Changes in the trophic state of Lake Erie: discordance between molecular $\delta^{13}$C and bulk $\delta^{13}$C sedimentary records

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Changes in the trophic state of Lake Erie: discordance between molecular δ¹³C and bulk δ¹³C sedimentary records

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Abstract

Prior to 1980, anthropogenic phosphorus (P) loadings resulted in increased algal productivity and the deterioration of water quality within Lake Erie. We measured C and N elemental compositions, geolipid concentrations, and δ¹³C values for bulk organic material and individual alkanes in samples taken from a 40-cm sediment core from the eastern basin of Lake Erie to infer recent trends in primary productivity and diagenesis. The predominance of autochthonous algal-derived C throughout the core is evidenced by low C/N values (9–10) and the persistent abundance of n-C₁₅ to n-C₁₇ alkanes throughout the core. The δ¹³C values of bulk organic C from Lake Erie vary between −25.9 and −24.9‰ with a maximum corresponding to the period of elevated historical P loading. Within Lake Erie, δ¹³C values of short-chained algal-derived alkanes (<n-C₁₈) are lower (approximately 1.0‰) than their terrestrial-derived homologs (>n-C₂₅). Down-core variations in the δ¹³C composition of algal-derived short-chained alkanes do not exhibit the same trend as that observed for bulk organic C. Down-core variations in δ¹³C values of individual alkanes likely reflect multiple diagenetic effects including kinetic fractionation effects, variations in the relative contributions of isotopically unique n-alkanes to the sediments, and/or variations in δ¹³C enrichments of n-alkanes associated with a single source. High sedimentation rates characteristic of this core maximize temporal variations in molecular δ¹³C values that might not otherwise be observed. Whereas δ¹³C data for bulk sedimentary organic C appear to reflect variation in trophic state, the isotopic record for algal-derived n-alkanes (e.g., n-C₁₇ and pristane) from Lake Erie must be considered from the perspective of molecular transformations. © 1998 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Algal productivity and water quality of the Great Lakes, have varied with the amount of anthropogenic phosphorus (P) loading. Lake Erie, the smallest of the five Great Lakes has been especially sensitive to variations in the delivery of anthropogenic P over the past century. In particular, high P loadings between 1960 and 1975 resulted in increased sediment oxygen demand, widespread anoxia in the hypolimnion of the central basin during stratification, and the decline of one of the world’s largest freshwater
fisheries (Burns, 1985; Rosa and Burns, 1987). Subsequent declines in phytoplankton biomass and recovery of the fishery in the mid-1970s occurred concomitantly with P abatement practices. These fluctuations in trophic state of the lower Great Lakes are recorded in the carbon isotope (δ13C) values of sedimentary organic matter (Schelske and Hodell, 1991, 1995).

The relationship between δ13C of primary photosynthate and the extent of production reflects the response of isotopic fractionation during carbon fixation to variations in aqueous CO2 concentrations (Rau et al., 1989; Fogel et al., 1992; Fogel and Cifuentes, 1993; Goericke et al., 1994). Early models of photosynthetic fractionation recognized that isotopic discrimination occurs during diffusion of CO2 into the cell and, to a greater extent, during carboxylation of ribulose diphosphate by the enzyme RuBP carboxylase (O'Leary, 1981; Roeske and O'Leary, 1984). During periods of high productivity when aqueous CO2 concentrations are low, discrimination against 13C by the enzyme RuBP carboxylase is effectively reduced. This may result in an increase in the δ13C of the primary photosynthate relative to periods of low productivity. Current work, however, recognizes that additional factors, such as pH, temperature, degree of nitrogen limitation, and growth rate, can influence the δ13C of phytoplankton (Beardall et al., 1982; Takahashi et al., 1990; Fogel and Cifuentes, 1993; Hinga et al., 1994; Laws et al., 1995).

Clearly, the ability of δ13C values to provide an indication of variations in trophic state within the Great Lakes is dependent on the degree to which C isotopic discrimination is dependent on ρCO2. Additionally, temporal variation in the contribution of

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**Fig. 1.** Percent C, percent N, and log excess 210Pb data for the organic component of sediments from the eastern Lake Erie.
allochthonous material and diagenesis may confound δ13C records of bulk organic carbon. Carbon isotopic values of algal-derived molecules, however, should not be influenced by terrigenous inputs and, thus, provide a better indication of trophic state than δ13C data on bulk sediments. We compare δ13C data for bulk sedimentary organic matter and individual n-alkanes (n-C16 to n-C29) obtained from a core taken from Lake Erie. To identify variations in allochthonous inputs and diagenesis, C and N elemental abundances and concentrations of individual n-alkanes are also presented.

2. Methods

2.1. Core material

A 40-cm box core was collected from the eastern basin of Lake Erie (42°35.3'N, 79°34.3'W) in 1982. A sub-core was sectioned at 1-cm intervals for the top 20 cm and at 5-cm intervals for the lower 20 cm for this research. Sediment samples were immediately frozen and stored in glass containers until 1994 when they were freeze-dried for geochemical analyses associated with the current study. Each sample contained approximately 10 g dry sediment. Approximate ages from a companion sub-core were previously calculated using 210Pb dating techniques (Robbins et al., 1989).

2.2. Elemental and isotopic analyses

Prior to elemental and isotopic analyses, inorganic carbon was removed from a 500-mg aliquot of dried sediment sample by acidification (2 N HCl). The acidified samples were subsequently dried at 45°C and homogenized. Carbon and nitrogen elemental abundances were analyzed by combustion with a Carlo Erba 1500 elemental analyzer. The δ13C val-

![Fig. 2. Atomic C/N and δ13C data for the organic component of sediments from sediments obtained from the eastern basin of Lake Erie.](image-url)
ues of the bulk sediment samples were determined using a PRISM stable isotope mass spectrometer (VG Isotech) interfaced with the Carlo Erba elemental analyzer, following the method of Wong et al. (1992).

2.3. Isolation and analysis of lipid concentrations

The lipid component of an aliquot (8 g) of each sediment sample was extracted in quartz distilled dichloromethane (DCM, Sigma, HPLC grade) in a soxhlet apparatus for 7 h. Separation of individual hydrocarbon classes was accomplished by column chromatography using activated (305°C) silica and alumina and high purity solvents (quartz distilled, HPLC grade) of increasing polarity (n-hexane, 2:1 n-hexane/DCM and methanol, for aliphatic, aromatic and polar compounds, respectively). After rotovaporation, each hydrocarbon fraction was evaporated to dryness under a stream of filtered air and weighed.

Identification and quantification of the abundance of individual n-alkanes contained within the aliphatic fraction was accomplished using a gas chromatograph (Hewlett-Packard 5890) fitted with a DB-5 column (32 µm i.d. x 25 m; J&W Scientific) and interfaced to a mass selective detector (Hewlett-Packard 5971). Samples were separated within the gas chromatograph using a temperature program of 100°C for 5 min, 5°C min⁻¹ to 305°C, and 305°C for 10 min. The mass selective detector was operated in scan mode (m/z 30 to 500). An internal standard (phenanthrene) was added to each sample prior to injection for quantification of individual components. Compound identification was based on the abundance and mass of molecular ion and fragment ions produced during the scan and by comparison with literature mass spectra (Giger et al., 1980; Kvenvolden et al., 1987; Schoell et al., 1994).

2.4. GC/IRMS of n-alkanes

Carbon isotope values of n-C₁₆ to n-C₃₀ alkanes, pristane and phytane were determined from an aliquot of the aliphatic fraction obtained from 10 of the sediment samples. Phenanthrene and deuterated n-
Fig. 4. Absolute abundances of $n$-alkanes ($n$-C$_{15}$ to $n$-C$_{31}$), pristane, and phytane ($\mu$g g$^{-1}$ sediment) from sediments from the eastern basin of Lake Erie sediments.
C\textsubscript{24} were isotopically characterized and used as an internal standard for each of the samples. Isotope values for several alkanes quantified by gas chromatography with mass selective detection are not reported owing to their low abundance (e.g., n-C\textsubscript{14} and n-C\textsubscript{30}) or co-elution (e.g., n-C\textsubscript{31}). The $\delta^{13}$C values of individual n-alkanes were analyzed on a VG Isochrom I (Hewlett-Packard 5890 gas chromatograph interfaced by a combustion furnace and water trap to a VG PRISM isotope ratio mass spectrometer). Samples (1 μl) were injected (splitless) onto a DB-5 fused silica column (32 μm i.d. × 25 m; J&W Scientific) and the following temperature program was used during chromatography: 70°C for 3 min, 70°C to 120°C at 1°C min\textsuperscript{-1}, 130°C to 300°C at 20°C min\textsuperscript{-1} and 300°C for 5 min. The injector was maintained at 280°C, the combustion furnace interface at 400°C, and the combustion furnace at 850°C. Reference CO\textsubscript{2} was introduced into the mass spectrometer before and after elution of the n-alkanes while column eluent was diverted. The slow ramp in the chromatographic program between 70 and 120°C provided for near base-line separation between n-C\textsubscript{17} and pristane and between n-C\textsubscript{18} and phytane.

3. Results

3.1. Sedimentation rate and mixed depth

The age-depth relationship of the core was estimated using $^{210}$Pb dating techniques (Fig. 1; Robbins and Edgington, 1975; Eisenreich et al., 1989). The approximate year of deposition for the bottom of the 40-cm core is 1968. The $^{210}$Pb data reveal a mixed depth of 10.5 cm that is equivalent to 3.7 years of...
sedimentation and a cumulative weight of 2.84 g cm\(^{-2}\). The mass sedimentation rate is 0.88 g cm\(^{-2}\) year\(^{-1}\) and is much higher than previously reported estimates from the eastern basin of Lake Erie (Mortimer, 1987; Robbins et al., 1989).

### 3.2. Elemental abundance

Organic C and N elemental abundances are reported as percentages relative to dry sediment weight, and as atomic C/N (Figs. 1 and 2). The range in percent C is small (2.04 to 2.47%), with an average of 2.26 \(\pm 0.11\)%. Percent N ranges between 0.241 and 0.311%, with an average of 0.274 \(\pm 0.016\)%.

The ratio of organic carbon to organic nitrogen averages 9.60 \(\pm 0.38\) (Fig. 2).

Procedural reproducibility for elemental analysis, estimated as the standard deviation of triplicate analyses (sample preparation and elemental abundance determination), is \(\pm 0.06\) and \(\pm 0.02\) for percent C and N, respectively. Error associated with the measurement of percent C and N is propagated in the calculation of atomic C/N. The propagated error associated with C/N, determined by the method of Taylor (1982), is \(\pm 0.58\).

Net depletion of organic matter with depth in sediments can be an indicator of microbial remineralization of organic matter. There is no depletion in C abundance with depth in the core. Percent N decreases slightly from the top to the bottom of the core. The most salient feature of the data is the repetitive series of maxima and minima in both percent C and percent N. Comparison of the trends in percent C and percent N shows that maxima and minima co-occur in most instances. The observation that differences in percent C or N between two successive maxima and minima are, in many cases, two times greater than the procedural reproducibility indicates that these differences are not an artifact of analytical error and instead record actual variations in sedimentary organic matter content.

### 3.3. Carbon isotopic composition of the total sedimentary organic C

Procedural reproducibility for \(\delta^{13}C\) analysis, estimated by the standard deviation of triplicate analyses...
The δ13C composition of sedimentary organic matter extracted from Lake Erie generally exhibits a trend of 13C enrichment between 1968 and 1970 (Fig. 2). The maximum δ13C value of −24.9‰ is recorded in sediments deposited in 1970 and again in 1977. The minimum δ13C value of −25.9‰ is recorded in sediments deposited in 1981.

The δ13C depth profile is characterized by a series of maxima and minima at intervals of 3 to 4 cm. These variations differ from the pattern of repeating maxima and minima exhibited by C and N abundances. The observation that differences in δ13C values between two successive maxima and minima are, in many cases, two times greater than the procedural reproducibility suggests that these differences are not an artifact of analytical error and record actual variations in the isotopic composition of bulk organic carbon.

3.4. Concentrations of lipids

The analytical reproducibility for the amount of extractable organic material (EOM) determined by triplicate analysis of a surficial sediment is 1.15 ± 0.07 μg g−1 dry sediment. Sediments deposited during 1976–1977 contained 2.07 μg EOM g−1 dry sediment, nearly twice the amount extracted from the most recent sediments. With the exception of these sediments, the total EOM ranges between 0.97 and 1.70 μg g−1 and does not exhibit major variation with time (Fig. 3).

Each of the individual subfractions of EOM (aliphatic hydrocarbons, aromatic hydrocarbons, and...
The absolute abundances of short-chain \( n \)-alkanes (\( C_{14}-C_{20} \)) tend to decrease down core, but the abundances of mid (\( C_{21}-C_{24} \)) and long (\( C_{25}-C_{31} \)) chain \( n \)-alkanes remain relatively constant. Within the upper 10 cm (sediments younger than 1981), the abundance of \( n-C_{17} \) is characterized by a series of variations that closely corresponds to the trend in percent N (Fig. 5). In contrast, variations in abundance of \( n-C_{31} \) within the upper 10 cm are small.

### 3.5. \( \delta^{13}C \) values of \( n \)-alkanes

Reproducibility for \( \delta^{13}C \) analysis of individual alkanes based on triplicate analyses of a single sample is \( \pm 0.3\% \). Individual carbon isotope values of \( n-C_{15} \) to \( n-C_{29} \), pristane and phytane in all samples...
analyzed ranged between $-32.7$ and $-27.8\%$. The average $\delta^{13}C$ values of $n-C_{15}$, $n-C_{16}$, and $n-C_{17}$ are lower (at least $1.0\%$) than those of alkanes with a longer C chain length (Fig. 6).

The highest $\delta^{13}C$ values for $n-C_{15}$, $n-C_{16}$, $n-C_{17}$, $n-C_{18}$, pristane, and phytane ($-30.2$, $-30.2$, $-29.9$, $-27.7$, $-29\%$, and $-29.3$, respectively) are from the surface sediments of the core (Fig. 7). Within sediments deposited since 1981, there is a decrease in the $\delta^{13}C$ values of these alkanes (0.5 to $2.9\%$) with depth. Within sediments older than 1981, the $\delta^{13}C$ values of $n-C_{16}$ to $n-C_{17}$ range between $-30.7$ and $-31.7\%$ and exhibit coincident maxima and minima. With the exception of the 1976 sample (bottom of the core), $\delta^{13}C$ values of pristane and $n-C_{18}$ deposited prior to 1981, range between $-31.4$ and $-29.2\%$ and exhibit corresponding maxima and minima.

The $\delta^{13}C$ values of $n-C_{19}$ and $n-C_{20}$ vary in a similar manner (Fig. 8). Between 1983 and 1980, $\delta^{13}C$ values of these alkanes increase slightly down-core from approximately $-30.2$ to $-29.7\%$. In older sediments, large shifts in $\delta^{13}C$ (as much as $2.8\%$) occur between consecutive samples down-core. Similarly, $\delta^{13}C$ values of $n-C_{21}$ initially increase down-core and prior to 1979, exhibit maxima and minima that often coincide with those observed for $n-C_{19}$ and $n-C_{20}$.

The down-core variations in $\delta^{13}C$ values of $n-C_{22}$ and $n-C_{23}$ are similar but offset by approximately $1.5\%$ ($n-C_{23}$ is enriched in $^{13}C$ relative to $n-C_{22}$; Fig. 8). The most salient trend in the isotopic compo-

Fig. 9. Temporal variation in $\delta^{13}C$ values of $n-C_{25}$ to $n-C_{29}$ from sediments from the eastern basin of Lake Erie.
position of all alkanes from \( n-C_{25} \) to \( n-C_{29} \) is a decrease in \( \delta^{13}C \) values down-core (Fig. 9).

4. Discussion

The high sedimentation rate in the eastern basin of Lake Erie (3 to 4 cm year\(^{-1}\)) permits resolution of short-term variations in the geochemical characteristics of the sediments, despite a \(^{210}Pb\) mixed depth of approximately 10.5 cm (Robbins et al., 1989). For example, large differences between maximum and minimum values for percent C, percent N, and \( \delta^{13}C \) data and variations in \(^{210}Pb\) within this interval indicate that this portion of the sediment core has not been entirely homogenized by bioturbation and physical mixing (Fig. 1). These short-term variations reflect the complex interactions between the physical, chemical, and biological processes, such as shoreline erosion, biotic production and resuspension, that influence the composition of sedimenting particles in the Great Lakes (Rea et al., 1981; Eadie and Robbins, 1987; Baker and Eisenreich, 1989).

Organic C and N elemental abundances and atomic C/N values can help to identify variations in delivery of aquatic and terrigenous organic matter and the amount of diagenetic alteration of sedimentary organic matter. Elemental abundances of 2.26 \( \pm \) 0.11 and 0.274 \( \pm \) 0.016\%, for C and N, respectively, within Lake Erie (Fig. 1) are typical for large, deep lakes such as Lake Biwa (Meyers and Horie, 1993) and the Laurentian Great Lakes (Fig. 1; Meyers and Eadie, 1993; Bourbonniere and Meyers, 1996). The absence of a significant change in percent C and the simultaneous small decrease in the percent N down-core suggests a minor amount of degradation associated with labile, nitrogen-rich aquatic compounds (Meyers and Ishiwatari, 1993a). The atomic C/N of Lake Erie sediments, however, averages 9.62 \( \pm \) 0.38 (Fig. 2) and suggests that the sediments are dominated by algal material (Meyers, 1994). The nearly constant atomic C/N values over time suggest that the relative proportions of terrestrial and algal sources of organic matter between 1968 and 1982 have remained virtually unchanged.

The \( \delta^{13}C \) values of the organic fraction of Lake Erie increase down-core (Fig. 2). Possible causes of this trend are the preferential mineralization of topically light carbon compounds, a change in the relative contribution of algal and terrestrial materials to the sediments, or variation in the \( \delta^{13}C \) of phytoplankton. Isotopic discrimination associated with mineralization appears to have a minor influence on the \( \delta^{13}C \) of organic sediments like those of Lake Erie that contain low concentrations of organic carbon (< 2-3\%); Jasper and Hayes, 1990; Fontugne and Calvert, 1992; Meyers and Horie, 1993; Meyers, 1994). The lack of variation in atomic C/N argues against an increase in terrestrial organic matter. Consequently, the shift in \( \delta^{13}C \) values suggests that the \( \delta^{13}C \) content of autochthonous production has changed between 1970 and 1982.

The \( \delta^{13}C \) of phytoplankton has been observed to vary inversely with aqueous CO\(_2\) concentrations (Rau et al., 1989; Fogel et al., 1992; Fogel and Cifuentes, 1993). Under CO\(_2\) limitation, isotopic discrimination during fixation of C by the enzyme RuBP carboxylase is effectively diminished and aquatic algae become enriched in \(^{13}C\) (O'Leary, 1981; Fogel and Cifuentes, 1993; Hayes, 1993). The relationship between the \( \rho CO_2\) and the \( \delta^{13}C \) of autotrophs was initially modelled by Farquhar et al. (1982) and Hayes (1993) and has been recently modified to incorporate the influence of additional factors such as growth rate (Laws et al., 1995).

Within the Great Lakes, variations in the \( \delta^{13}C \) of phytoplankton induced by changes in \( \rho CO_2\) are postulated to be linked to fluctuations in anthropogenic phosphorusr loadings (Bourbonniere et al., 1991; Schelske and Hodell, 1991, 1995). Within Lake Erie, highest \( \delta^{13}C \) values for organic carbon are present in sediments deposited in 1970, 2 years following the maximum loading of anthropogenic P (Fraser, 1987). Between 1970 and 1982, organic matter deposited on the bottom of Lake Erie is depleted in \(^{13}C\), coincident with known records of phosphorous reductions (Fraser, 1987; Rosa, 1987).

A series of maxima and minima exist in the \( \delta^{13}C \) data (Fig. 2). Given that similar large scale variations were observed in percent C and N, these shifts in \( \delta^{13}C \) may reflect inter-annual changes in the type and amount of sedimenting particles, which are superimposed on variation in trophic state and associated changes in \( \rho CO_2\). In particular, maximum values in the \( \delta^{13}C \) content of the sediments may reflect periodic transport of organic matter from the central...
basin of the lake, which is more eutrophic than the
eastern basin (Burns, 1985). Concentrations of spe-
cific subfractions of extractable organic matter and
of individual hydrocarbons offer additional informa-
tion about diagenesis and variations in organic mat-
ter sources (Matsuda and Koyama, 1977a,b; Ishi-
watari et al., 1980; Giger et al., 1980; Cranwell,
1984a,b; Kawamura et al., 1987; Rieley et al., 1991).
Between the top of the core and sediments deposited
in 1978 (upper 16 cm), concentrations of total ex-
tractable hydrocarbons remain essentially constant
(1.14 ± 0.09 mg g⁻¹ dry sediment; Fig. 3). Concen-
trations of extractable organic matter in sediments
deposited between 1976 and 1977 peak at 2.07 mg
g⁻¹ dry sediment. The peak in total extractable
hydrocarbons does not coincide with an increase in
the aliphatic, aromatic, or polar fractions (Fig. 3)
and, therefore, reflects an increase in some ex-
tractable, yet refractory, component that is not repre-
sented in these three groups. An increase in highly
weathered terrestrial material in 1976 could have
been derived from shoreline erosion associated with
high water levels in Lake Erie at this time (Stevens
and Neilson, 1987).

With the exception of the upper three samples, the
concentrations of aliphatic, aromatic, and polar com-
ounds are nearly constant throughout the core (Fig.
3). The concentration of each of these compound
classes in the upper three samples decreases with
depth and suggests the diagenetic loss of labile,
predominantly aquatic compounds in the near-surface
sediments.

The relative abundance of pristane and phytane in
sediments has previously been interpreted as an indi-
cator of oxic/anoxic deposition (Didyk et al., 1978).
In the primary biosynthetic pathways of these
molecules is through the oxic or anoxic decomposi-
tion of phytol, the alcohol side-chain of chlorophyll
a, during later diagenesis (Peters and Moldowan,
1993; Ho and Meyers, 1994). In recent sediments,
however, the presence of pristane reflects the decom-
position of chlorophyll a in the digestive tract of
copepods (Blumer et al., 1963; Ho and Meyers,
1994). Large fluctuations in pristane concentration
throughout the sediment core indicate the annual variabil-
ity of zooplankton grazing communities (Fig.
4). The concentration of phytane remains relatively
constant with depth, indicating a different formative
process, which has varied little during the 14 years
of sediment deposition (Fig. 4).

The bimodal distribution of n-alkanes with peaks
at n-C₁₇, and at n-C₂₉ or n-C₃₁ is characteristic of
sedimentary environments having dual sources of
organic matter (Giger et al., 1980; Ho and Meyers,
1994; Fig. 4). Heptadecane (n-C₁₇) is the most
abundant n-alkane in phytoplankton (Gelpi et al.,
1970; Giger et al., 1980) and its dominance through-
out the core supports interpretations of atomic C/N
data that identify algae as the primary source of
organic matter in Lake Erie (Fig. 4). The observation
that within sediments deposited prior to 1979,
down-core variations in percent N are similar to
those for n-C₁₇ abundance but not n-C₁₉, abundance
(Fig. 5) suggests the influence of algal material on
the labile component of the bulk organic fraction of
these sediments. The high concentrations of n-C₂₉
and n-C₃₁, however, indicate that a large terrestrial
component is also present in the EOM.

Although C₁₇ remains the dominant n-alkane
throughout the sediment core, the ratio of algal to
terrestrial n-alkanes (aquatic/terrigenous n-alkane
index = (n-C₁₅ + n-C₁₇ + n-C₁₉)/(n-C₂₉ + n-C₃₁ +
n-C₁₉); Bourbonniere and Meyers, 1996) changes
down-core (Fig. 10). The decrease of at least 0.5 in
the short/long n-alkane index for sediments younger
than 1980 relative to older sediments suggests that
short-chained algal n-alkanes may be preferentially
respired by heterotrophs in the mixed layer of the
sediments. A similar loss of autochthonous material
was not observed in atomic C/N data for bulk
organic material. The distinction is important be-
cause it emphasizes that individual compounds are
much more sensitive to diagenetic alteration than is
bulk organic matter.

The prevalence of algal n-alkanes (n-C₁₅ to n-
C₁₉) throughout the core provides an opportunity to
evaluate relationships between variations in trophic
state and δ¹³C values of individual compounds de-
derived specifically from algae. Despite evidence
that the total organic carbon is predominantly au-
tochthonous, the down-core trend in δ¹³C values for
the algal alkanes and bulk sedimentary organic mat-
ter interestingly differs (Figs. 2 and 7). In contrast to
the general decrease in δ¹³C values from the bottom
to the top of the core observed for bulk sediments,
algal alkanes show little variation for sediments older
Fig. 10. Short/long n-alkane index - \( \frac{n-C_{15} + n-C_{17} + n-C_{19}}{n-C_{17} + n-C_{19} + n-C_{31}} \) for sediments from the eastern basin of Lake Erie.

![Aquatic/Terrigenous Alkane Index](image)

than 1980 and an increase between 1980 and 1983. Whereas \( \delta^{13}C \) value of bulk organic C is influenced by diverse reactions associated with multiple sources and processes, isotopic compositions of individual sedimentary hydrocarbons are determined by isotope effects associated with specific reactions of biosynthesis and diagenesis that are unique to the molecule. For example, the \( ^{13}C \) depletion of the lipids relative to bulk organic carbon (1.7 to 5.7\% based on comparison of average \( \delta^{13}C \) between sediments and individual alkanes) reflects isotopic fractionation during the oxidation of pyruvate to acetyl coenzyme-A (De-Niro and Epstein, 1977; Monson and Hayes, 1982) and hydrolysis of the thioester bond attaching the acyl chain to the carrier protein during elongation (Monson and Hayes, 1980). Molecular isotopic data may not be directly comparable to \( \delta^{13}C \) values of bulk organic carbon. Consequently, we discuss our
molecular data by comparing it to published δ13C data for n-alkanes and by considering factors that can affect variations in 13C enrichment of individual compounds.

The δ13C values of n-alkanes from Lake Erie sediments (−32.7 to −27.8‰) are generally similar to those reported for marine sediments from the Black Sea and Cariaco Trench (−31.6 to −29.7‰) and −32.8 to −26.7, respectively; Freeman et al., 1994), Tokyo Bay (−32.9 to −28.2; Ishiwatari et al., 1994), New Zealand (−33.0 to −27.0‰; Kennicutt and Brooks, 1990) and coastal Newfoundland (−31.3 to −26.0‰; Bakel et al., 1994), but are enriched in 13C relative to those of Ellesmere Lake sediments (−35.9 to −30.3‰; Rieley et al., 1991). The low δ13C values of hydrocarbons from Ellesmere Lake sediments are similar to those of deciduous trees that surround the lake and likely reflect a greater contribution of allochthonous material relative to that which occurs in Lake Erie.

With lake Erie sediments, large variations in δ13C values (as much as 5‰ among different alkanes) exist among algal n-alkanes (n-C15 to n-C19) and for a single alkane (e.g., n-C18) obtained from different sediment samples (Fig. 7). Such large variation is not unusual. Carbon isotope values of n-alkanes obtained from a single plant can differ by as much as 6‰ (Collister et al., 1994a). This was suggested to have been related to differences in the amount of homologs produced during the growth cycle under unique water and nutrient availability. Differences in δ13C values of n-alkanes of the same chain length obtained from sediments from similar depositional environments are as great as 3.6‰ (Freeman et al., 1994). Clearly, the expectation should be that the δ13C composition of sedimentary alkanes will differ between ecosystems as a consequence of the complex set of reactions that occur during biosynthesis and diagenesis.

The current study reports a pattern of 13C enrichment wherein the δ13C of n-C15 to n-C17 < n-C19 to n-C25 and n-C17 to n-C29 < than n-C23 and n-C25 (Fig. 6). These results differ from those of Spooner et al., 1994, who did not observe a difference in δ13C between low molecular weight alkanes (n-C17 and n-C19) and their homologs with a longer C chain length. Other studies, however, have observed depletions of 13C among short chained n-alkanes believed to be of phytoplankton origin relative to the higher molecular weight alkane components (Hollander et al., 1993; Bakel et al., 1994; Collister et al., 1994b). Low δ13C values (e.g., −31.7‰) of sedimentary alkanes should not be unexpected given the observation of low δ13C values for sinking particles and near-surface sediments in lacustrine systems (−38 to −25‰) (Hollander and McKenzie, 1991; Schelske and Hodell, 1991; Meyers and Eadie, 1993; Schelske and Hodell, 1995) and the further 13C depletion that is typical of lipids relative to the material from which they are derived (Abelson and Hoering, 1961).

Within Lake Erie, short chained n-alkanes are likely derived from phytoplankton (n-C15 to n-C17) and have lower average δ13C values than long chained homologs of terrestrial origin (n-C20 to n-C29, Fig. 6). The origins of the 13C enriched alkanes, n-C23, n-C25, and n-C27, remains unclear.

Down-core variation in the δ13C values of an individual n-alkane reflects kinetic isotope effects associated with a diverse series of reactions occurring during diagenesis. Kinetic isotopic discrimination typically results in preferential incorporation of 12C into the product, leaving the residual substrate enriched in 13C (Mariotti et al., 1981). Decreases in δ13C values of n-C15, n-C16, n-C17, and n-C18 (Fig. 7) with depth between 1983 and 1980 may reflect the incorporation of isotopically light alkanes produced from defunctionalization of acids, alcohols, or esters during diagenesis. Long chained hydrocarbons of terrestrial origin are typically the survivors of extensive organic matter alteration prior to entering lake sediments (Meyers and Ishiwatari, 1993b) and, therefore, are not likely to be influenced by the same processes as algal hydrocarbons. This might explain why the δ13C values of long chained alkanes (n-C25 to n-C29) in the sediments deposited prior to 1980 do not exhibit the same pattern of variation as their short chain homologs (Figs. 7–9). In addition to kinetic isotope affects, variations in the relative contributions of isotopically unique n-alkanes to the sediments and temporal changes in 13C enrichments of n-alkanes associated with a single source can contribute to the down-core variation in δ13C values of single n-alkanes. For example, alkanes derived from n-alkanoic acids occurring in eukaryotes and eubacteria as triglyceride esters have not been isotopically characterized and are an unknown source of
variance in the data. At this point, the relative importance of different factors on the $\delta^{13}C$ of individual hydrocarbons including kinetic isotope effects, variation in the relative abundance of $n$-alkanes from different sources or changes in the characteristics of a single source cannot be evaluated.

5. Conclusions

The isotopic composition of the bulk organic C in sediments from Lake Erie exhibits a significant decrease in $\delta^{13}C$ content between 1968 and 1982. Based on C and N elemental data and $n$-alkane distributions, this decrease in $\delta^{13}C$ is related neither to a change in diagenetic activity nor to a change in the relative distribution of terrestrial and aquatic sources of organic matter. Therefore, it is likely that the isotopic shift is due to a decrease in the algal productivity, a response related to diminished P loadings to Lake Erie since the mid-1970s.

Series of maxima and minima in percent C, percent N, and organic $\delta^{13}C$ content occur in the sediment record. These variations and those in $^{210}Pb$ activity indicate that sediments were not completely homogenized, despite a $^{210}Pb$ mixed depth of 10.5 cm. The fluctuations in geochemical characteristics of Lake Erie sediments appear to reflect short term variations in the relative abundance of different types of particles settling to the lake bottom.

The diagenetic alteration and variations in the relative contributions of different sources of organic matter affect individual molecules, compound classes, and the bulk organic fraction differently. Early diagenetic alteration of the organic sediments is apparent in variations of the concentrations of $n$-alkanes, compound classes, and, possibly, the $\delta^{13}C$ composition of short chained $n$-alkanes. The absence of significant change in the percent C content of the sediments, however, suggests that diagenetic alteration alone is insufficient to affect the $\delta^{13}C$ of the bulk organic fraction.

Whereas $\delta^{13}C$ values of bulk organic material appear to present an integrated history of the trophic state of Lake Erie, temporal variations in the C isotopic composition of individual $n$-alkanes appears to be largely influenced by a complex set of factors associated with diagenesis. The molecular isotopic data for this core emphasize temporal variability that might not otherwise be apparent in sediments from environments that are characterized by low rates of deposition.

Bradshaw et al. (1991) suggested the possibility that little bulk organic material would survive the effects of heterotrophy but that a selection of algal biomarkers would. Our study demonstrates that isotopic analysis of bulk organic matter and of individual molecules has the potential to offer two distinct yet important sets of information. Furthermore, our results clearly emphasize that the retrieval of information relating to ecosystem level processes (e.g., trophic state or variations in $pCO_2$) from molecular $\delta^{13}C$ data will require careful selection of compounds whose $\delta^{13}C$ values express this type of information rather than having isotopic compositions that are controlled by biosynthetic and diagenetic reactions that are unique to the molecule.

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