

# Carbon isotope compositions of terrestrial C3 plants as indicators of (paleo)ecology and (paleo)climate

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**A broad compilation of modern carbon isotope compositions in all C3 plant types shows a monotonic increase in  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  with decreasing mean annual precipitation (MAP) that differs from previous models. Corrections for temperature, altitude, or latitude are smaller than previously estimated. As corrected for altitude, latitude, and the  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$ , these data permit refined interpretation of MAP, paleodiet, and paleoecology of ecosystems dominated by C3 plants, either prior to 7–8 million years ago (Ma), or more recently at mid- to high latitudes. Twenty-nine published paleontological studies suggest preservational or scientific bias toward dry ecosystems, although wet ecosystems are also represented. Unambiguous isotopic evidence for C4 plants is lacking prior to 7–8 Ma, and hominid ecosystems at 4.4 Ma show no isotopic evidence for dense forests. Consideration of global plant biomass indicates that average  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of C3 plants is commonly overestimated by approximately 2‰.**

aridity | carbon cycle | closed canopy | paleoprecipitation

Plants exhibiting C3 photosynthesis have dominated the history of terrestrial vegetation, as CAM plants occupy only a small percentage of typical ecosystems (e.g., 1), and C4 plants became abundant in grasslands only within the last 7–8 million years (2). C3 plants exhibit a large range of carbon isotope compositions (–20 to –37‰, V-PDB; Fig. 1), generally reflecting a physiological response to aridity (anomalously high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ) and a combination of low light levels plus leaf litter recycling (anomalously low  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ; 3). Past studies have conflicted on the dependence of  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  on mean annual precipitation (MAP). Most studies support a negative correlation (e.g., 4), but some have reported no correlation (5) or even a positive correlation (6).

This study explores carbon isotope systematics of C3 plants through a comprehensive compilation of literature data, minimizing local differences that have given rise to disparate interpretations. This work directly benefits paleodietary and paleoecological studies by providing estimates of MAP in ancient environments as well as clearer boundaries for identifying the understory of closed-canopy forests and the contribution of non-C3 plants to diet, which is used to gain insights into C4 origins (2). The new compilation also helps refine models of the modern carbon cycle by providing a better estimate of global C3  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values (7). The present analysis differs from a recent investigation of correlations between tree + shrub  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and MAP or plant functional type (8) in that it is several times larger on a site-by-site basis, spans the full range of plant growth forms (including trees, bushes, grasses, and herbs), averages data from each site to minimize sampling bias (4), and regresses an arguably more appropriate function to the data. Selection criteria of climate and isotopic data also differ slightly. This broader approach of considering all C3 plants and averaging compositions is important when evaluating herbivore paleodiets, which are not restricted to trees, and further reveals significant differences in modeled compositions at low MAP and in the estimated effect of altitude and latitude. A simple function allows MAP to be estimated from  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of fossil bone collagen and tooth enamel and used for inferring terrestrial climate change. Past studies of dietary ecology and global C3 plant  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values further indicate an analytical bias toward dry ecosystems.

## Results

**Data.** The dataset, provided in [Dataset S1](#), encompasses all types of C3 plants, including trees, shrubs, herbs, and grasses from approximately 570 individual sites, and spans ranges of MAP, mean annual temperature (MAT), altitude, and latitude of 1 to 3,700 mm/yr, –13.5 to 28.4 °C, –391 to 4,900 m, and 54.9°S to 69.5°N. This dataset is *ca.* six times larger than any previous analysis of C3 isotopic systematics and covers more types of C3 plants.

**C3 Data Distributions.** For the global C3  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  dataset, a histogram of corresponding MAP values (Fig. 1A) demonstrates research bias toward dry ecosystems (high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ) and tropical rain forests (low  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ). Thus the histogram of  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values, which shows the well-known range from –20 to –37‰ (Fig. 1B), is broader than expected for global C3 biomass. Values above –23‰ are almost completely restricted to the Atacama Desert (9), the driest desert on Earth, and to *Pinus* in dry settings (10). Values below –31.5‰ reflect canopy effects in low-light tropical forests. The compilation from O’Leary (11; downward corrected by –0.25‰ for fossil fuel burning) and from this study average about –27.25‰ and –27.0‰, respectively, omitting understory analyses below –31.5‰.

**Correlation of MAP with  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ .** Carbon isotope compositions exhibit a systematic change over the range of MAP, excepting low  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values associated with the understory of dense forests (Figs. 1 and 2). High  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values (above –25.5‰) are essentially restricted to environments with MAP < 500 mm/yr. The trend noticeably “flattens” at high MAP, indicating nearly constant isotopic discrimination in wet environments. Other attempts to quantify this correlation have resulted in widely disparate results (Fig. 2), largely because they were based on limited datasets. The results of Stewart et al. (4) and Diefendorf et al. (8) most closely match the new compilation, but the Stewart et al. model deviates from observations at MAP > 1,000 mm/yr, whereas the Diefendorf et al. model predicts unusually high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values at low MAP (Fig. 2). The preferred equation for MAP as a function of  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  is:

$$\begin{aligned} \delta^{13}\text{C}(\text{‰,VPDB}) = & -10.29 + 1.90 \times 10^{-4} \text{ Altitude (m)} \\ & - 5.61 \log_{10}(\text{MAP} + 300, \text{ mm/yr}) \\ & - 0.0124 \text{ Abs (latitude, }^\circ) \end{aligned} \quad [1]$$

or alternatively for  $\Delta$ :

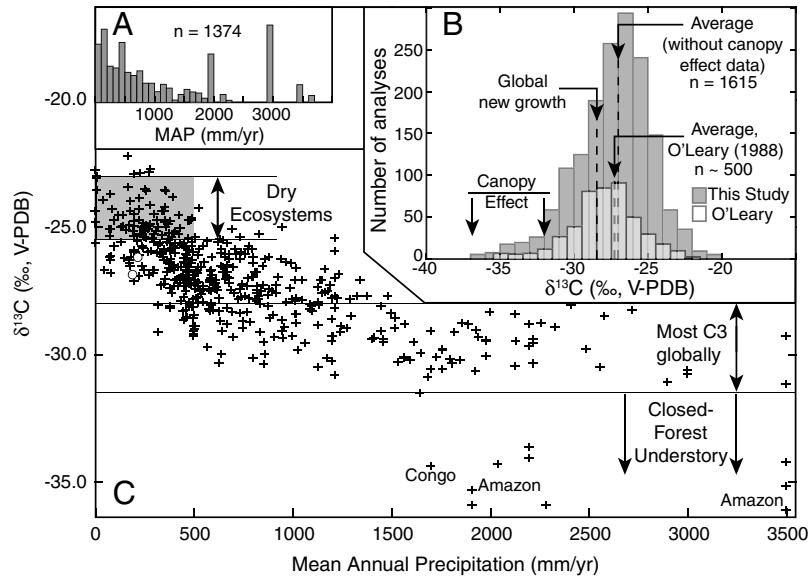
Author contributions: M.J.K. designed research, performed research, contributed new reagents/analytic tools, analyzed data, and wrote the paper.

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**Fig. 1.** (A) Histogram of MAP values for isotopically characterized C3 plants, showing emphasis on relatively arid ecosystems (MAP  $\leq$  500 mm/yr) and tropical rainforests (spikes at MAP  $\sim$  2,000, 3,000 mm/yr). (B) Histogram of  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values of modern C3 plants. Data compiled in this study average  $-27.0\text{‰}$ , excluding analyses from the understory of closed-canopy forests. Estimated global average composition, based on global trends in precipitation and vegetation, is approximately  $-28.5\text{‰}$ , significantly lower than typically assumed. An accurate average  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  value for C3 plants is needed for accurate models of carbon fluxes, atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  compositions, and soil organic matter. (C)  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values vs. MAP showing increasing  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  with aridity. Data sources are listed in *SI Text*. White dots are average compositions of data from a large collection made in a single month during a wet year (35).

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta (\text{‰, VPDB}) = & 2.01 - 1.98 \times 10^{-4} \text{ Altitude (m)} \\ & + 5.88 \log_{10}(\text{MAP} + 300, \text{ mm/yr}) \\ & + 0.0129 \text{ Abs (latitude, }^\circ) \end{aligned} \quad [2]$$

where:

$$\Delta = \frac{\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}} - \delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{leaf}}}{1 + \delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{leaf}}/1000} \quad [3]$$

(3). Both regressions have an  $R^2$  of 0.59, a significant improvement over the functional form used by Diefendorf et al. (8;  $R^2 = 0.34$ , including their altitude and latitude coefficients). These equations allow evaluation of the effects of MAP, altitude, and latitude on  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values or  $\Delta$ , or alternatively estimation of MAP from altitude, latitude, and  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  or  $\Delta$ . Note that the altitude coefficient is smaller by a factor of 3 to 5,000 than indicated in other studies (8, 12). Latitudinal effects have not been estimated for data that simultaneously account for altitude and MAP. Uncertainties of  $\pm 0.5\text{‰}$  in mean  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  or  $\Delta$  propagate to uncertainties in MAP of as little as  $\pm 100$  mm/yr at MAP = 100–500 mm/yr, to  $\pm 500$  mm/yr at MAP  $\sim$  2,000 mm/yr.

## Discussion

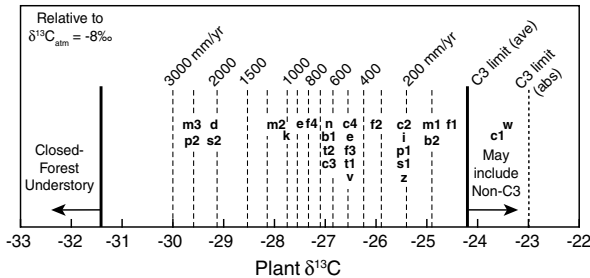
**Average C3 Composition and Isotopic Bounds on C3  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ .** A commonly quoted “average” C3 composition ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{C3,ave}}$ ) is  $-26$  to  $-27\text{‰}$  (e.g., 2, 13–15) similar to or slightly higher than compilation means (Fig. 1). Such high values, however, are strongly biased toward dry ecosystems (Fig. 14). For example, the global  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{C3,ave}}$ , as estimated from Eq. 3 and distributions of plant biomass and precipitation, is approximately  $-28.5\text{‰}$ , or approximately 2‰ lower than commonly assumed. This low  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{C3,ave}}$  mainly reflects the importance of equatorial and midlatitude northern hemisphere C3 biomass, which is less well represented in the literature. The  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{C3,ave}}$  value is important for models of carbon fluxes, atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  compositions, and soil organic matter (e.g., 7, 15–17). Seasonal changes to  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$  depend on C3–C4 biomass ratios and their compositions, and differences in modeled C3 biomass discrimination perturb predicted  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$

of atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  most strongly (16). The dataset and equations developed here could be used to test and calibrate these models. Considering that  $\delta^{13}\text{C} > -23\text{‰}$  is restricted to MAP  $<$  10 mm/yr, non-C3 vegetation (e.g., C4 plants, lichen, or CAM plants) or the genus *Pinus* in some settings, this value is recommended as a likely maximum for typical C3 plants. Likewise,  $\delta^{13}\text{C} < -31.5$  is recommended as a cutoff indicating the understory of closed-canopy forests.

**Paleoprecipitation Reconstructions.** The regressed curve allows prediction of MAP from the average modern equivalent of diet composition ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet,meq}}$ ), which can be estimated from fossil tooth or collagen  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values and  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$  (see *SI Text*). Most studies that inferred mixed C3–C4 ecosystems were omitted from consideration because obvious C4 consumption ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet,meq}}$  values for individual species well above  $-22\text{‰}$ ) would otherwise imply low or negative MAP. Corrections for  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$  are key for predicting accurate C3 composition and MAP. For example, two high values for tooth enamel  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  at approximately 15.5 Ma in East Africa (c.  $-8\text{‰}$ ; 18) were interpreted as approximately 2‰ higher than the range of C3 compositions, requiring a C4 dietary component. A high  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$  at that time (c.  $-5.25$ , or a 2.75‰ downward correction), however, implies  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet,meq}}$  of  $\sim -24.8\text{‰}$ , well within the range of a pure C3 diet in dry ecosystems (Fig. 1B and Fig. 3, “m1”). Similarly large corrections apply to several other studies (19–21) and indicate wetter conditions than suggested by corrections for modern fossil fuel burning alone (c.  $-1.5\text{‰}$  correction).

Results correlate generally with previous interpretations regarding “dry” vs. “wet” environments and with the possibility of alternative food sources. Few independent measures of MAP are available but include estimates of 300–700 mm/yr for late Cenozoic Spain (22) vs.  $\sim 500$  mm/yr (Fig. 3, “v”), approximately 1,200 mm/yr for Paleocene-Eocene strata in Wyoming (23) vs.  $\sim 1,000$  mm/yr (Fig. 3, “k”), and  $740 \pm 280$  mm/yr for Eocene-Oligocene strata in Nebraska (24) vs. approximately 200 mm/yr (Fig. 3, “z”). In the latter case, only a few taxa were analyzed, probably compromising estimates of average compositions. Several





**Fig. 3.** Paleodietary compositions corrected for altitude and latitude contoured for MAP; this plot permits interpretation of paleoenvironments from carbon isotope compositions of fossil tooth enamel or collagen. Tooth enamel and collagen compositions are averaged across species and corrected for  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$ , physiological fractionations, altitude, and latitude. Most data plot at MAP  $\leq 800$  mm/yr, i.e., relatively dry environments, although wetter environments are also represented.  $b_1$  = Bibi (51);  $b_2$  = Bocherens and Drucker (63);  $c_1$  = Chritz et al. (30);  $c_2$ ,  $c_3$  = Coltrain et al. (32, 20–25 ka and 12 ka);  $c_4$  = Cerling et al. (2);  $d$  = DeSantis and Wallace (26);  $e$  = Eberle et al. (21);  $f_1$ ,  $f_2$  = Fox-Dobbs et al. (31, caribou, equid);  $f_3$  = France et al. (64);  $i$  = Iacumin et al. (65);  $k$  = Koch et al. (19);  $m_1$  = Morgan et al. (18 at 15.5 Ma);  $m_2$  = Merceron et al. (52);  $m_3$  = MacFadden and Higgins (20);  $n$  = Nelson (66);  $p_1$  = Passey et al. (49);  $p_2$  = Palmqvist et al. (27);  $s_1$  = Ségalen and Lee-Thorp (67);  $s_2$  = Secord et al. (25);  $t_1$  = Tütken et al. (68);  $t_2$  = Tütken et al. (69);  $v$  = van Dam and Reichart (34);  $w$  = Wang et al. (29);  $z$  = Zanazzi and Kohn (33).

maxima. Last, it has been argued that higher past  $\text{pCO}_2$  resulted in lower  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values for C3 plants, with a dependence of approximately  $2\text{‰}/100$  ppm (e.g., 39). Eocene  $\text{pCO}_2$  estimates of 1,000–1,500 ppm (40),  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$  of  $-5.5$  to  $-6$  (41) and fossil tooth enamel  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  (19, 21, 25, 33) would then imply  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet,meq}}$  of  $-5$  to  $-10\text{‰}$ . Such high values exceed the range of even C4 plants today (e.g., 11, 42), further supporting a negligible  $\text{pCO}_2$  correction (43).

## Conclusions

Carbon isotope compositions show a distinct but nonlinear increase in  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values with decreasing MAP. A regressed expression provides a new basis for estimating MAP from carbon isotope compositions of fossil tooth enamel or collagen, after first correcting for changes to  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$ , altitude, latitude, and physiological fractionations. Research bias toward dry ecosystems appears in analysis of paleoecologies. A downward revision in modern  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{ave}}$  for C3 plants may improve models of carbon fluxes and soil  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values.

## Methods

Data and methods are described in further detail in *SI Text*. In brief, data were taken from the literature, preferring large natural datasets that included date of collection, location, MAP, and mean annual temperature. In some instances, specific locations were not provided, and an estimated or average location was assigned based on descriptions in the primary source. Compositions were corrected for secular changes to the composition of atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$ ) to a common  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$  of  $-8.00\text{‰}$  based on modern secular trends ( $0.023\text{‰}/\text{yr}$ ; 44). If not reported, the date of collection was assumed to be 2 yr prior to the date of publication. Nearly all climate data were taken directly from the original publications, and any gaps in climate data were obtained from online and published local meteorological tabulations, or, in the few instances where local data were unavailable, from models. Most

data are for whole leaves, and for nonleaf data, isotopic offsets were applied as recommended by the authors. Where no recommendation was made, offsets of  $-2\text{‰}$  and  $-0.5\text{‰}$  were assumed for soil organic matter and leaf litter, respectively (15, 45). It may be argued that environmental parameters other than MAP correlate better with leaf  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ , such as potential evapotranspiration, water deficit, or growing season precipitation. Although such parameters may be calculated in modern settings, they involve additional variables (e.g., seasonal temperature or precipitation) that may be difficult to constrain in paleoenvironments. Modern data show sufficiently strong correlations with MAP to allow MAP inferences.

Prior to regressions, data were averaged over all C3 plant species at an individual site. This averaging approach differs markedly from all other studies except Stewart et al. (4), whose dataset was over 40 times smaller. Assignment of sites was based on how authors reported their data, i.e., if authors distinguished one set of analyses from another then they were treated as separate sites. Understory, midlevel canopy, and upper-level canopy compositions were distinguished in tropical forests, and analyses from different years were considered as different sites. The total dataset has approximately 570 sites ( $\sim 95$  usable sites from ref. 8) and is especially dense at low MAP (Fig. 1C). Many different regression approaches were tested to relate carbon isotope composition to MAP. Averaging data over small MAP ranges (e.g.,  $<100$ ,  $100$ – $200$ ,  $250$ – $300$  mm/yr, etc.) resulted in the highest correlation coefficients (c. 0.95), but this approach is compromised by requiring a priori corrections for altitude and latitude. Instead, the preferred and simpler approach involved regressing  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  vs. altitude, latitude, and  $\log_{10}(\text{MAP} + m_0)$ , where  $m_0$  is an offset that is determined iteratively and ensures that the intercept of the regression is finite. An alternative regression with  $\Delta$  as the dependent variable was also calculated. Outliers at  $\pm 3\sigma$  from local means were removed iteratively and represent approximately 4% of sites. Understory compositions from dense forests were also omitted ( $\sim 2\%$  of sites). Data from Schulze et al. (35) for MAP =  $130$ – $250$  mm/yr deviate significantly from global data trends. These data represent  $>50\%$  of data in that precipitation range and were collected in a single month during a wet year. To avoid bias compared to other datasets, the Schulze et al. data for  $<200$  and for  $200$ – $250$  mm/yr were averaged to separate values.

Global distributions of precipitation between  $60^\circ\text{S}$  and  $75^\circ\text{N}$  latitudes were estimated from  $2.5^\circ$  grids obtained from the Global Precipitation Climatology Center (GPCC) and averaged over 20 yr (1986 to 2005) (<http://gpcp.dwd.de>). Global plant biomass was either assumed to increase linearly with precipitation or taken from compilations of C3 plant biomass vs. latitude (46), with precipitation vs. latitude for vegetated areas determined from GPCC. The global average C3 value was then predicted by using the fitted curve to model  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  vs. MAP, ignoring low  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  understory, which represents a negligible fraction of total leaf biomass in the tropics (47, 48). Both methods give comparable results ( $-28.4$  vs.  $-28.5\text{‰}$ , respectively). Note that these calculations ignore corrections for altitude but include a latitude correction of approximately  $-0.3\text{‰}$ .

For comparison to herbivore tooth enamel and collagen compositions, correction for changes to  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$  over geologic time was made based on the  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of benthic foraminifera as adjusted for calcification temperature (41; see also refs. 25 and 49). No dependence of plant  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  on atmospheric  $\text{CO}_2$  concentrations was considered because experimental data show no consistent resolvable relationship for  $\text{pCO}_2$  between 200 and 1,300 ppm (43). The effect of this assumption is further discussed. Compositions of fossil teeth and collagen were converted to paleodietary plant composition by subtracting  $14\text{‰}$  (42) and  $5\text{‰}$  (50), respectively, except for three studies that focused exclusively on tooth enamel from bovids younger than 10 Ma (30, 51, 52); for these a larger tooth-diet offset of  $14.5\text{‰}$  was used (53). All paleodiet compositions were converted to  $\Delta$ , and modern equivalent compositions ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet,meq}}$ ) were calculated for  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}} = -8.00\text{‰}$ .

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## Clarifying the influence of water availability and plant types on carbon isotope discrimination by C3 plants

We are pleased that the results of Kohn (1) so strongly support our findings published earlier in PNAS (2). Both studies (1, 2) analyzed published measurements of the carbon isotope composition of plants and quantified relationships between isotopic fractionation and environmental factors at large spatial scales. These relationships will be useful when interpreting archives of plant-derived carbon, such as fossils, soil organic matter, and plant biomarkers. Kohn (1) emphasized differences between the two papers, particularly the coefficients and proportion of variance explained in regression models, but the major findings were the same: water availability [estimated by mean annual precipitation (MAP)] explains most of the observed variability in  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values for modern C3 plant leaves. We disagree with Kohn (1) on two aspects of data analysis: (i) including data from very arid sites in the regression and (ii) using mean carbon isotope values for each site.

We reanalyzed the data from Kohn (1) and found that the multiple regression results are very similar to our own results (Table 1). We use  $\log_{10}\text{MAP}$  instead of Kohn's (1) predictor [ $\log_{10}(\text{MAP} + 300)$ ], which condensed and obscured variation at low MAP. We transformed altitude to its square root to improve normality, a key assumption of linear regression. Very arid regions were not included in our study. In Kohn's data (1), very arid regions (<90 mm/y MAP) behaved as statistical outliers (i.e., >1.5 times the interquartile range from the lowest quartile), consistently with positive residuals. MAP only approximates water availability during plant growth in all settings (2), and water availability in dry regions is strongly influenced by soil moisture, topographic exposure, plant water, and life strategies (3), factors that are independent of MAP. Alternatively, very arid regions can be identified in the past using floral, faunal, biomarker, and pedological data. For all models from both papers, when full uncertainties in data, slope, and intercept were considered, propagated errors in MAP predictions were too large to be of practical use in paleoenvironment or climate reconstructions (1, 2).

By combining data for all plant types into a single mean  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  value for each site, Kohn (1) assumed that available data for a geographic locality accurately represented both community composition and diversity across the wide range of MAP reported. However, sources of ancient plant carbon are not equally represented in mineral and organic archives. Fossil tooth enamel reflects the weighted values of an animal's diet, including different plant functional types, tissues, and canopy position. Soil organic matter is dictated by litter flux, which is dominated by the canopy (4), and it can reflect differences in canopy closure (5). We reported isotopic data along with plant taxa and functional types. Such an approach permits broader applications of leaf  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ -MAP relationships to different plant carbon archives and strengthens interpretations when fossil evidence indicates changes in plant community. We disagree with Kohn's (1) use of mean values; our information on vegetation and plant functional type allowed greater insights to plant fractionation and ultimately, enabled more detailed reconstructions of paleodiet, paleovegetation, and paleoclimate.

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**Table 1. Multiple regression analysis results comparing data from Diefendorf et al. (2) with data from Kohn (1)**

Data source	Model type ( <i>n</i> )	$R^2$	Intercept	Log (MAP) coefficient	Altitude <sup>1/2</sup> coefficient
Kohn (1)	Site means (480)	0.50	13.07 ( $\pm 0.38$ )	2.60 ( $\pm 0.13$ )	-0.02 ( $\pm 0.003$ )
Kohn (MAP > 90 mm/y) (1)	Site means (461)	0.55	9.18 ( $\pm 0.53$ )	3.91 ( $\pm 0.18$ )	-0.01 ( $\pm 0.003$ )
Diefendorf et al. (2)	Species site means (502)	0.61	9.31 ( $\pm 0.90$ )	4.20 ( $\pm 0.26$ )	-0.06 ( $\pm 0.007$ )
Diefendorf et al. (2)	Site means (69)	0.73	10.03 ( $\pm 1.39$ )	3.94 ( $\pm 0.45$ )	-0.06 ( $\pm 0.009$ )

## Reply to Freeman et al.: Carbon isotope discrimination by C3 plants

Diefendorf et al. (1) and I (2) compiled plant isotopic datasets to further explore long-recognized dependencies of C3  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  on aridity (3) and plant functional type (4). We used different approaches, and Freeman et al. (5) raise several questions regarding scientific rationale and methods, including (i) regressions and arid site data, (ii) data averaging, and (iii) applications.

i) I viewed Earth's low mean annual precipitation (MAP) environments as key for groundtruthing models. Regardless, excluding low MAP (<90 mm/y) data changes my model predictions negligibly (<0.1‰ or <20 mm MAP) and implies compositions of  $-24.3\text{‰}$  for the driest sites (<50 mm/y), indistinguishable from observations ( $-24.1 \pm 0.6\text{‰}$ ). Thus, data from arid sites do not seem anomalous.

I did not use a  $\log_{10}(\text{MAP})$  regression, which has an infinite intercept, for three practical and theoretical reasons: data are fit better with an offset [i.e.,  $\log_{10}(\text{MAP} + m_0)$ ] (2), data from arid sites have finite  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values (see above), and plant physiological models imply finite  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values (3). At minimum, theoretical or observed composition limits must apply, but  $\log_{10}(\text{MAP})$  cannot accommodate this.

Correlations between  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and altitude are weak, and residuals of regressions that omit altitude are quite scattered (figure 2b in ref. 2). Therefore, I chose the simplest model—a linear dependence. I cannot find good support for the preferred square root dependence of Freeman et al. (5). Binning by altitude suggests that only Tibetan data above 4,000 m resolve any effect. If anything, bin-averaged residuals correlate more strongly with altitude<sup>2</sup> than with altitude<sup>1/2</sup> ( $R^2 = 0.97$  vs. 0.71). Arguably, Tibetan data are anomalous, and altitude should be dropped (so to speak) from regressions.

ii) Given the emphasis on geology by Freeman et al. (5), I assume that their comment about averaging applies to both modern and fossil systems. Modern data averages were justified already (2): individual studies, commonly conducted over days, weeks, or single seasons, may be highly biased by seasonal or

annual MAP vagaries or geography. Averaging helps identify and guard against resulting outliers; numerous measurements of a single anomalous site may otherwise bias regressions. My compilation (2) was strongly angiosperm-dominant (~90%), however, and should not be directly applied to gymnosperms (1, 4).

Geological averaging is common, and potential biases are generally recognized both for chemical/isotopic and physical proxies (6). I emphasized the importance of understanding limits to compositions and interpreting MAP within the context of other data, including potential dietary biases (2). Ultimately, one may assume MAP from other proxies and calculate atmospheric  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  (1) or assume atmospheric  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and calculate MAP (2); both approaches, however, use geologically averaged compositions (e.g., alkanes in ref. 1 and enamel in ref. 2) and have potential biases.

iii) I provided several examples where  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ -based MAP matched independent evidence (2); I doubt this is fortuitous. Formally propagated errors in regressed parameters imply MAP uncertainties of a few hundred millimeters per year (smaller at lower MAP and larger at higher MAP), which are comparable with other proxies. Uncertainties in geologic  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of  $\pm 0.5\text{‰}$  would propagate to errors approximately two times smaller (figure 3 in ref. 2). These errors are sufficiently small to permit a range of applications.

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# Supporting Information

Kohn10.1073/pnas.1004933107

## Dataset

The basic data gathering and processing methods are described in the main text. The purpose of this section is to outline differences in methods compared to other studies. Because Diefendorf et al. (1) presented superficially similar data and results, this comparison emphasizes their study's methods vs. the present one. Excepting points 1, 3, and 7 below, most differences probably have little effect on regression results. Nonetheless, all are listed for completeness and to help direct future data compilations. Note that regression results are provided with the dataset in a separate file. Specific differences in datasets and methods include:

1. A more comprehensive literature search identified about six times more sites than the largest previous study (1–65).
2. Nearly all climate data were taken directly from original publications. For North America, this contrasts with Diefendorf et al. (1), who used modeled MAP and MAT values. Although MAT values do not affect results of either this study or Diefendorf et al. (1), a few (<2%) MAT values for non-U.S. sites tabulated by Diefendorf et al. (1) did not correspond with published values. Published values were used for considering regression residuals vs. MAT in the present study.
3. Prior to regressions, data were averaged over all C3 plant species at an individual site. Excepting Stewart et al. (4), this averaging approach differs from all other studies, which distinguished compositions of individual species within a site. Many studies have restricted consideration to woody plants (a subset of the global C3 dataset), and Diefendorf et al. (1) further distinguished differences in isotope fractionation among plant functional types. While their choice is crucial to a key goal of their study, it also emphasizes sites with analyses that span greater species diversity. For example, a single study (33) constitutes almost 30% of Diefendorf et al.'s entire dataset, potentially biasing regressions of global C3  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values vs. MAP. For the purposes of this study (evaluating correlations with MAP across all C3 plant types), averaging minimizes reporting bias and provides higher quality resolution of the correlation between MAP and  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  or  $\Delta$  (4).
4. Several sources reported inaccurate  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$ , typically rounding values to  $-8\text{‰}$ , rather than using actual values for  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{atm}}$ , typically between  $-7.7$  and  $-7.9\text{‰}$ . This does not affect the conclusions of these studies, partly because data scatter exceeds any introduced error by a factor of 3–5, and also because these studies emphasize differences in  $\Delta$ , rather than absolute values. Nonetheless, this error was corrected in the present study, although not in Diefendorf et al. (1).
5. Compositions for leaf litter and leaf cellulose, which are enriched in  $^{13}\text{C}$  compared to whole fresh leaves (66), were

1. Diefendorf AF, Mueller KE, Wing SL, Koch PL, & Freeman KH (2010) Global patterns in leaf  $^{13}\text{C}$  discrimination and implications for studies of past and future climate. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 107:5738–5743.
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- reported in a few studies (44, 51, 67), and used without correction by Diefendorf et al. (1). Cellulose compositions were not used in the present study, and corrections for leaf litter vs. whole fresh leaves were based on Dawson et al. (66).
6. Data from gardens, plantations, and experimental plots were excluded. This differs from Diefendorf et al. (1), who included results from gardens and experimental plots. A comprehensive analysis of leaf compositions in natural vs. experimental settings has not been reported, and these choices might not influence regressions.
  7. Most studies regressed data linearly, although simple logarithmic and polynomial functions have also been used. A linear model may be appropriate for a regional dataset, but clearly not for global data (Figs. 1 and 2). The simple logarithmic function used by Diefendorf et al. (1), while far superior to a linear model, seems inappropriate because  $\log_{10}(\text{MAP})$  approaches negative infinity (predicted  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  approaches infinity) as MAP approaches 0. Similarly, the polynomial functions proposed in other studies (9, 54) do not extrapolate realistically to high and low MAP. For logarithmic functions, the quality of fit is significantly improved if an offset to MAP is used, i.e., regressing  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  vs.  $\log_{10}(\text{MAP} + m_o)$ , where  $m_o$  is solved for iteratively, maximizing either  $R^2$  or  $F$ . Data at low MAP (as low as 1–10 mm/yr) have finite  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  values, which can be achieved in this functional form only with  $m_o > 0$ . For example, the preferred regression has  $m_o = 300$  mm/yr and an  $R^2$  value of 0.594. Omitting  $m_o$  results in an  $R^2$  value of 0.499 and unrealistic predicted compositions at low MAP.

**Alternative Regressions: Altitude and Latitude Corrections.** Altitude and latitude corrections can be estimated in two different ways, either by directly regressing  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  vs. MAP, altitude, and latitude, as described in the text, or by assuming altitude and latitude coefficients, averaging over small MAP ranges (Table S1), and iteratively solving for best-fit coefficients that maximize  $R^2$  or  $F$  in regressions of the averaged data. For a regression of  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  vs.  $\log_{10}(\text{MAP} + 300)$ , the latter approach results in high  $R^2$  (0.96), the same altitude coefficient ( $1.9\text{e-}4$ ), and a larger latitude coefficient (0.028). The same method may be used to regress MAP as any function of  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ , including logarithmic or polynomial. Again, high  $R^2$  results (0.96), but predictions are not substantially different from the regressions presented in the text.

## Other Supporting Information Files

[Dataset S1 \(XLS\)](#)

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