LR reflect the multimodel mean and range of a broad set of CMIP5 models (14). The four RCPs represent standard IPCC informed emission scenarios (SI Appendix, SI Methods).

Simulations. All MEMs ran simulations without fishing, and three MEMs ran simulations with fishing for historical (1970–2000) and future (2006–2100) periods. Historical fishing reflected time-varying effort or mortality rates depending on MEM requirements, and future fishing was kept constant at 2005 levels (SI Appendix, SI Methods). Not all MEMs performed all simulations, and sensitivity analyses cross-checked subsets of results (SI Appendix, Table S3).

Analyses and Validation. Annual outputs of total animal biomass density (grams carbon per square meter) and animal biomass of >3 cm and ≥30 cm were derived on a 1 x 1 degree grid. We calculated time series of % biomass change from 1970 to 2100 relative to 1990–1999 (reference period), and % biomass change in 2009–2099 vs. 1990–1999 for each simulation, as absolute biomass densities were not strictly comparable across MEMs. Relative change effects (RCP8.5 – RCP2.6) was calculated in a fished and unfished ocean (B/BMSY; ref. 29) and temperature-dependent biomass hindcasts ocean within and across MEMs. Empirical validation was achieved by comparing historical projections with biomass trends of assessed fish stocks in a fished ocean (B/BMSY; ref. 29) and temperature-dependent biomass hindcasts (MSY) of assessed stocks without fishing (30), in addition to published individual MEM validations with empirical data (SI Appendix, Fig. S5). Trophic amplification was evaluated by comparing mean (±SD) changes (2090s vs. 1990s) in NPP and total phytoplankton and zooplankton biomass from ESMs with higher trophic level biomass from MEMs across RCPs. Mean biomass changes were also compared with global air temperature changes since preindustrial times (1861–1870) from ESMs. Spatial patterns were mapped as mean % biomass changes in 2090–2099 vs. 1990–1999, the SD of the mean to assess intermodel variability in the magnitude of change, and the % model agreement on the direction of change (14). We also mapped the climate change effect with and without fishing and the variability of results across ESMs and MEMs. For further details, see SI Appendix, SI Methods.

Data Accessibility. All data reported in this paper are archived (45) and publicly available at http://dataservices.gfz-potsdam.de/pik/showshort.php? id=esicodic:2956913.

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