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DOC cycling in a temperate estuary: A mass balance approach using natural $^{14}\text{C}$ and $^{13}\text{C}$ isotopes

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Abstract

We measured dissolved organic carbon (DOC), dissolved inorganic carbon (DIC), and their corresponding $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values in order to study the sources and fates of DOC in the York River Estuary (Virginia, U.S.A.). The $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of DOC and DIC at the freshwater end-member indicate that during periods of moderate to high flow, riverine DOC entering the York was composed of decadal-aged terrestrial organic matter. In nearly all cases, DOC concentrations exceeded conservative mixing lines and were therefore indicative of a net DOC input flux from within the estuary that averaged 1.2 $\mu$M L$^{-1}$ d$^{-1}$.

The nonconservative behavior of DOC in the York River Estuary was also apparent in carbon isotopic mixing curves and the application of an isotopic mixing model. The model predicted that 20–38% of the DOC at the mouth of the estuary was of riverine (terrestrial + freshwater) origin, while 38–56% was added internally, depending on the isotopic values assigned to the internally added DOC. Measurements of $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of DOC and DIC and marsh organic matter suggest that the internal sources originated from estuarine phytoplankton and marshes. The isotopic mixing model also indicates a significant concomitant loss (27–45%) of riverine DOC within the estuary.

Changes in DOC concentration, $\Delta^{13}\text{C}$-DOC, and $\delta^{13}\text{C}$-DOC were also measured during incubation experiments designed to quantify the amounts, sources, and ages of DOC supporting the carbon demands of estuarine bacteria. Results of these experiments were consistent with an estuarine source of phytoplankton and marsh DOC and the preferential utilization of young ($^{14}\text{C}$-enriched) DOC in the low-salinity reaches of the York. However, the average removal of riverine DOC by bacteria accounts for only ~4–19% of the riverine pool; therefore, other significant sinks for DOC exist within the estuary.

Estuaries link terrestrial and continental systems with the coastal ocean and receive large inputs of allochthonous and autochthonous organic matter and nutrients. The balance between these inputs determines estuarine net metabolism (Hopkinson and Vallino 1995). The delivery of allochthonous organic matter and nutrients from land to estuaries has increased dramatically with land use change and urbanization (Howarth et al. 1991; Cole et al. 1993). Consequently, estuaries have some of the highest areal rates of primary and bacterial secondary production (Smith and Hollibaugh 1993) and CO$_2$ evasion among aquatic and marine systems (Raymond et al. 1997; Cai et al. 1999; Frankignouelle et al. 1998). An understanding of both the degree of coupling between, and overall cycling of, organic matter and nutrients in estuaries is therefore critical for constraining local carbon and nutrient budgets and for evaluating the role of estuaries in regulating carbon and nutrient fluxes between the continents and oceans.

Dissolved organic carbon (DOC) is a major component (~60%) of the riverine organic matter imported to estuaries from rivers and the surrounding watershed (Spitzy and Ittukkot 1991). Estuaries may also receive internal additions of autochthonous DOC (Aminot et al. 1990; Peterson et al. 1994; Fisher et al. 1998; this study) from phytoplankton (Cole et al. 1982) and marshes (Teal 1962; Odum 1980). Estuarine DOC has three main potential fates: (1) it may be oxidized directly to CO$_2$ through bacterial respiration (Findlay et al. 1992; Coffin et al. 1993; Moran et al. 1999) or photo-oxidation (Amon and Benner 1996); (2) it may undergo physicochemical transformations (e.g., flocculate to form less soluble colloids and particles [Sholkovitz et al. 1978; Fox 1983; Hedges and Keil 1999]); or (3) it may be exported to adjacent coastal and continental shelf waters (Mantoura and Woodward 1983; Moran et al. 1991; Raymond and Bauer 2000).

The quantification of DOC sources and sinks in estuaries is challenging, and it is often hindered by a large number of complex and overlapping interactions between organic matter sources and sinks and relatively short residence times for water. As a consequence, DOC concentrations and mixing curves alone often do not constrain potential sources and sinks in estuaries. Stable carbon isotopes ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$) of DOC have been used successfully to quantify the sources of DOC to estuaries and estuarine bacteria (Coffin et al. 1989; Peterson et al. 1994; Meredith et al. 1996; Cifuentes and Eldridge 1998; Kelley and Coffin 1998; Coffin and Cifuentes 1999). However, interpretation of $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ measurements in rivers and estuaries can be equivocal due to a significant degree

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of overlap in the isotopic signatures for the presumed major DOC sources (i.e., terrestrial, estuarine phytoplankton, riverine phytoplankton, marsh, and marine organic matter).

The natural radioisotope of carbon (\(^{14}\)C) can provide additional and unique information on the sources, ages, and residence times of organic matter in estuaries (Raymond and Bauer 2001; Spiker and Rubin 1975; Cherrier et al. 1999) that is complementary both to DOC concentrations and \(\delta^{13}\)C. Natural \(^{14}\)C also has the advantage of a greater dynamic range (\(\Delta^{14}\)C = around -1,000 to +250‰) than \(^{13}\)C (\(\delta^{13}\)C = around -32 to -12‰) in aquatic and marine organic matter, allowing for an added degree of sensitivity.

Our study site was the York River Estuary, a subestuary of the Chesapeake Bay. Previous work on phytoplankton and bacteria populations (Ducklow 1982; Koepfler 1989; Schultz 1999; Sin et al. 1999; Raymond and Bauer 2000) and carbon cycling (Neubauer et al. 2000; Raymond et al. 2000) in the York River Estuary was invaluable for the work presented here. Based on these earlier studies, we hypothesized that the DOC and DIC isotopic distributions would be influenced by tidal marshes in the upper York and by phytoplankton in the middle and lower York. We further hypothesized that significant quantities of DOC would be remineralized by bacteria in the York River and that the preferential utilization of DOC of different sources and ages would cause isotopic shifts in both DOC and DIC.

To test these hypotheses and to evaluate the magnitude of DOC sources and sinks in the York River Estuary, we combined DOC concentrations and distributions of \(\Delta^{14}\)C-DOC and \(\delta^{13}\)C-DOC. We also measured the \(\Delta^{14}\)C and \(\delta^{13}\)C of the dissolved inorganic carbon (DIC) pool in order to constrain the isotopic values of estuarine phytoplankton. The information from the DOC and DIC concentration measurements and isotopic mixing curves was used to model both the removal of terrestrial and riverine DOC and the simultaneous addition of autochthonous DOC during estuarine mixing and transport. From the collective data, we speculate on the sources and ages of DOC ultimately removed and added within and subsequently exported from a model temperate estuary to the coastal ocean.

Materials and methods

Sample collection—The York River Estuary has an average flow rate of 70 m\(^3\) s\(^{-1}\) and a watershed size of \(\sim4,350\) km\(^2\) and is formed by the confluence of the Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers \(\sim50\) km from its mouth (Fig. 1). During our study, the Mattaponi contributed \(\sim33\)%, while the Pamunkey contributed \(\sim66\)% of the freshwater flow to the York (flow data from www.water.usgs.gov). Sampling transects for this study began at the mouth of the estuary and continued up the Pamunkey River until freshwater was encountered (Fig. 1). For this study, large differences in DOC concentrations between the two major tributaries could produce anomalous results. However, data available on the Environmental Protection Agencies (EPA) Chesapeake Bay program website (http:}
Tions in the Mattaponi and Pamunkey were 485 ± 85 and 448 ± 102 µM, respectively. This high degree of similarity is not surprising considering the Mattaponi and Pamunkey drain watersheds of similar land use and vegetation cover.

Ten transect cruises were conducted along the main stem of the York from July 1996 to September 1997. Transects stretched from the freshwater Pamunkey to the mouth of the York Estuary (typically ~100 km) and had an average salinity range of 0–18. The locations of stations were not fixed in order to ensure that the salinity range was well covered during each sampling. The York’s tidal marshes are located in the upper estuary and were within the boundaries of this study. They are flooded with freshwater for the majority of the year yet receive low-salinity (<4) estuarine water during periods of low flow. For this study, the freshwater end-member samples were collected above the tidal freshwater marshes. Surface water (<0.5-m depth) was collected for DOC analysis on all transect cruises. For three of the cruises, samples were collected for DOC and DIC isotopic analysis (Δ13C and δ13C).

Samples for surface-water DOC and isotopic analysis were filtered in the field through baked (~550°C) 142-mm-diameter GF/D (nominal pore size of 3.9 µm) and GF/F glass-fiber filters (nominal pore size of 0.7 µm). Filters were changed frequently to avoid cell lysis and occlusion of filters by particulates. Samples for isotopes were collected in duplicate baked (~550°C) 500-ml amber glass bottles, placed on ice in the dark while in the field, and frozen upon return to the laboratory.

DOC and DIC concentration measurements—For DOC analysis, 4 ml of water was filtered, in duplicate, into baked 7-ml vials and acidified with 25 µl of high-purity 10% HCl. Caps for the vials were acid soaked, rinsed, and lined with baked aluminum foil. Samples were sparged for 4 min with ultrahigh-purity (UHP) nitrogen, and DOC was measured on a Shimadzu TOC-5000A high-temperature analyzer, using a four-point calibration curve with glucose as a standard. Samples for isotopes were collected in duplicate baked (~550°C) 500-ml amber glass bottles, placed on ice in the dark while in the field, and frozen upon return to the laboratory.

The average coefficient of variation for duplicate DOC analysis was 1.2% of the mean. Duplicate samples for DIC analyses were collected in 7-ml gas-tight test tubes. Samples were stored on ice and in the dark while in the field and were analyzed in the laboratory within 12 h of sampling. Analysis was performed in duplicate on a Shimadzu TOC 5000A in total inorganic carbon mode, using a five-point calibration curve with sodium bicarbonate standards. The average coefficient of variation for this procedure was 4% of the mean for duplicates.

Δ14C and δ13C analysis of DOC and DIC—The method used for isotopic analysis of DOC and DIC is described in detail elsewhere (Williams and Gordon 1970; Bauer et al. 1992; Druffel et al. 1992). Briefly, for DOC, 100 ml of estuarine water was placed in a quartz reaction vessel that interfaced directly with a vacuum extraction line. The sample was acidified to pH ~2.5 with high-purity 85% H3PO4 and sparged with UHP nitrogen to remove all DIC. The sample was then saturated with UHP oxygen and irradiated for 2 h with a 2,400-W medium-pressure mercury arc ultraviolet (UV) lamp (Conrad-Hanovia). Following irradiation, the CO2 produced during DOC oxidation was purged from the reaction vessel with UHP nitrogen. The gas stream was passed through a KIO3 trap to remove any chlorine and bromine gas produced from seawater salts, and the CO2 was purified cryogenically on the vacuum extraction line. The purified CO2 sample was split ~1:10 and collected in Pyrex® break-seal tubes for isotopic analysis. The smaller aliquot was used for δ13C analysis, while the larger aliquot was used for Δ14C.

For DIC, 45–100 ml of sample was placed in a glass-sparging chamber that interfaced directly with the vacuum extraction line (the KIO3 trap was removed). The sample was acidified to pH 2–3 with 10% HCl and sparged with UHP nitrogen gas. The evolved CO2 gas was purified on the vacuum line, split, and collected in Pyrex® break-seal tubes for isotopic analysis. Similar to DOC samples, the smaller aliquot was used for δ13C analysis, while the second, larger aliquot was analyzed for Δ14C.

Δ14C is defined as the parts per thousand (per mil) deviation of a sample from the 14C activity of nineteenth-century wood. For Δ14C analysis (both DOC and DIC), the CO2 samples were converted to graphite targets in an atmosphere of H2 over a cobalt catalyst (Vogel et al. 1987). Targets were analyzed at the Center for Accelerator Mass Spectrometry at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. All reported Δ14C values were corrected for fractionation using the δ13C values of the samples, according to the conventions of Stuiver and Polach (1977). δ13C (defined as δ13C = (Rsample/Rstandard − 1) × 10 6 where R is the ratio of 13C to 12C, and Rstandard is the Pee Dee Belemnite standard) was analyzed using a VG 602 isotopic ratio mass spectrometer.

Fifteen in situ samples and 12 incubation end-point samples (see below) were processed for DOC isotopes. Because of the difficulty and expense of natural 14C measurements, only one of the in situ samples had duplicate analyses performed on it. Standard deviations of ±0.03‰ for δ13C and ±2‰ for Δ14C were obtained for duplicate analyses of this sample and were within the analytical measurement errors. A total of 13 samples were processed for DIC isotopes. Similarly, replicate analyses were performed for only one in situ DIC sample, and standard deviations of ±0.2‰ for δ13C and ±7‰ for Δ14C were obtained.

Bacterial DOC utilization experiments—Incubations of 2 months’ duration were conducted to elucidate the isotopic signatures of DOC utilized by bacteria. This timescale is similar to the 1–2-month residence times for water in the York River Estuary (Sin et al. 1999). To minimize the time elapsed between water collection and the start of a given experiment, incubations were initiated in the field. Approximately 5 liters of water from various salinities was filtered through baked (~550°C) 142-mm-diameter GF/D and GF/F glass-fiber filters to remove particulate organic matter and algae. Filters were changed frequently to avoid cell lysis and occlusion of filters by the high particulate organic matter.
load. At each site, four 500-ml baked glass amber bottles were filled with ~300 ml of filtered water. Two bottles were immediately placed on ice for a time-zero sample and immediately frozen upon return to the lab. The remaining two incubation bottles were placed in the dark in a bath of York River water to maintain in situ temperatures. Once in the lab, the bottles were placed in an incubation chamber and incubated in the dark at in situ temperatures for 2 months, after which time they were frozen. At the conclusion of the experiment, $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC isotopes were analyzed for initial and final time points according to the methods outlined above.

**Marsh sediment organic matter**—Two 30-cm-long cores were collected from the tidal freshwater Sweet Hall Marsh (indicated in Fig. 1) in May 1998, in order to measure $\Delta^{14}$C and $\delta^{13}$C and marsh sediment organic matter. The cores were sectioned in the lab, and sediment organic matter was sampled from depths of 5–6, 7–8, and 9–10 cm. Samples (~5 g dry sediment) were HCl fumed and then sealed in Pyrex® tubes with CuO and Ag metal and combusted to CO$_2$ (>900°C) for isotopic analysis (Sofer 1980). The CO$_2$ gas produced was then purified on a vacuum extraction line and analyzed for $\Delta^{14}$C and $\delta^{13}$C according to methods outlined above.

**DOC mixing curves**—We estimated the net source of DOC to York River Estuary waters using DOC concentration mixing curves. Mixing curves are commonly used for interpreting source/sink dynamics of estuarine constituents (Officer 1976). When observed concentrations of a solute are distributed linearly relative to salinity (a conservative tracer), it is generally interpreted that the constituent of interest mixes conservatively (i.e., has no significant sources or sinks) with respect to the system’s residence time. In contrast, measured values lying above the conservative mixing line indicate a net estuarine source, while values falling below the conservative mixing line indicate a net estuarine sink for DOC.

Kaul and Froelich (1984) presented an equation to estimate the net flux of a dissolved constituent in estuaries. When mixing curves are continuous and can be described using simple quadratic equations, the input flux of a dissolved constituent within an estuary is defined as

$$\text{Input flux} = Q(C_s - C_o)$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where $Q$ is freshwater flow (in m$^3$ s$^{-1}$), $C_o$ (μM) is the concentration where the quadratic equation intersects the y-intercept (i.e., the concentration at zero salinity), and $C_s$ (μM) is the concentration of the constituent where the tangent at the seawater end-member for the equation intersects the y-intercept. For present purposes, when measured values were greater than the conservative mixing line (i.e., an estuarine source of DOC was indicated), we modeled each mixing curve using quadratic equations. We used the quadratic equation to calculate the y-intercept (Co) and the y-intercept for the tangent at the seawater end-member (Cs). According to Kaul and Froelich (1984), the total export flux of a dissolved constituent from an estuary is the product of Cs and Q, the internal flux is the product of Cs – Co and Q, and the riverine flux is the product of Co and Q.

**$\Delta^{14}$C-DOC and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC mixing curves**—Isotopic mixing curves are dependent on the contributions of two-component end-members. We constructed isotopic mixing curves according to the conventions of Spiker (1980). Using this method, $\Delta^{14}$C or $\delta^{13}$C mixing curves depend on both the total DOC concentration and isotopic composition (I) of the riverine (r) and high-salinity/marine (m) end-members. The conservative isotopic value for a sample at a known salinity is then calculated according to the following equation:

$$I_s = \frac{(f_I \cdot DOC_r + (1 - f_I) \cdot DOC_m)}{DOC_{mix}}$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

where the riverine fraction, $f_I$, is calculated from salinity, and DOC$_{mix}$ is the amount of DOC expected due to conservative mixing of the freshwater and marine end-members.

**Results and discussion**

**End-Member DOC concentrations and ages**—The mean riverine DOC concentration for all transects averaged 431 ± 103 μM at the riverine end-member and 269 ± 29 μM at the mouth station (Table 1). The $\Delta^{14}$C and $\delta^{13}$C values of DOC in the York are reported in Table 2. Riverine $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC had average values of 229.2 ± 20.6 and −28.2 ± 0.5‰, respectively. The riverine $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC values are both consistent with values of contemporary terrestrial soil organic matter (Schiff et al. 1990; Trumbore et al. 1992) and forest floor organic matter (Rich-
ter et al. 1999). Based on chlorophyll a (Chl a) values and DIC isotopes, the contribution from riverine phytoplankton at the riverine end-member for these samples is believed to be minimal (see section on DIC isotopes below).

The riverine $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC values were enriched (by as much as 150‰) compared to modern atmospheric $\Delta^{14}$C-CO$_2$ values of around +100‰ (value obtained from measuring the $\Delta^{14}$C of a leaf from the York River watershed). Atmospheric $\Delta^{14}$C-CO$_2$ was last $+229‰$ in the early 1980s (Levin and Kromer 1997). Therefore, we propose that a significant percentage of the riverine DOC was derived from terrestrial sources and was photosynthetically fixed on land at least 15–20 yr ago. At increasing salinities in the York River Estuary, DOC becomes $1^{14}$C-depleted and $13^{14}$C-enriched (Table 2). Samples from the mouth of the York had average $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC values of $48 \pm 12$ and $-24.6 \pm 0.6‰$, respectively (average salinity $= \sim 18$).

**Nonconservative DOC behavior**—In the present study, we used two independent approaches to interpret DOC dynamics in the York River Estuary: DOC mixing curves and isotopic mass balances. The information obtained from each of these is unique in that the DOC mixing curves provide information on net DOC sources or sinks, while the isotopic mixing curves provide information on gross DOC dynamics.

**DOC mixing curves**—For 8 of the 10 transects, the majority of the measured DOC concentrations were greater than the conservative mixing lines (Fig. 2), indicating a net internal flux of DOC within the estuary (Table 1). This flux was calculated using quadratic equations (represented by the dotted lines in Fig. 2) and Eq. 1, and the results are reported in Table 1. The average $r^2$ values of the quadratic equations used to estimate Cs in Eq. 1 were 0.88 and ranged from 0.78 to 0.99. The measured and calculated (i.e., point where the dotted line passes through the y-intercept) values of riverine end-member DOC were identical, with the measured values averaging $431 \pm 103$ µM and the calculated values averaging $431 \pm 101$ µM. The large $r^2$ values and close agreement between predicted and measured riverine DOC concentrations support the use of quadratics for calculating the net internal DOC flux in the York River Estuary.

For the 10 transects, the accumulation of DOC within the estuary ($Cs – Co$) averaged $266 \pm 240$ µM, which equates to a net flux of internally added DOC into the entire estuary of $8.5 \pm 6.1 \times 10^6$ mmol d$^{-1}$ (Table 1). Using a surface area of $134.8 \times 10^3$ m$^2$ and average depth of 5.7 m (Cronin 1971) for the York River Estuary, this equates to an average net daily input of $1.2 \mu$M L$^{-1}$ d$^{-1}$.

The influence of internal sources on the distribution of nonconservative solutes is modulated by river flow and flushing time (Officer 1976). Over the course of this study, a pattern emerged between the observed accumulation of DOC ($Cs – Co$) and freshwater discharge (Fig. 3). When discharge is high, residence times are short, and the accumulation of DOC in the estuary is low (Fig. 3). Based on DOC measurements and mixing curves, it appears that there is a relatively constant internal flux of DOC within the York River Estuary. During periods of low to moderate discharge, this flux causes DOC to accumulate in the water column and

### Table 2. DOC concentrations, $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC for the York River Estuary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Salinity</th>
<th>DOC (µM)</th>
<th>$\Delta^{14}$C-DOC (‰)</th>
<th>$\delta^{13}$C-DOC (‰)</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
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to be differentiable from the conservative mixing line. However, this does not mean that there is no internal flux during periods of high flow, particularly if high flow periods elevate riverine end-member DOC concentrations.

$\Delta^{14}C$-DOC and $\delta^{13}C$-DOC mixing curves: The $\Delta^{14}C$-DOC and $\delta^{13}C$-DOC mixing curves also indicate nonconservative behavior in the York River Estuary (Fig. 4). In general, $\Delta^{14}C$-DOC values were depleted and $\delta^{13}C$-DOC values were enriched with respect to their expected conservative distributions (Fig. 4). Unlike DOC concentration mixing curves that are linear, isotopic mixing curves are constructed using $\Delta^{14}C$ and $\delta^{13}C$ values weighted by DOC end-member concentrations (Eq. 2). For this reason, there are two possible explanations for the differences between observed and predicted values in each ($^{14}C$ or $^{13}C$) mixing curve: (1) the removal of $^{14}C$-enriched and $^{13}C$-depleted DOC, and/or (2) the input of $^{14}C$-depleted and $^{13}C$-enriched DOC. To quantify the relative importance of these two possible fluxes, we employed an isotopic end-member mixing model.

Isotopic mixing model: The isotopic model employed here may be used to estimate the fraction of riverine DOC removed and the total amount of DOC added within the estuary during estuarine mixing. Conceptually, the model is shown in Fig. 5. The model delineates DOC distributions at any point within the estuary into three pools: an internally added pool, a riverine pool, and a marine pool. Then, as-
transport of marine DOC, even though it is probable that a percentage of this marine DOC is removed within the estuary. However, due to the comparatively small amounts of marine DOC found in a York River Estuary sample, the removal of marine DOC produces small changes to our model. As an example, there would be a negligible effect on our isotopic interpretation (<1% change in the estimated percentage of riverine DOC present in a sample) if we ran the model assuming a 10% removal of marine DOC within the estuary, even if we assume that the marine DOC being removed has a modern Δ¹⁴C signature.

The final source of variation in the model lies in the choice of the isotopic signature assigned to the internally added DOC ($I_a$ in Eq. 6). To provide a robust range for the output for Eq. 6, the value used for $I_a$ was varied, and Eq. 6 was applied using both Δ¹⁴C-DOC and δ¹³C-DOC. For Δ¹⁴C-DOC, we used estimates of +50 and +0‰ for $I_a$, while for δ¹³C-DOC, we used estimates of −23 and −20‰. The first set of estimates (+50 and −23‰ for δ¹³C and Δ¹⁴C, respectively) is based on direct isotopic measurements of DIC and marsh organic matter in the York River Estuary. The second set of numbers was chosen to produce a conservative estimate for the fraction of riverine DOC removed during estuarine mixing. By using these different values for $I_a$ in Eq. 6, the average output for the percentage of riverine DOC removed in a sample changed by only 12%.

A major strength of this approach is that the assumptions are tested through the dual-isotopic approach. That is, the
Fig. 5. Conceptual diagram of the isotopic mixing model used in this study. According to the diagram, the fraction of riverine DOC present in a sample \( f \) in Eq. 6) is represented by the fraction of the line to the right of the star on the two-component line diagram representing Eq. 6.

Isotopic mixing model results: In all but two cases, the DOC\(_{\text{NM}}\) fraction was \( ^{13}\text{C}\)-enriched, and in all cases was \( ^{14}\text{C} \)-depleted in comparison to average riverine \( ^{14}\text{C} \)-DOC and \( ^{13}\text{C} \)-DOC signals of +229 and −28.2‰, respectively (Table 2). As salinity increased, the \( ^{14}\text{C} \) and \( ^{13}\text{C} \) values of the DOC\(_{\text{NM}}\) fraction became more \( ^{14}\text{C} \)-depleted and \( ^{13}\text{C} \)-enriched.

Using Eq. 7, we estimated the percentages of riverine and internally added DOC present in a DOC\(_{\text{NM}}\) sample using both isotopes (Table 5). According to these independent solutions, there is a gradual decrease in the percentage of riverine DOC with increasing salinity. This decrease is balanced by a concomitant increase in the percentage of internally added DOC (Table 5). At the mouth of the estuary, depending on what value was used for \( I_1 \) in Eq. 6, 21–38% of the DOC was estimated to be of terrestrial/riverine origin, while 38–56% was added internally (Table 5). Below, we examine the importance of phytoplankton, marshes, and bacteria to DOC dynamics in the York River Estuary.

### Sources and sinks of DOC in the York River Estuary—
Inputs of phytoplankton DOC: The measured \( ^{14}\text{C} \)-DIC and \( ^{13}\text{C} \)-DIC values for York River Estuary samples were used to constrain the predicted isotopic signatures of phytoplankton carbon within the York, assuming kinetic fractionations of 20‰ for \( ^{13}\text{C} \) (Chanton and Lewis 1999). All \( ^{14}\text{C} \)-values are normalized to a \( ^{13}\text{C} \) value of −25‰; therefore, no corrections have to be made for fractionation (Stuiver and Polach 1977). Based on the DIC isotopic measurements, phytoplankton in the low-salinity (≤4) regions of the York would have average \( ^{14}\text{C} \) and \( ^{13}\text{C} \) signatures of +148 and −30.9‰, respectively (Table 6). The depleted \( ^{13}\text{C} \) signatures are similar to the \( ^{13}\text{C} \) values of terrestrial DIC signals and attest to the difficulties associated with relying on \( ^{14}\text{C} \)
plankton would have predicted depleted and 13 C-enriched (Table 6). In these samples, phytoplankton production (Schultz 1999) and pCO2 supersaturation (Raymond et al. 2000). Therefore, in the low-salinity York, DOC cycling should be strongly influenced by marsh DOC input and organic matter turnover.

Neubauer et al. (2000) estimate that the freshwater marshes of the upper York export 60 g C m⁻² yr⁻¹. These marshes encompass an area of 2.0 x 10⁶ m² (Doumele 1979; Silberhorn and Zacherle 1987). This equates to a flux of 1.2 x 10⁴ g C yr⁻¹, which is ~30% of the average net DOC source estimated by DOC mixing curves (Table 1). Therefore, freshwater marshes appear to be a quantitatively significant term in the DOC cycle of the York River Estuary. Preliminary Δ¹⁴C and δ¹³C measurements of organic matter in the top 10 cm of a large freshwater marsh located in the Pamunkey River (Fig. 1) indicate that marsh organic matter is ¹⁴C-depleted and ¹³C-enriched relative to York River Estuary DOC (Table 7). Therefore, the isotopic data and the work of Neubauer et al. (2000) are consistent with an input of marsh DOC to the York River Estuary.
Bacterial DOC utilization experiments: Changes in DOC concentrations, $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC, and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC during incubation experiments are reported in Table 8. The $\delta^{13}$C values of DOC utilized by bacteria during incubations exhibited a shift from 13C-depleted values at low salinities to 13C-enriched values at higher salinities (Table 8). Assuming end-member values of around −28‰ for terrestrial/riverine DOC (Table 2), −25‰ for freshwater marsh DOC (Table 7), and −24 to −20‰ for estuarine phytoplankton DOC (Table 6), the 13C values are consistent with bacterial utilization of terrestrial and freshwater marsh DOC in the low-salinity York; a mixture of phytoplankton, terrestrial, and marsh DOC in the transitional York; and algal DOC in the high-salinity York. Raymond and Bauer (2000) also predict an internal source of labile DOC to the York River Estuary.

The majority of the $\Delta^{14}$C values calculated for the utilized DOC fraction support the above interpretations based on the $\delta^{13}$C values. Calculated $\Delta^{14}$C values of the utilized fraction were +385 to +698‰ in the upper, low-salinity (<4) York, suggesting utilization of terrestrial DOC (Table 8). These values (+385 to +698‰) correspond to DOC that was fixed during the height of bomb testing ~40–50 yr ago. In the transitional York (salinity = 4–12), three out of four of the calculated $\Delta^{14}$C values for the utilized DOC ranged between +108 and +163‰, which is consistent with a mixture of phytoplankton, terrestrial, and marsh DOC.

Two of the three $\Delta^{14}$C values for DOC utilized in the lower York are more difficult to explain (Table 8; March 1997 salinity 12 sample and September 1996 salinity 15.2 sample). These incubations indicate that bacteria utilized DOC with $\Delta^{14}$C values greater than +450‰. As mentioned above, the $\delta^{13}$C values for these same samples are consistent with DOC of algal origin, yet because there is no evidence that $\Delta^{14}$C-DIC becomes this enriched at these salinities, it is difficult to invoke a mechanism for obtaining algal material with $\Delta^{14}$C values greater than +450‰. The high calculated $\Delta^{14}$C values for the lower York samples could be partly due to the limitations of the incubation experiments and the two end-member mass balance calculations used to model the $\Delta^{14}$C value of the fraction utilized. For these two incubations (in particular, the September 1996 salinity 17 sample), very small quantities of DOC were utilized over the course of the incubation (Table 8). Therefore, any errors would have a large impact on the mass balance equation. However, similar highly enriched $\Delta^{14}$C values were observed during incubation experiments performed on open-ocean waters (Bauer in prep.), and we therefore cannot rule out the preferential utilization of a highly 14C-enriched bomb-carbon fraction. The $\Delta^{14}$C value for the DOC utilized in the March 1997 (salinity 14.5) sample was ~76 and is more consistent with $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC values found just outside the Chesapeake Bay mouth (Table 3).

Sources and sinks of DOC in the York River Estuary—
The higher concentrations of DOC in riverine waters compared to coastal waters suggest that at the mouth of the York River Estuary, isotopic values should resemble riverine DOC more closely than marine DOC (Fig. 4). However, the mouth of the York River Estuary consistently had $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC values that were closer to coastal marine DOC (Table 2; Fig. 4). This suggests that estuarine DOC cycling significantly alters the isotopic signature of the DOC pool.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depth below surface (cm)</th>
<th>Core A $\Delta^{14}$C (%)</th>
<th>Core B $\Delta^{14}$C (%)</th>
<th>Core A $\delta^{13}$C (%)</th>
<th>Core B $\delta^{13}$C (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>−26.3</td>
<td>−26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>−22.3</td>
<td>−25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–10</td>
<td>−1</td>
<td>ND*</td>
<td>−25.8</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* ND, not done.

Table 8. Results of bacterial DOC utilization experiments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Salinity</th>
<th>Concentration of DOC utilized (µM)</th>
<th>Beginning isotopic values</th>
<th>Ending isotopic values</th>
<th>Calculated isotopic values of DOC utilized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$\Delta^{14}$C</td>
<td>$\delta^{13}$C</td>
<td>$\Delta^{14}$C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 96</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>−28.0</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 97</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>−28.8</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 96</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>−28.7</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 97</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>−27.3</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 96</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>−26.4</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 97</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>−25.5</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 96</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>−25.4</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 97</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>−24.7</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 97</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>−24.2</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 96</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>−24.3</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Filtered (0.7 µm) York River Estuary water was incubated for 2 months in the dark at in situ temperatures. DOC, $\Delta^{14}$C-DOC, and $\delta^{13}$C-DOC were measured at the start and end of the incubations. The isotopic values of the utilized fraction were calculated by mass balance. On two occasions, duplicate second time points from separate bottles were analyzed in order to report standard deviations on the calculated isotopic values of the utilized fraction. Average standard deviations of 0.3 and 1.4‰ for $\delta^{13}$C and 13 and 21‰ for $\Delta^{14}$C were found for the utilized fraction of DOC in these replicate analyses.
that is ultimately exported from this temperate estuary. Evidence for this nonconservative behavior was found in the isotopic mixing curves (Fig. 4), the results from the mixing model (Tables 4, 5), and the bacterial utilization experiments (Table 8).

Results from Eq. 7 indicate that at the mouth of the estuary, 20–38% of DOC was of riverine origin, depending on the values used for I (Table 5). Assuming no inputs or removals (i.e., conservative mixing of riverine and coastal end-members), we estimate that 65% of the DOC present at the mouth of the York River Estuary should be of riverine/terrestrial origin. This represents a loss of ~27–45% of riverine DOC within the estuary. However, the DOC concentration mixing curves do not indicate a net loss of DOC in the York River Estuary (Fig. 2). In fact, according to these mixing curves, the loss of riverine DOC is balanced by substantial DOC additions, which is also substantiated by the isotopic mixing model. According to the model, 38–56% of DOC present at the mouth was added internally (Table 5).

The removal of 27–45% of riverine DOC cannot be balanced by bacterial degradation alone. Raymond and Bauer (2000) estimated that only 4–19% (average = 10.8%, n = 7) of riverine DOC is removed on timescales relevant to York River Estuary residence times of 1–2 months (Sin et al. 1999). Photo-oxidation or flocculation could be responsible for the removal of lost riverine DOC. The oxidation of DOC to CO₂ may occur through the absorbance of UV and visible light by organic chromophores (Mopper et al. 1991; Amon and Benner 1996; Moran et al. 1999). In a study in the Amazon River, Amon and Benner (1996) reported average rates of photochemical DOC consumption of 4 μM h⁻¹. These workers estimated that this photolysis occurs only in the top 10 cm of the water column, which is probably a conservative estimate for the turbid York. Therefore, in the York, assuming average depths of 5.7 m (Cronin 1971) and residence times of 1 month (Sin et al. 1999), this equates to a loss of only ~1% of the total DOC pool.

Precipitation of riverine humic materials can remove significant quantities (60–100%) of humic DOC in estuaries (Sholkovitz et al. 1978; Fox 1983). However, because the humic pool is typically a small component of the total DOC pool, this amounts to a relatively small (3–11%) removal of total riverine DOC (Sholkovitz et al. 1978; Fox 1983). In the York, the contribution of humic matter to the total DOC pool is unknown. However, we have proposed that the majority of York riverine DOC originates from terrestrial soils. These soils contain a significant amount of humic organic matter (Hedges and Oades 1997). It therefore seems plausible that flocculation of terrestrial humic DOC may account for a significant percentage (i.e., >10%) of the total riverine DOC pool removed during estuarine transport and mixing in our system. Yet another possibility is the scavenging of DOC by particles within the estuary; once associated with particles, the DOC may then be deposited in estuarine sediments, where it is subject to burial or local remineralization (Hedges and Keil 1999).

Conclusion

In the York River Estuary, a carbon isotopic study using only δ¹³C would have been constrained by the small dynamic range (~10%) and overlap in the δ¹⁴C signatures of coastal DOC (around ~23‰) and DOC produced within the York (~20 to ~25‰). By utilizing δ¹⁴C measurements in conjunction with δ¹³C, the present study benefited from the greater dynamic range (~200‰) and the lack of overlap between coastal δ¹⁴C-DOC (around ~80‰) and DOC produced within the estuary (0–100‰). We conclude that riverine DOC entering the York during periods of moderate to high flow is comprised predominantly of decadal-aged terrestrially organic material. Moreover, as much as half of this riverine DOC is removed during estuarine mixing and transport. Interestingly, this large removal of riverine material is not evident in DOC concentration mixing curves because it is often balanced by an equally large (or greater) input of autochthonous DOC. This autochthonous source is present year-round, originates from phytoplankton and marshes, and supports a percentage of bacterial carbon demand in the higher salinity sections of the York. If the York is representative of other temperate estuaries worldwide, it suggests that estuaries may play an important role in the global carbon budget. Estuaries may remove terrestrial and riverine DOC and simultaneously add and export DOC having a unique estuarine character that potentially has very different isotopic signatures, chemical characteristics, and biological lability.

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Estuarine DOC


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