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Opinion Article

Marine Plants and Algae Uses in Carbon Sequestration and Climate Regulation

Ria Mayasari*

Department of Marine Biology, National Institute of Biology, Vecnapot , Ljubljana, Slovenia

DESCRIPTION

The Earth's climate is complexly linked to its oceans, with marine ecosystems playing a pivotal role in moderating climate change. Among these ecosystems, marine plants and algae stand out as unsung heroes in the battle against rising greenhouse gas emissions. Through a process known as carbon sequestration, these organisms play a vital role in regulating Earth's climate by by absorbing carbon dioxide (CO_2) from the atmosphere and storing it in various forms. Marine plants and algae are adept at harnessing sunlight through photosynthesis, a process that not only fuels their growth but also enables them to capture atmospheric CO_2. During photosynthesis process these organisms utilize CO_2 , water, and sunlight to produce organic compounds while releasing oxygen as a byproduct. This organic carbon is then stored within the biomass of marine plants and algae, including seagrasses, phytoplankton, macroalgae (such as kelp), and mangroves. Additionally, some carbon is deposited as detritus on the ocean floor, contributing to carbon burial in sediments.

The carbon stored within marine plants and algae plays a crucial role in the global carbon cycle. By sequestering carbon from the atmosphere, these organisms helps to regulate CO_2 levels, thereby mitigating the greenhouse effect and reducing the impacts of climate change. Moreover, carbon stored in marine ecosystems can remain sequestered for long periods, especially when it's incorporated into the deep ocean or buried in sediments, effectively locking away carbon from the atmosphere. Coastal ecosystems, including mangroves, salt marshes, and seagrass meadows, are particularly effective in sequestering carbon and are collectively referred to as "blue carbon" ecosystems. These habitats sequester carbon at rates much higher than terrestrial forests, making them critical carbon sinks. Marine plants, especially seagrasses, have extensive root systems that trap and stabilize carbon in sediments, contributing significantly to blue carbon storage. Protecting and restoring these coastal ecosystems is therefore vital for enhancing carbon sequestration and climate regulation.

While often overlooked, microscopic algae and phytoplankton play a disproportionately large role in carbon sequestration. These tiny organisms inhabit the sunlit surface layers of the ocean, where they carry out photosynthesis on a massive scale. Despite their small size, phytoplankton collectively absorbs vast amounts of CO_2 , with estimates suggesting they are responsible for roughly half of the global primary production. Additionally, when phytoplankton die, they sink to the ocean floor, taking carbon with them and contributing to the ocean's biological pump, a mechanism for long-term carbon storage. The significance of marine plants and algae in carbon sequestration extends beyond mitigating climate change. These organisms also influence ocean acidity, nutrient cycling, and ecosystem productivity, ultimately shaping marine biodiversity and resilience. Furthermore, healthy marine ecosystems, rich in plant and algal diversity, provide essential ecosystem services such as coastal protection, fisheries support, and livelihoods for coastal communities. Thus, preserving and restoring these ecosystems is essential not only for climate regulation but also for sustaining marine life and human well-being.

From vast kelp forests to microscopic phytoplankton, these organisms sequester carbon, stabilize coastal sediments, and support diverse marine ecosystems. Recognizing the importance of marine plants and algae in moderating climate change underscores the urgency of protecting and restoring marine habitats. Safeguarding this vital ecosystem is essential to mitigate climate change while preserving the health of oceans for future generations.

Correspondence to: Ria Mayasari, Department of Marine Biology, National Institute of Biology, Vecnapot, Ljubljana, Slovenia, E-mail: ria@maya.si

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