

[Reviewer's comments are inserted in regular font and responses are highlighted in blue. Relevant changes made in manuscript are also highlighted in blue.]

Responses to Reviewer #1

GENERAL COMMENTS

Comment 1 (C1): This manuscript investigates the mechanism controlling the development of hypoxia in the northern Gulf of Mexico with a modelling approach. The topics fit perfectly with the scope of Biogeosciences. The main question, i.e. to quantify the respective importance of the various oxygen sinks and sources in mitigating/enhancing hypoxia in the northern Gulf of Mexico, is well stated and modelling experiments well constructed to answer the question. The fact that stratification and sediment oxygen consumption are the main driver of hypoxia in this area has already been suggested but this manuscript specifically tests and confirms this hypothesis (by comparing hypoxic area obtained with and without considering water column biological processes affecting oxygen). The most problematic issue is the strong emphasis on benthic oxygen consumption in the discussion, and the large approximations in its representation in the model. Once the impact of the latter on the conclusions is discussed accordingly, this manuscript would constitute a valuable publication and contribution to the understanding of hypoxia in the northern Gulf of Mexico.

Response (R): We thank the reviewer for the encouraging comments. The emphasis on benthic oxygen consumption in the discussion is due to its critical importance as an oxygen sink in driving hypoxia on the LA shelf. We carefully addressed all specific comments, detailed below, which helped strengthen and improve the discussion.

C2: In general the manuscript is slightly redundant. There are many figures and all the information contained in the figure is not always exploited in the discussion. Either some figures could be removed, either these should be better integrated in the discussion.

R: We removed Figure 9, which was not fully exploited in the discussion, and further edited the manuscript to avoid redundancy.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

C3: [1] The main weakness of the modelling set-up lies in the empirical relationship used to estimate the sediment oxygen consumption (SOC). SOC is expressed as a direct function of bottom oxygen consumption, calibrated empirically on the basis of a set of in-situ benthic chambers measurements. While it is recognized (P14898 L15-21) that other SOC data sets indicate lower value than those obtained in the simulation (ie. Lehrter et al. 2012, Murrell and Lehrter, 2011) the manuscript states that "Observations from Rowe et al. (2002) and McCarthy et al. (2013) mostly fall within the range of the variability of simulated SOC". This has to be described more accurately since on Figure 7 only 4 points over a total of 12 (Rowe et al. (2002)) lie between the depicted range of 25th-75th model percentile, and 5/18 for McCarthy et al. (2013).

R: The sentence in question was removed and instead we now say (Page 13):

“Simulated SOC is at the upper range of the available observations.”

C4: [2] More generally, there is a paradox in that the validation procedure indicates simultaneously (1) an overestimation of bottom oxygen concentration and (2) an overestimation in sediment oxygen consumption (SOC). Moreover if we take into account the manuscript’s main conclusion which is that oxygen dynamics in the bottom layer is driven by sediment oxygen consumption. The direct (empirical) dependence of SOC on DO makes it difficult to interpret this behavior. The authors justify this (P14903,L22-P14904,L5) by suggesting that measured SOC could underestimate the true sediment oxygen demand, ie. that the accumulation of reduced metabolite resulting from benthic respiration could lead to further oxygen consumption not accounted for by SOC measurement. In order to be so, the oxidation of these metabolites should occur in the water column, which suppose those are released to the water column, which suppose quasi-anoxic bottom conditions, but Fig 7. indicates overestimated SOC over a large DO range. Could some physical aspects explain this apparent paradox? Can the accuracy of vertical diffusion at the bottom pycnocline and/or horizontal advection be checked independently, i.e. on the basis of physical aspects (probably this has been done already, and a referenced discussion will do). In general, because this is central to the main conclusion these aspects have to be discussed more completely.

R: We agree that the simultaneous overestimation of bottom oxygen concentration and SOC would be a paradox if SOC was the only process determining bottom oxygen dynamics and if our SOC parameterization was perfect. But, as indicated in the second half of the reviewer’s comment, of course other factors matter. A physical explanation would be that the bottom boundary layer in the model is too thick, which means that higher SOC rates are required to draw down bottom oxygen, than in reality. We added the following on page 19:

“Another explanation could be that the thickness of the simulated bottom boundary layer is overestimated. If this is the case, SOC would have to be larger than in reality in order to produce hypoxic bottom water. Future work on validating the expression and dynamics of the bottom boundary layer and its effect on hypoxia dynamics will address this question.”

C5: [3] I wonder why nitrification is listed in the oxygen sinks (P14895, L13) but is not considered in the budget (Section 3.3). Nitrification of ammonium originated from the sediments could be a significant oxygen sink in bottom waters not accounted for by SOC measurements. If nitrification happens to be a significant term in the budget and if in-situ estimates are available, a validation would greatly complete the present picture. For instance Lehrter et al. 2012 mention that "Realistic models of sediment O₂ dynamics for this shelf will need to include the accumulation of oxygen debt from reduced nitrogen, iron, manganese, and sulfur." In the present manuscript the list of "reduced metabolite" given P14903 excludes ammonium.

R: Unfortunately we didn’t make it clear enough in the text, but nitrification is explicitly included in the calculation of the dissolved oxygen balance (as a component of water

column respiration). We clarified this in the text (Page 14) as follow: “For simplicity, we are considering that oxygen consumption due to nitrification to be included in the respiration term, and not as a separate process for deriving the oxygen balance. Though we are referring to the sum of respiration and nitrification as WR, we recognize that nitrification is a chemoautotrophic process. While not strictly accurate, this is consistent with the use of WR in the observational literature where measurements of water column oxygen consumption include the contribution of nitrification.”

We also clarified it in the caption of Figure 9 for the oxygen balance (Page 47) by writing explicitly “respiration+nitrification.”

We also followed the suggestion of adding ammonium to the sentence on reduced metabolites (Page 18).

C6: [4] In general the effect of temperature on Oxygen saturation concentration should be acknowledged when discussing air-sea oxygen fluxes and community respiration/production (e.g. P 14900, L 1-3; P14901, L 15; P14905 L 4). For instance, which part of the oxygen flux to the atmosphere is due to the autotrophic condition of surface water, and which part is due to the fact that warming surface waters become naturally oversaturated in oxygen, as oxygen solubility decreases and exchanges rates at the surface are kinetically limited.

R: Agreed. In section 3.3 on page 14, we now say:

“In terms of air-sea exchange, oxygen is outgassing during summer and taken up during the rest of the year in all sub-regions, corresponding to the seasonal pattern in water column metabolism (more heterotrophic in winter and less heterotrophic or autotrophic in summer) and the seasonal cycle of surface water temperatures, which affect oxygen solubility contributing to outgassing in summer and uptake in winter.”

On Page 16 we now say:

“The positive net community production and decreasing oxygen solubility associated with the increasing water temperature in summer lead to oxygen outgassing to the atmosphere and net transport of oxygen downward to deeper waters.”

Also in section 4.2 on page 20 we now say:

“The decreased oxygen solubility of warmer waters typical of summer conditions also promotes outgassing, but the effect is relatively small compared to the autotrophy in surface waters (oxygen gas-exchange is fast and the summer change in water temperature is relatively small on the LA shelf). ”

We would also like to note that oxygen gas-exchange is fast and kinetic limitation negligible in this context. We have carried out sensitivity experiments where we doubled and halved the gas exchange coefficient and found only negligible changes in the results.

C7: [Table 3] The SOC bias is estimated by comparing model values to observations according to the DO ranges. This approach is strongly dependent on the assumption of a close relationship between SOC and DO, an assumption that is questioned by the large

dispersion of in-situ measurement depicted in Fig 7. Wouldn't it be better to compare model and in-situ SOC values according to the spatial distribution (e.g. using the four areas used in the present manuscript or the zones of similarity from Lehrter et al. 2012)? This could eventually lead to a discussion on the adequacy of using such a relationship over the important environmental gradient covered by the model domain. The validation procedure has to establish that the model approximation does not jeopardize the conclusions presented on the basis of the sensitivity experiment (i.e. with and without water column terms).

R: We have not found an along-shelf gradient in SOC. However, there is an across-shelf gradient with SOC increasing from inshore to offshore, which is driven by changes in bottom water oxygen concentrations such that offshore sites (in 50 m water depth) have higher SOC because of higher bottom water oxygen than inshore sites with lower bottom water oxygen. The SOC spread among the available different data sources is not due to a spatial pattern. Also, SOC measurements from all sources, except those from McCarthy et al. (2013), which were collected with a different method, show a dependence on oxygen concentration. Therefore we choose to compare model values with observations according to the DO ranges in Figure 7.

C8: [Fig. 5] Fig. 5 is not really exploited in the discussion. Why is this figure essential?

R: We feel that the vertical profiles of model bias in Figure 5 provide a good illustration of how model and data agree throughout the water column, and how the two simulations differ. Hence we chose to retain the figure to illustrate that point.

C9: [Fig 7.] SOC is a function of DO, modulated by temperature. As the same relationships is used in the two simulations (Model and MODEL + CCR), how comes that they depict different curves? Is that due to a different DO/Temperature distribution? Please clarify.

R: The physical model configuration is identical in the two simulations (i.e., the temperature distribution). At the same location and time, both model simulations have the same temperature, but the "Model+CCR" has lower DO concentrations. In Figure 7, at the same DO range, the SOC curve in "Model+CCR" corresponds to locations and times with lower temperatures than those in the "Model" and hence lower SOC values.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

C10: [P14893, L11] Boyer et al, 2005 or 2006?

R: Corrected, it should be Boyer et al., 2006.

C11: [P14894 L 10] "Climatological boundary conditions were initialized using an average profile of temperature and salinity based on historical hydrographic data (Boyer et al., 2005) and assumed to be horizontally uniform": It is not clear with this sentence whether physical boundary conditions vary seasonally.

R: They don't vary seasonally. We have changed the sentence (page 7) as follows:

“An average profile of temperature and salinity, based on historical hydrographic data (Boyer et al., 2006) and assumed to be horizontally uniform, is used as physical boundary condition.”

C12: [P14899 L 18] Please provide the exact time frame of integration.

R: The sentence (Page 14) has been changed as follows: “In this section, we evaluate the DO balance for the summer period (June to August) for different regions of the LA shelf to identify the key processes controlling hypoxia.”

C13: [P14905 L 29] The reference Kemp et al. 1992 does not appear in the bibliography.

R: The reference is now added to the bibliography.

C14: [FIG 6.] Split the y-label: PP for the upper part; Water community respiration for the lower part.

R: Figure 6 was redone as suggested.

C15: [Fig. 9]: Should be introduced in section 3.1

R: In response to the reviewer's concern that there are too many figures, we removed Figure 9 ('Vertical distribution of hypoxia probability') and instead refer to Figure 6 in Fennel et al. (2013), which also shows that hypoxia most frequently occurs within a thin bottom water layer on the Louisiana shelf.

C16: [References] Refs Dagg et al., 2004; Green et al., 2006 ; Trefry et al., 1994 appears in the bibliography but not in the text

R: Removed.

Responses to Reviewer #2

GENERAL COMMENTS

C1: The manuscript analyses the output of a coupled physical-biogeochemical model with regard to oxygen distribution and variability at the Louisiana shelf. The strength of the study is the detailed validation of model results against different observations that nicely show the realism of the presented simulations. Main findings of the study are the important role of strong stratification shielding bottom layers from ventilation from above (associated with O₂ outgassing from the surface layer), a minor role of primary production below the pycnocline for the development of hypoxia on the shelf and that the hypoxia is determined by a combination of physical processes and sediment oxygen consumption. The last point, however, is in my mind somehow vague and it is not clear to me, how much it depends on the chosen parameterizations.

R: We appreciate the positive comments. Regarding how much our conclusion depends on the chosen parameterizations, we have carefully addressed the comments on sediment oxygen consumption and air-sea gas exchange parameterizations as detailed below and hope that the conclusions are better justified as a result.

C2: My main concern regards the parameterization of the sediment oxygen consumption (SOC) and the evaluation of the oxygen budget (Eq. 4-6). The used parameterization of SOC depends only on oxygen and temperature. This dependence clearly does not explain very well the observed variability of SOC (Fig. 7). As physical processes, particularly vertical diffusion, are the main oxygen supply to the bottom layer, the SOC parameterized by oxygen concentration depend on the strength of this oxygen supply. This could be an oversimplification of the problem. What could be the role of spatially varying available particulate organic matter on the shelf? Could this be accounted for or why we should not care about it? And is it correct to have a SOC parameterization that depends on oxygen concentration also for relatively high oxygen levels.

R: There are three points in this comment that we respond to separately:

1) Regarding “the SOC parameterization does not explain well the observed variability in SOC (Fig. 7)”

This is true and may partly be due to the different measurement techniques used (i.e. limitations in the available data) and partly because instantaneous SOC depends on many other factors (incl. for example sediment porosity and faunal activity), but there is no simple mechanistic formulation explaining these dependencies. The SOC parameterization we used, while simple, does include two parameters known to be key in modulating SOC: temperature, which is well-known to modulate the rate of microbial respiration in sediments, and dissolved oxygen concentration in the overlying water, which regulates the depth of O₂ diffusion into the sediments, and hence, the sediment O₂ flux into the sediments (Cai and Sayles 1996). The SOC parameterization has been used in previous modeling studies in this region and shown to accurately simulate hypoxia relative to observations. The discrepancies between the parameterization and the observed rates are a subject of our Discussion and will, without a doubt, be the subject of future research.

2) Regarding “What could be the role of spatially varying particulate organic matter [flux]? Could this be accounted for or why should we not care about it?”

We have a model configuration where SOC was determined by the amount of organic matter sinking to the sediment (this was used in several of our previous publications) and we have actually performed all analyses presented in this manuscript for these simulations as well (and they were part of the very first draft of this manuscript). It turned out, however, that our conclusions about the summer oxygen balance are essentially identical when using the spatially and temporally varying organic matter flux to the sediment rather than the SOC parameterization. We decided it would be too tedious and redundant to report results for both cases and since the model’s skill in simulating hypoxia is better when using the latter (see e.g. Fennel et al. 2013) we chose to show those. We state this now in section 4.1 on Page 19.

3) Regarding “is it correct to have a SOC parameterization that does depend on SOC for relatively high oxygen levels?”

SOC is dependent on oxygen concentration only for low oxygen levels. We added the following text in the description of our SOC parameterization (Page 10):

“SOC linearly increases with increasing bottom water *DO* for concentrations lower than 50 mmol O₂ m⁻³ and saturates when concentrations are higher than 100 mmol O₂ m⁻³.” This characteristic is shown in Figure 7 where the simulated SOC increases with increasing bottom *DO* for oxygen concentrations below ~50 mmol O₂ m⁻³. The reason the SOC declines above ~80 mmol O₂ m⁻³ in Fig. 7 is its temperature dependence (high oxygen concentrations occur in winter when water is colder).

C3: The oxygen budget for the three layers described by equation 4 to 6 is not easy to understand and to follow. I would suggest writing down more complete equations. My concerns are the following. If you integrate the time derivative of oxygen over volume and time (first term of equation 4-6, respectively), you obtain the amount of mol O₂ within the volume of integration. My understanding from your description is that this volume is not constant for the upper and middle layer. Thus volume changes have to be incorporated into the equations. This also includes the question, what happens if during part of the time only two layers exist and the budget is not evaluated (P14900, L10)? This would change the mol O₂ in the regional budgets.

R: We replaced all occurrences of ‘oxygen budget’ with ‘oxygen balance’, because we feel the latter is a more accurate description of our calculations for the reasons mentioned by the reviewer. We have also removed equations 4-6 that caused confusion; instead, we added the equation of *DO* conservation in section 2 (‘Model description’) and clarified how we calculated the summer oxygen balance in section 3.3:

(Page 9) “The equation for the *DO* conservation is given by

$$\frac{\partial DO}{\partial t} = - \left(u \frac{\partial DO}{\partial x} + v \frac{\partial DO}{\partial y} + w \frac{\partial DO}{\partial z} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left(K_v \frac{\partial DO}{\partial z} \right) + PP + WR + F_{bf} \quad (1)$$

where *x* and *y* represent the two horizontal directions and *z* the vertical direction, *u*, *v*, and *w* (m s⁻¹) represent velocities in *x*-, *y*-, and *z*-directions, respectively, and *K_v* is the vertical

diffusivity (m s^{-2}). On the right-hand side of the Eq. (1), the first term represents horizontal and vertical advection of DO, and the second term is the vertical diffusion of DO (horizontal diffusivity K_H is set 0 in the model and hence we neglected horizontal diffusion terms in equation). Here the advection and diffusion terms are computed using the advanced numerical schemes build into the ROMS hydrodynamic model. The term PP is the primary production and WR represents the sum of water column respiration and nitrification. Although not strictly accurate, the use of the terminology WR is consistent with the use of WR in the observational literature where measurements of water column oxygen consumption include the contribution of nitrification. The term F_{bf} represents the boundary oxygen fluxes, namely the air-sea flux of oxygen at the top layer and the sediment oxygen consumption at the bottom layer, the parameterizations of which are detailed below.”

(Page 15) “We defined the pycnocline as the depth of maximum Brunt-Vaisala Frequency (Pond and Pickard, 1983) and restricted our analysis to horizontal grid cells where all three layers existed (i.e. a main pycnocline was present and was more than 5 m above the bottom). We then integrated the terms in Eq. (1) vertically over each layer at each desired grid cell on each desired day. The advection and diffusion terms were evaluated as divergences, namely fluxes of DO into or out of the given volume through advection or diffusion. Finally we averaged the integrated results over all grid cells within a selected sub-region and over June to August in order to obtain the summer oxygen balance for the sub-regions.”

C4: Moreover, it is not clear how the advection and diffusion term in the oxygen budget are evaluated. The calculation of the supply due to horizontal advection (which is part of the advection terms, P14901, L6-7) is not correct, as it is written. The integration must be over vertical planes, e.g. u times O2 integrated over y and z and v times O2 integrated over x and z . Moreover, it is not clear to me if these integrations are done for each grid cell or for the whole region. Thus it would be really helpful to see more detailed equations that also would better explain the other terms. How is the vertical diffusion parameterized? Do you use a horizontal diffusivity in the tracer equation? Why it is not included in the budget? Are you able to close the budget with your calculations? What is the error in budget calculations?

R: In the ROMS model, advection and diffusion diagnostics were calculated as divergences, namely fluxes of DO into or out of a given volume (i.e. grid cell), and not as fluxes through vertical planes. (This is why vertical and horizontal advection in Figure 9 cannot be separated.) The ROMS diagnostics were calculated in this way because it is practically impossible to close tracer budgets if fluxes are approximated as fluxes across horizontal and vertical planes. However, when using divergences, tracer budgets close perfectly.

We have added the equation of DO conservation in section 2 (‘Model description’):

$$\frac{\partial DO}{\partial t} = - \left(u \frac{\partial DO}{\partial x} + v \frac{\partial DO}{\partial y} + w \frac{\partial DO}{\partial z} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left(K_v \frac{\partial DO}{\partial z} \right) + PP + WR + F_{bf} \quad (1)$$

To calculate oxygen balance, we integrated the terms in Eq. (1) vertically over each layer at each desired grid cell on each desired day. We then averaged the oxygen balance over the grid cells within a selected sub-region and over June to August to obtain the summer oxygen balance. Please see the response to comment 4 for more details on the calculations.

The vertical mixing is parameterized using the Mellor and Yamada (1982) turbulent closure scheme.

Horizontal diffusivity is set as 0 in the model and hence horizontal diffusion term is not included in the oxygen balance.

We have also added more details in Section 2 Model description (Page 7): “The model uses a fourth-order horizontal advection scheme for tracers and a third-order upwind scheme for the advection term in the momentum equation. Vertical gradients are calculated with conservative parabolic splines, and vertical mixing is parameterized using the Mellor and Yamada (1982) turbulent closure scheme.”

C5: In general, it would be helpful to see some discussion on the sensitivity of the model results to different parameterizations, e.g. the air-sea gas parameterizations. What is the uncertainty of the model results due to the use of these specific parameterizations? Other specific points are listed below. In summary, I think that this paper could be good contribution to a better understanding of low oxygen regions and particularly to the hypoxia of Louisiana after clarification of the addressed general remarks above and specific points below.

R: We have added a discussion of the effect of the air-sea gas exchange parameterization in the revision (Page 20):

“We have carried out sensitivity experiments where we doubled and halved the air-sea gas exchange coefficient (results not presented in the manuscript) and found that the model results are insensitive to the air-sea gas exchange rates, likely because the air-sea oxygen flux is fast.”

SPECIFIC POINTS

C6: P14890, L14: “autotrophic/heterotrophic water” sounds not ok, please reformulate

R: We modified this sentence (Page 2) in the abstract by removing the second part that contained autotrophic and heterotrophic. It now reads: “During this time, efflux of oxygen to the atmosphere, driven by photosynthesis and surface warming, becomes a significant oxygen sink.”

C7: P14891, L29: Do you have explicit horizontal (isopycnal) diffusion in the tracer equation? How is it parameterized? It would be helpful to see the equations that are evaluated for the budget. See also my points above.

R: No, the horizontal diffusion coefficient is zero in the model. Also see the response to

comment 4.

C8: P14894, L12: You use horizontal uniform T/S boundary conditions, which does not allow baroclinic inflow. What are your conditions for flow into and out of the model domain? How do you account for larger scale advection?

R: We added more details on how the physical horizontal boundaries are treated:

(Page 7) “An average profile of temperature and salinity, based on historical hydrographic data (Boyer et al., 2006) and assumed to be horizontally uniform, is used as physical boundary condition. At the three open boundaries, gradient conditions are used for the free surface, radiation conditions for the three-dimensional velocities, and a Flather (1976) condition with no mean barotropic background flow for the two-dimensional velocities.”

(Page 7) “The model uses a fourth-order horizontal advection scheme for tracers and a third-order upwind scheme for the advection term in the momentum equation.”

C9: P14895, L25: Wanninkhof (1992) proposed a parameterization with relatively large air-sea gas exchange. Particularly in high productive upwelling regions, the air-sea gas exchange might be limited by surface films (Tsai and Liu, 2003). Probably the effect on hypoxia would be very minor, when using different parameterizations. Please comment on that.

R: We are confident that the effect is negligible. Please see the response to comment 5.

C10: P14896, L7: Dependence of SOC on oxygen concentration is typically assumed for much lower oxygen levels only (e.g. Canfield 1993, 1994). Why is there no dependence on organic matter load?

R: Please see the response to comment 2.

C11: P14901, Eq. 6: Terms for horizontal and vertical advections has to be separated and integrated over different planes.

R: Advection terms are calculated from divergences, hence can not be separated into horizontal and vertical. Please see the response to comment 4.

C12: P14972, Figure 10: Please explain the term “Net”.

R: We have added an explanation in the caption of this Figure (Page 47, now Figure 9): “The net rate of oxygen change in each layer (i.e. the sum of all oxygen source and sink terms) is given and denoted as Net.”

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Marine Chemistry, 52, 123-131, 1996.

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Tsai, W. T. and Liu, K. K.: An assessment of the effect of sea surface surfactant on global atmosphere-ocean CO₂ flux, J. Geophys. Res.-Oceans, 108, 3127, doi:10.1029/2000jc000740, 2003.

1 **Numerical Analysis of the Primary Processes Controlling Oxygen**
2 **Dynamics on the Louisiana Shelf**

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5

6 **Abstract**

7 The Louisiana shelf in the northern Gulf of Mexico receives large amounts of freshwater
8 and nutrients from the Mississippi/Atchafalaya River system. These river inputs
9 contribute to widespread bottom-water hypoxia every summer. In this study, we use a
10 physical-biogeochemical model that explicitly simulates oxygen sources and sinks on the
11 Louisiana shelf to identify the key mechanisms controlling hypoxia development. First,
12 we validate the model simulation against observed dissolved oxygen concentrations,
13 primary production, water column respiration, and sediment oxygen consumption. In the
14 model simulation, heterotrophy is prevalent in shelf waters throughout the year except
15 near the mouths of the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers where primary production
16 exceeds respiratory oxygen consumption during June and July. [During this time, efflux](#)
17 [of oxygen to the atmosphere, driven by photosynthesis and surface warming, becomes a](#)
18 [significant oxygen sink](#). A substantial fraction of primary production occurs below the
19 pycnocline in summer. We investigate whether this primary production below the
20 pycnocline is mitigating the development of hypoxic conditions with the help of a
21 sensitivity experiment where we disable biological processes in the water column (i.e.
22 primary production and water column respiration). In this experiment below-pycnocline
23 primary production reduces the spatial extent of hypoxic bottom waters only slightly. Our
24 results suggest that the combination of physical processes and sediment oxygen
25 consumption largely determine the spatial extent and dynamics of hypoxia on the
26 Louisiana shelf.

1. Introduction

The Louisiana shelf (LA shelf) in the northern Gulf of Mexico receives large inputs of freshwater, nutrients and organic matter from the Mississippi/Atchafalaya River system and experiences widespread hypoxia (oxygen concentrations $< 2 \text{ mg l}^{-1}$ or 62.5 mmol m^{-3}) in bottom waters every summer (Rabalais et al. 2007; Bianchi et al. 2010). The classic paradigm for explaining the recurring hypoxic conditions on the LA shelf is that high nutrient inputs from the river stimulate high rates of primary production in coastal waters; as this organic matter sinks below the pycnocline and is respired, dissolved oxygen (DO) becomes depleted due to a combination of high microbial respiration and low re-oxygenation of the bottom waters because of strong stratification (Rabalais et al. 2002).

While the statistical linkage between spring nutrient loads and the spatial extent of the summer hypoxic area is well documented (Turner et al., 2005; Greene et al., 2009; Forrest et al., 2011), the distribution of hypoxia on the LA shelf is known to be the integrated result of various physical and biogeochemical processes that interact non-linearly (Bianchi et al. 2010; Fennel et al. 2011). Rowe and Chapman (2002) suggested that as the distance from the river mouth increases, the primary driver of hypoxia changes from deposition of riverine organic matter to biological production and respiration and finally to physical stratification. Model simulations (Bierman et al., 1994; Breed et al., 2004; Eldridge and Roelke 2010) also show that the dominant processes contributing to hypoxia change in westward direction, namely allochthonous organic matter accounts for most of DO consumption near the Mississippi river mouth and autochthonous organic matter dominates DO consumption farther west. Hetland and DiMarco (2008) suggested that the differences in vertical stratification within the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River

plumes lead to differences in the dominant type of respiration responsible for hypoxia with water column respiration driving hypoxia near the Mississippi River plume and benthic respiration controlling hypoxia near Atchafalaya Bay and further west. Recent work suggests that the main axis of variability in hydrography and metabolism is inshore to offshore on the shelf (Lehrter et al. 2012; Murrell et al., 2013a; Lehrter et al., 2013; Fry et al., 2014).

Understanding the occurrence of hypoxia on the LA shelf requires quantitative knowledge of the mechanisms controlling DO dynamics. Generally, the distribution of DO is determined by physical processes (air-sea flux, horizontal advection, vertical mixing across the pycnocline) and biogeochemical processes (photosynthetic production, respiration in the water column and sediments, and oxidation of reduced substances) (Testa and Kemp, 2011). The magnitudes and spatial and temporal dynamics of these processes on the LA shelf are as of now poorly constrained.

Circulation over the LA shelf displays two distinct modes (Cochrane and Kelly, 1986; Cho et al., 1998): an upcoast circulation mode during the dominantly upwelling-favorable (westerly) winds in summer (June to August) versus westward flow during the dominantly downwelling-favorable (easterly) winds for the rest of the year. Previous statistical studies (Forrest et al., 2011; Feng et al., 2012) have shown that the observed hypoxic extent is correlated to the duration of upwelling-favorable wind. Feng et al. (2014) further showed that the wind influences the distribution of low salinity, high chlorophyll water on the shelf and thereby the bottom water DO concentrations and hypoxic area.

A substantial fraction of phytoplankton production is observed below the pycnocline (Lehrter et al., 2009) and even at the sediment-water interface when light is available (Lehrter et al., 2014), but the effect of sub-pycnocline production on bottom water hypoxia is not well known. Eldridge and Morse (2008) highlighted the importance of benthic respiration as a DO sink at the beginning and end of hypoxic events, and suggested water column respiration in bottom water near the pycnocline as primary O₂ sink once hypoxia has developed. Quinones-Rivera et al. (2007, 2010) estimated benthic respiration to account for ~73% of the total DO loss within 1 m of the bottom sediments during summer based on $\delta^{18}O$ measurements and an isotope fractionation model, whereas Murrell and Lehrter (2011) found that benthic respiration only contributes on average $20\pm4\%$ of total respiration below the pycnocline. The relative contributions of benthic and water column respiration are strongly affected by the assumed depth of the bottom layer.

In order to better understand the relative importance of these processes, considerable efforts have been invested in modeling the DO dynamics and hypoxia within the system. These models range from relatively simple regression models (Turner et al., 2005, 2006; Greene et al., 2009; Forrest et al., 2011; Feng et al. 2012) to more complex process simulations that emphasize either biogeochemical processes in simplified physical frameworks (Justić et al. 1996, 2002; Eldridge and Morse, 2008; Green et al. 2008) or physical circulation using detailed hydrographic models with simple parameterizations of biogeochemical process (Hetland and DiMarco 2008; Lehrter et al., 2013). More recently a number of fully coupled physical-biogeochemical models have become available (Fennel et al. 2013; Laurent and Fennel 2014; Feng et al. 2014; Justić and Wang 2014).

Coupled models of DO dynamics and circulation have been used successfully in other coastal systems with seasonal hypoxia including Chesapeake Bay (i.e., Cerco and Cole, 1993; Cerco, 1995). More recently, Li et al. (2015) coupled an empirical DO model derived from observations with a high-resolution hydrodynamic model to derive a DO budget for Chesapeake Bay. An even simpler empirical DO parameterization was used by Scully (2013) to illustrate the important role of physical forcing in the formation of seasonal hypoxia. Both, Li et al. (submitted) and Scully (2013) obtained a realistic simulation of the seasonal cycle of DO and spatial distributions of hypoxic water.

Here we use a coupled physical-biogeochemical model for the LA shelf described in Fennel et al. (2011, 2013) that was recently extended to include phosphate by Laurent et al. (2012) and Laurent and Fennel (2014). The biogeochemical model explicitly simulates DO and is coupled to the realistic 3-dimensional circulation model of Hetland and DiMarco (Hetland and DiMarco 2008, Hetland et al. 2012). Here we build upon the earlier work to identify the key processes controlling DO dynamics.

The manuscript is organized as follows. First we describe the coupled physical-biogeochemical model and its DO source and sink terms. Then we validate model-simulated DO and oxygen production and consumption rates against available observations. We explore spatial and temporal patterns of water column metabolism across the shelf and its interaction with air-sea fluxes. We also analyze the summer DO balance for different regions which allows us to identify the key controlling processes and how they vary in space. Finally, we examine the role that sub-pycnocline primary production plays in hypoxia generation.

2. Model description

Our physical model is the Regional Ocean Modelling System (Haidvogel et al. 2008, ROMS, <http://myroms.org>) configured for the Mississippi/Atchafalaya outflow region as described in Hetland and DiMarco (2008, 2012). The model grid covers the Louisiana continental shelf with a horizontal resolution ranging from ~20 km in the southwestern corner to 1 km near the Mississippi Delta, and has 20 terrain-following vertical layers with increased resolution near the surface and bottom (Fig. 1). The model uses a fourth-order horizontal advection scheme for tracers and a third-order upwind scheme for the advection term in the momentum equation. Vertical gradients are calculated with conservative parabolic splines, and vertical mixing is parameterized using the Mellor and Yamada (1982) turbulent closure scheme. An average profile of temperature and salinity, based on historical hydrographic data (Boyer et al., 2006) and assumed to be horizontally uniform, is used as physical boundary condition. At the three open boundaries, gradient conditions are used for the free surface, radiation conditions for the three-dimensional velocities, and a Flather (1976) condition with no mean barotropic background flow for the two-dimensional velocities. The model is forced with 3-hourly winds from the NCEP North American Regional Reanalysis (NARR) and climatological surface heat and freshwater fluxes from da Silva et al. (1994a, b). Freshwater inputs from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers are based on daily measurements of transport by the US Army Corps of Engineers at Tarbert Landing and Simmesport, respectively.

The biological component of the model uses the nitrogen cycle model of Fennel et al. (2011, 2013) but was extended to include phosphate (Laurent et al., 2012) and river dissolved organic matter as additional state variables. The model is a relatively simple

representation of the pelagic nitrogen (N) cycle, including two species of dissolved inorganic N, nitrate (NO_3) and ammonium (NH_4), phosphorus (PO_4), one phytoplankton group (Phy), chlorophyll (Chl) as a separate state variable to allow for photoacclimation, one zooplankton group (Zoo), two pools of detritus representing large, fast-sinking particles (LDet), and suspended, small particles (SDet), and river-born dissolved organic matter (RDOM). Combined with the freshwater discharge described above, the model receives river nutrients (NO_3 and NH_4) and organic matter based on the US Geological Survey (USGS) estimates (<http://toxics.usgs.gov/>). More specifically, river dissolved organic nitrogen (DON) was determined as the difference between filtered Total Kjeldahl Nitrogen (TKN) and NH_4 ; and particulate organic nitrogen (PON) was defined as the difference between unfiltered and filtered TKN (Fig. 2). Different from our previously published simulations where river organic nitrogen enters the pool of SDet in the model without distinguishing between dissolved and particulate fractions, here river DON and PON enter the pools of RDOM and SDet, respectively. The only biological term in the equation for RDOM is remineralization to NH_4 in the water column. We chose a remineralization rate of 0.03 d^{-1} for RDOM, an order of magnitude lower than that of small detritus (0.3 d^{-1}) to reflect the observation that riverine dissolved organic matter is less labile than phytoplankton-derived organic matter (Shen et al., 2012). A schematic of the extended N cycle model is shown in Figure 3. Also shown are the biological sources and sinks of DO, including photosynthetic production, nitrification, respiration in water column and sediment, and the air-sea flux of oxygen across the air-sea interface. At the open boundaries NO_3 , PO_4 and oxygen were prescribed using the NODC World Ocean Atlas. All other biological state variables at the boundary were set to small positive

values. Model parameterization and previous validations were described in Fennel et al. (2006, 2011, 2013), Laurent et al. (2012), Laurent and Fennel (2014). For completeness' sake, all parameter values are given in Table S1 of the Online Supplement.

The equation for the *DO* conservation is given by

$$\frac{\partial DO}{\partial t} = -\left(u \frac{\partial DO}{\partial x} + v \frac{\partial DO}{\partial y} + w \frac{\partial DO}{\partial z}\right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z}\left(K_v \frac{\partial DO}{\partial z}\right) + PP + WR + F_{bf} \quad (1)$$

where x and y represent the two horizontal directions and z the vertical direction, u , v , and w (m s^{-1}) represent velocities in x -, y -, and z -directions, respectively, and K_v is the vertical diffusivity ($\text{m}^2 \text{s}^{-1}$). On the right-hand side of the Eq. (1), the first term represents horizontal and vertical advection of DO, and the second term is the vertical diffusion of DO (horizontal diffusivity K_H is set 0 in the model and hence we neglected horizontal diffusion terms in equation). Here the advection and diffusion terms are computed using the advanced numerical schemes build into the ROMS hydrodynamic model. The term PP is the primary production and WR represents the sum of water column respiration and nitrification. Although not strictly accurate, the use of the terminology WR is consistent with the use of WR in the observational literature where measurements of water column oxygen consumption include the contribution of nitrification. The term F_{bf} represents the boundary oxygen fluxes, namely the air-sea flux of oxygen at the top layer and the sediment oxygen consumption at the bottom layer, the parameterizations of which are detailed below.

Following Fennel et al. (2013), an air-sea flux of oxygen ($F_{air-sea}$, in units of $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$) is prescribed in the top layer of the model as:

$$F_{air-sea} = \frac{vk_{O_2}}{\Delta z} (DO_{sat} - DO), \quad (2)$$

where DO and DO_{sat} are the oxygen concentration and concentration at saturation, respectively, Δz is the thickness of the respective grid box, and vk_{O_2} is the gas exchange coefficient for oxygen based on Wanninkhof (1992), such that:

$$vk_{O_2} = 0.31 u_{10}^2 \sqrt{\frac{660}{Sc_{Ox}}}, \quad (3)$$

where u_{10} is the wind speed at 10 m above the sea surface, and Sc_{Ox} is the Schmidt number, calculated as in Wanninkhof (1992).

The parameterization for Sediment Oxygen Consumption (SOC) used in this study was developed by Hetland and DiMarco (2008) and based on observed sediment oxygen fluxes from Rowe et al. (2002). In this parameterization, SOC ($\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$) linearly increases with increasing bottom water oxygen (DO , $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$) for concentrations lower than $50 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$ and saturates when concentrations are higher than $100 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$. Also, SOC is dependent on temperature (T , $^{\circ}\text{C}$) such that it doubles for every 10°C temperature increase (i.e., $Q_{10} = 2$). The equation is given as follows:

$$SOC = 6 [\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}] * 2^{T/10^{\circ}\text{C}} * (1 - \exp\left(-\frac{DO}{30[\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}]}\right)). \quad (4)$$

In Fennel et al. (2013) this parameterization was extended to include an NH_4 flux into the bottom water proportional to oxygen uptake by the sediments. Therefore, organic matter sinking out of the water column essentially leaves the system while empirically determined fluxes of oxygen into the sediments and ammonium out of the sediments are prescribed.

Motivated by the model-data comparisons, described below, we conducted a sensitivity experiment where a spatially and temporally constant oxygen consumption rate (1.5

mmol O₂ m⁻³ d⁻¹) was added to the water column oxygen pool (simulation denoted as ‘Model+CCR’). In order to distinguish between the role of biological processes in the water column (primary production and water column respiration, denoted as PP and WR, respectively) and the combination of physical transport and sediment respiration, we conducted two further sensitivity experiments where all biological processes in the water column were turned off (denoted as ‘Model w/o PP and WR’ and ‘Model+CCR w/o PP and WR’ in comparison to the full model simulation and Model+CCR, respectively).

All simulations were run from 1 January 2004 to 31 December 2007. For model analysis we defined four geographical zones across the Louisiana continental shelf: three sub-regions associated with the Mississippi River plume (Mississippi Delta, Mississippi Intermediate, Mid-shelf), and another sub-region associated with the Atchafalaya River plume (Atchafalaya Plume) (Fig. 1). These four sub-regions cover most stations that comprise the observational data sets used for model validation: (1) DO concentrations from Rabalais et al. (2007), Nunally et al. (2013), Murrell et al. (2013b), and the Mechanisms Controlling Hypoxia (MCH) program; (2) in situ measurements of water column respiration rates from 10 cruises during spring, summer and fall from 2003 to 2007 (Murrell et al., 2013a); (3) the concurrent measurements of phytoplankton production from Lehrter et al. (2009); (4) benthic flux measurements from Rowe et al. (2002), Murrell and Lehrter (2011), Lehrter et al. (2012), and McCarthy et al. (2013). Locations for the observed primary production and water column respiration rates are shown as black dots in Figure 1.

3. Results

3.1 Simulated oxygen dynamics and model validation

Time series of simulated and observed bottom DO both show a seasonal cycle reaching a maximum between December and February and minimum between July and August (Fig. 4). In summer the median of simulated bottom DO is consistently larger than observations in the Mississippi Intermediate region, but otherwise observations and simulation agree well. Simulated bottom DO falls within the observed range of variability for all 4 regions.

We report model bias and root mean square error (RMSE) as statistical measures of agreement between simulated and observed bottom DO in Table 1. Bias was calculated as model minus observations; thus a positive bias indicates that the model overestimates the observations. Table 1 indicates that the model overestimates the observed bottom DO in all regions with an average bias of $33.7 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$. Based on this comparison, the model performs best in the Mid-shelf region (bias of $15.6 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$) and worst in the Mississippi Delta region (bias of $43.3 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$).

Profiles of bias between simulated and observed DO profiles are shown in Figure 5 for the summer months. Simulated DO often overestimates observed DO, but remains typically within one standard deviation of the observations except for the bottom layer (e.g. in June).

Observed and simulated rates of primary production (PP) and water column respiration (WR) are shown in Figure 6, and statistical measures of model-data agreement are given in Table 2. The model simulates the observed PP reasonably well, but underestimates the WR observations, although the model is within one standard deviation of the observations (Fig. 6 and Table 2).

Simulated SOC within all 4 regions is plotted against bottom DO and compared with available observations in Figure 7. Simulated SOC increases with increasing bottom DO for oxygen concentrations below $\sim 80 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$ and declines thereafter because of the temperature effect (SOC halves for each temperature decrease of 10°C). SOC observations from different sources vary over a large range from 0 to $40 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$ (Fig. 7). **Simulated SOC is at the upper range of the available observations.** Model bias in Table 3 indicates that the median of simulated SOC overestimates the observed SOC when combining all sources (average bias $18.2 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$).

3.2 Validation of the Model+CCR simulation

The model biases described in previous section (i.e. the underestimation of WR and overestimation of SOC) motivated us to carry out an additional simulation (Model+CCR) with increased WR. The additional, constant oxygen consumption rate ($1.5 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3} \text{ d}^{-1}$) was determined from Table 2 (average bias of $30.8 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$ divided by the average water column depth of 20.4 m) and should compensate for the bias in model-simulated WR.

Compared with the previous model simulation, Model+CCR reduces the overall model data discrepancy in WR (average bias of $-1.0 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$) but overestimates the observed WR in the Mid-shelf region (bias of $35.6 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$) (Fig. 6 and Table 2). The increased WR draws down the simulated DO concentrations, improving agreement between the observed and simulated bottom DO in all regions (average bias of $9.1 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$) except in the Mid-shelf region where the observed bottom DO is significantly underestimated (bias of $-18.8 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$) (Fig. 4 and Table 1). Compared to the previous simulation, the reduced DO concentrations throughout the water column in

Model+CCR generally improve the model performance with lower biases, except for the Mid-shelf region in June and July (Fig. 5). The reduced bottom DO concentrations in Model+CCR also lead to a reduction in the simulated SOC (as SOC is dependent on bottom DO) and thereby slightly improve the agreement between simulated and observed SOC with lower RMSE and bias (average bias of $14.9 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$) (Fig. 7 and Table 3).

3.3 Oxygen balance

In this section, we evaluate the DO balance for the summer period (June to August) for different regions of the LA shelf to identify the key processes controlling hypoxia. We focus the detailed analysis on the model simulation without additional WR; results from Model+CCR will be discussed at the end of the section. For simplicity, we are considering that oxygen consumption due to nitrification to be included in the respiration term, and not as a separate process for deriving the oxygen balance. Though we are referring to the sum of respiration and nitrification as WR, we recognize that nitrification is a chemoautotrophic process. While not strictly accurate, this is consistent with the use of WR in the observational literature where measurements of water column oxygen consumption include the contribution of nitrification.

We first explore the simulated seasonal and spatial patterns in water column metabolism across the shelf and its interaction with the air-sea flux of oxygen (Fig. 8). The Mississippi Delta and Atchafalaya Plume regions, which are directly impacted by the river, transit from autotrophy in June and July to heterotrophy for the rest of the year. The Mississippi Intermediate and Mid-shelf regions, however, are heterotrophic throughout the year. In terms of air-sea exchange, oxygen is outgassing during summer and taken up

during the rest of the year in all sub-regions, corresponding to the seasonal pattern in water column metabolism (more heterotrophic in winter and less heterotrophic or autotrophic in summer) and the seasonal cycle of surface water temperatures, which affect oxygen solubility contributing to outgassing in summer and uptake in winter. The oxygen flux into the ocean increases with the degree of heterotrophy, demonstrating the important role of air-sea gas exchange in replenishing DO in the water column.

When considering an oxygen balance for the water column it is useful to distinguish distinct vertical layers. We considered the following three layers in our analysis of the summer oxygen balance: a surface layer above the main pycnocline, a mid-layer extending from the main pycnocline to 5 m above the sediment and a 5-m thick bottom layer above the sediment (i.e., the layer where hypoxia occurs most frequently, as demonstrated in Figure 6 in Fennel et al., 2013). We defined the pycnocline as the depth of maximum Brunt-Vaisala Frequency (Pond and Pickard, 1983) and restricted our analysis to horizontal grid cells where all three layers existed (i.e. a main pycnocline was present and was more than 5 m above the bottom). We then integrated the terms in Eq. (1) vertically over each layer at each desired grid cell on each desired day. The advection and diffusion terms were evaluated as divergences, namely fluxes of DO into or out of the given volume through advection or diffusion. Finally we averaged the integrated results over all grid cells within a selected sub-region and over June to August in order to obtain the summer oxygen balance for the sub-regions.

Figure 9 shows the summer oxygen balance in the three layers and four sub-regions (numbers are provided in Table S2 of the Online Supplement). The surface layers in all four sub-regions are autotrophic while the bottom layers are heterotrophic (Fig. 9). In the

surface layer, biochemical processes (PP and WR) far exceed physical transport of oxygen. The positive net community production and decreasing oxygen solubility associated with the increasing water temperature in summer lead to oxygen outgassing to the atmosphere and net transport of oxygen downward to deeper waters.

The mid-layer is autotrophic in all four sub-regions as well, with an average PP of 48% occurring below the pycnocline and 38% in the mid-layer. About 10% of PP occurs within the 5-m bottom layer where hypoxia occurs most frequently (Fig. 9). We compared the simulation results with observations from Lehrter et al. (2009), as percentage of production below the pycnocline for each cruise (Table 4). Considering the rather large observed standard deviations, the percentages of sub-pycnocline PP in the simulations (18.6 - 40.9%) agree well with observations (23.3 - 38.7%).

On average the sub-pycnocline PP offsets 68% of total respiration below the pycnocline and 27% of total respiration within the 5-m bottom layer (Fig. 9). The percentages are higher in 2006 (a drought year) where PP offsets 72% of total respiration below pycnocline and 31% of total respiration within the bottom 5 m.

The 5-m bottom layer is heterotrophic in all sub-regions with SOC representing the single largest oxygen flux (Fig. 9). The SOC accounts for 36% of total respiratory oxygen demand below the pycnocline when averaged over the shelf and summer months. The fraction of SOC rises to 68% when limited to the bottom 5 m (Fig. 9). Driven by the strong vertical DO gradient in the water column, vertical diffusion is the primary mode of DO replenishment for the bottom layer offsetting on average 32% of total respiration over the shelf. Advection, driven by the typical summer upwelling circulation on the LA shelf,

is another important DO source for bottom waters offsetting on average 29% of total respiration shelf-wide.

Adding WR in the Model+CCR simulation impacted the summer oxygen balance by making the water column more heterotrophic and decreasing the relative contributions of SOC and WR to total respiration (Table S3 and Fig. S3). In Model+CCR the mid layers in all sub-regions and all three layers in Mid-shelf region become heterotrophic in summer months. Also, the simulated fraction of SOC to total respiration averaged over the 4 sub-regions during summer decreases from 36% to 26% within below-pycnocline water layer and from 68% to 57% within the bottom 5-m layer.

3.4 Role of sub-pycnocline PP in hypoxia generation

Time series of simulated hypoxic area from the sensitivity run without biological processes in the water column (Model w/o PP and WR) are shown in comparison to the full model and the observed hypoxic extent in Figure 10. The temporal evolution of hypoxic area is almost identical in both simulations, with ‘Model w/o PP and WR’ simulating an only slightly larger hypoxic area in summer. A similar pattern is observed for simulated hypoxic volume (Fig. S1) and for the simulations with the additional oxygen sink (Fig. S4).

4. Discussion

4.1 Simulated oxygen dynamics and model validation

Overall, the model simulates the evolution of oxygen and the magnitudes and spatial distribution of PP well, but tends to overestimate bottom DO and underestimate WR

(within one standard deviation of observations). One possible explanation is that the model does not receive any dissolved or particulate organic matter inputs from estuarine sources other than the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers. Several recent studies (Bianchi et al. 2010, Murrell et al. 2013a, and Fry et al. 2014) suggested that the inshore coastal waters represent a source of oxygen-consuming organic matter that may be episodically transported onto the LA shelf.

The model also overestimates the observed SOC from all sources, especially those observed by Lehrter et al. (2012) and Murrell and Lehrter (2011) (Fig. 7, Table 3). Using the same model as in this study, Fennel et al. (2013) have shown that generation of hypoxia on the LA shelf is very sensitive to the parameterization of SOC, primarily because the hypoxic conditions on the shelf are restricted to a relatively thin layer above the sediment. Fennel et al. (2013) have further shown that the SOC parameterization based on observations from Rowe et al. (2002), which is used in this study, performed best in simulating the observed hypoxic extent whereas parameterization based on lower SOC values from Murrell and Lehrter (2011) led to almost no hypoxia in this model. The apparent discrepancy between SOC observations and parameterizations used in mechanistic models remains to be reconciled. One explanation could be that empirical SOC measurements underestimate the true oxygen demand, because they do not account for accumulation of reduced metabolites of anaerobic metabolism (e.g., NH_4^+ , HS^- , Fe^{2+}). Accumulation of anaerobic metabolites can be episodically important in scavenging oxygen, thus acting to maintain hypoxic conditions during periods when traditional SOC measurements suggest a small DO sink. This interpretation is supported by Lehrter et al. (2012) who found that DIC fluxes (a better measure of total oxygen demand) were

relatively constant and insensitive to overlying DO concentration. Another explanation could be that the thickness of the simulated bottom boundary layer is overestimated. If this is the case, SOC would have to be larger than in reality in order to produce hypoxic bottom water. Future work on validating the expression and dynamics of the bottom boundary layer and its effect on hypoxia dynamics will address this question.

The SOC parameterization has the inherent limitation that it does not account for spatial variability in the supply of particulate organic matter reaching the sediment. An alternative model, where SOC varies responsive to the amount of organic matter sinking to the sediment (Fennel et al. 2011, 2013), essentially simulated identical results as presented here. While the SOC parameterization used here is simple, it does include two key parameters known to modulate SOC: temperature and dissolved oxygen.

In order to assess the effects of the model biases in WR we conducted a sensitivity experiment where an additional, constant oxygen consumption rate was applied to the water column DO based on observed WR rates from Murrell et al. (2013a). This generally improves the comparisons among measured and simulated WR, bottom water DO and SOC except in the Mid-shelf region where WR is overestimated and bottom DO is underestimated. The increased WR and slightly decreased SOC in the Model+CCR simulation also reduce the SOC fraction of total respiratory oxygen demand.

4.2. Primary processes controlling oxygen dynamics

The simulated seasonal transition from autotrophy to heterotrophy in the Mississippi Delta and Atchafalaya Plume regions has previously been reported in mesohaline waters (salinity: 15-29) in the Mississippi River plume (Breed et al., 2004). The Mississippi Intermediate and Mid-shelf regions were heterotrophic throughout the year, implying a

net import of organic carbon. This result is consistent with the observations of Murrell et al. (2013a) who found net heterotrophy on the western shelf and in deeper waters of the LA shelf. A more recent study by Fry et al. (2014) also suggested that the autotrophic near-river and nearshore areas could be net source regions of carbon fueling hypoxia in adjacent mid-shelf waters.

Despite the heterotrophy, the main sink for oxygen is outgassing in the Mississippi Intermediate and Mid-shelf regions during the summer hypoxic season. This result is consistent with frequent observations of supersaturated DO concentrations in surface plume waters, particularly in the Louisiana Bight region (Murrell et al. 2013b). The simultaneous occurrence of heterotrophy and outgassing of oxygen is primarily due to density stratification of the water column, which isolates the autotrophic upper waters that actively exchange oxygen with the atmosphere from the heterotrophic waters below. As shown in the summer DO balance (Fig. 9), the surface layers above the pycnocline were autotrophic in all sub-regions, driving outgassing of oxygen to the atmosphere despite the whole water column being heterotrophic. The decreased oxygen solubility of warmer waters typical of summer conditions also promotes outgassing, but the effect is relatively small compared to the autotrophy in surface waters (oxygen gas-exchange is fast and the summer change in water temperature is relatively small on the LA shelf). We have carried out sensitivity experiments where we doubled and halved the air-sea gas exchange coefficient (results not presented in the manuscript) and found that the model results are insensitive to the air-sea gas exchange rates, likely because the air-sea oxygen flux is fast.

It has previously been demonstrated, based on observations, that a strong near-surface pycnocline is a prerequisite for hypoxia on the LA shelf, while a weaker, near-bottom pycnocline determines the hypoxic layer that actually forms (Wiseman et al., 1997). This was confirmed by model simulations (Fennel et al., 2013), which show that hypoxia is constrained to a thin layer above the sediment over large parts of the shelf. A more recent retrospective analysis of data collected during shelf-wide sampling cruises reported that the 27-year (1985-2011) average thickness of the bottom hypoxic layer is 3.9 m and that there was an increasing trend in hypoxic layer thickness from 1985 to 2011 (Obenour et al., 2013).

Consistent with observations by Lehrter et al. (2009), our model demonstrated that a large fraction of PP occurred below the pycnocline and even within bottom 5-m water (Fig. 9, Table 4). This is presumably because the euphotic zone extends well below the pycnocline and sometimes to the bottom on the LA shelf (Chen et al., 2000; Lehrter et al., 2009). Lehrter et al. (2009) also observed that the euphotic zone in non-plume areas (salinity>31) is deeper than in plume areas, and that the average shelf-wide light attenuation strongly correlates with freshwater discharge from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers. In agreement with these observations, the simulated percentage of sub-pycnocline PP is higher in the Mississippi Intermediate region (52% below the pycnocline and 13.6% in the 5-m bottom layer) than in the Delta region (48% and 8.3%, respectively), and higher throughout the shelf in 2006 (a drought year with low freshwater discharge) than in average over the 4 years simulated (52% compared to 48%).

The importance of physical transport in replenishing bottom-water DO pools has been found in other coastal systems with seasonal hypoxia including Chesapeake Bay, where

Kemp et al. (1992) estimated that in summer the vertical oxygen flux across the pycnocline and the net longitudinal oxygen exchange offset ~55% and ~38% of total respiration below the pycnocline, respectively. More recent modeling work by Li et al. (2015) estimated that vertical diffusion and net advective fluxes respectively offset ~27% and ~64% of total respiration in the bottom 10 m during summer. Kemp et al. (1992) also showed that increased biological consumption of DO in bottom waters of Chesapeake Bay increases horizontal and vertical DO gradients and thereby increases physical transport of DO to the bottom waters during March to July. On the LA shelf the occasional occurrence of tropical storms and hurricanes can rapidly erode stratification and replenish bottom waters with DO. The lateral advection of oxygenated water from adjacent deep basins during upwelling-favorable wind conditions can also increase bottom-water DO on the LA shelf (Rabalais et al, 2007).

The result that SOC is the dominant oxygen sink in waters directly overlying the sediments (within 5 m above the bottom) is consistent with previous observational estimates for the LA shelf. Quinones-Rivera et al. (2007) estimated that SOC accounts for ~73% of the total DO loss within 1 m of the sediments during summer based on $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ measurements and an isotope fractionation model. Since the isotope approach only provides relative fractions of sediment and water column respiration, we cannot directly compare SOC and WR from Quinones-Rivera et al. (2007) to our simulations. However, the simulated proportions of sediment respiration to total respiration (on average 36% below pycnocline and 68% in the 5-m bottom layer) are consistent with the estimates of Quinones-Rivera et al. (2007). Adding the additional DO sink decreased the proportions of SOC to total respiration (26% below the pycnocline and 57% in the 5-m bottom layer)

but did not change the model result that SOC is the dominant DO sink in the bottom 5 m, demonstrating the relative sensitivity of the model to the SOC parameterization used.

4.3 Role of sub-pycnocline PP in hypoxia generation

The [summer oxygen balance](#) presented in the previous section suggests that physical transport processes and sediment respiration are major drivers of oxygen dynamics on the LA shelf, and that PP below the pycnocline may mitigate hypoxic conditions. However, in a sensitivity experiment where we disabled all biological processes in the water column the spatial extent of hypoxic bottom waters is only slightly reduced, suggesting that PP below the pycnocline has only a minor effect on hypoxia.

5. Summary and conclusions

In this study we used a physical-biogeochemical model to investigate the dynamics of dissolved oxygen and hypoxia on the LA shelf and to identify the key controlling processes. Comparisons with observations demonstrate that the model simulates the evolution of oxygen well but tends to overestimate bottom DO and SOC, and underestimates WR. When adding a constant oxygen consumption rate in the water column to correct the bias in WR rates, the model-simulated oxygen dynamics agree better with observations in all sub-regions except the Mid-shelf. This result suggests that organic matter from inshore waters may need to be included in future versions of the model.

Consistent with observations of Murrell et al. (2013a), our model demonstrated that the LA shelf is essentially heterotrophic throughout the year except for the areas directly

impacted by rivers during June and July. This implies a net import of organic carbon on the LA shelf. Air-sea gas exchange was the primary mode of replenishing the very heterotrophic waters in non-summer months with relatively strong mixing. However, in summer, stratification isolates the autotrophic surface from the heterotrophic lower waters. In the Mississippi Intermediate and Mid-shelf regions this isolation results in significant outgassing of oxygen across the air-sea interface despite a heterotrophic water column, exacerbating the risk of hypoxia in these regions.

In summer, the model indicates that a substantial fraction of primary production (~48%) occurs below the pycnocline and about 10% of primary production occurs within 5 m of the bottom where hypoxia forms most frequently. [In a sensitivity experiment where biological processes in the water column \(i.e. PP and WR\) were turned off we demonstrate that the below-pycnocline PP mitigates hypoxia only slightly, and that physical processes and sediment oxygen consumption together largely determine the spatial extent and dynamics of hypoxia on the LA shelf.](#)

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Table Captions

Table 1. RMSE and bias (both in units of $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$) between simulated and observed bottom DO concentrations. Comparisons were conducted over the simulation period from 2004 to 2007 using all available observations. Bias was calculated as model minus observation. N is the number of observations available for each calculation.

Table 2. RMSE and bias (both in units of $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$) between simulated and observed primary production (PP) or water column respiration (WR). Comparisons were conducted over the simulation period from 2004 to 2007 using all available observations. Bias was calculated as model minus observations. N is the number of observations for each category.

Table 3. RMSE and bias (both in units of $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$) between simulated median of sediment oxygen consumption (SOC) and observed SOC. The simulation period ranged from 2004 to 2007 while observations from different sources were collected during longer period from 1991 to 2011. Bias was calculated as model median minus observation with same bottom dissolved oxygen (DO) concentration. N is the number of observations available for each category.

Table 4. Shelf-wide average observed and simulated percentage of primary production below the pycnocline ($\text{mean} \pm \text{standard deviation}$). N is the number of observations.

Table 1. RMSE and bias (both in units of mmol O₂ m⁻³) between simulated and observed bottom DO concentrations. Comparisons were conducted over the simulation period from 2004 to 2007 using all available observations. Bias was calculated as model minus observation. N is the number of observations available for each category.

	Model		Model+CCR		N
	RMSE	Bias	RMSE	Bias	
Mississippi Delta	74.6	43.3	61.6	15.6	182
Mississippi Intermediate	72.2	40.3	61.5	18.7	845
Atchafalaya Plume	66.3	35.0	58.7	16.6	377
Mid-shelf	48.9	15.6	54.0	-18.8	435
All data	66.4	33.7	59.3	9.1	1839

Table 2. RMSE and bias (both in units of mmol O₂ m⁻² d⁻¹) between simulated and observed primary production (PP) or water column respiration (WR). Comparisons were conducted over the simulation period from 2004 to 2007 using all available observations. Bias was calculated as model minus observations. N is the number of observations for each category.

	PP				WR				N
	Model		Model+CCR		Model		Model+CCR		
	RMSE	Bias	RMSE	Bias	RMSE	Bias	RMSE	Bias	
Miss. Delta	145.2	-42.3	145.5	-43.6	115.8	-49.4	104.4	-17.9	55
Miss. Inter.	94.7	10.5	95.0	9.2	93.3	-45.9	84.5	-19.4	60
Atch. Plume	114.1	12.5	114.0	11.2	62.6	-27.6	58.4	-8.2	77
Mid-shelf	91.8	50.2	91.1	48.4	75.8	-7.0	81.7	35.6	71
All data	112.0	10.8	112.0	9.3	86.5	-30.8	81.9	-1.0	263

Table 3. RMSE and bias (both in units of $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$) between simulated median of sediment oxygen consumption (SOC) and observed SOC. The simulation period ranged from 2004 to 2007 while observations from different sources were collected during longer period from 1991 to 2011. Bias was calculated as model median minus observation with same bottom dissolved oxygen (DO) concentration. N is the number of observations available for each category.

	Model		Model+CCR		N
	RMSE	Bias	RMSE	Bias	
Rowe et al. 2012	15.9	11.1	13.6	8.0	12
McCarthy et al. 2013	15.8	10.2	13.9	7.0	18
Lehrter et al. 2012	26.1	24.6	22.4	20.7	22
Murrell and Lehrter 2011	24.7	21.2	21.7	18.1	31
All data	22.3	18.2	19.5	14.9	83

Table 4. Shelf-wide average observed and simulated percentage of primary production below the pycnocline (mean \pm standard deviation). N is the number of observations.

Cruise	N	Percentage of PP below pycnocline (%)	
		Observation	Simulation
Mar 2005	24	23.3 \pm 29.4	27.8 \pm 26.9
Apr 2006	31	35.3 \pm 30.0	23.4 \pm 25.2
Jun 2006	54	29.3 \pm 25.7	18.6 \pm 19.2
Sep 2006	71	38.7 \pm 25.7	39.4 \pm 28.2
May 2007	64	25.8 \pm 25.0	36.2 \pm 29.6
Aug 2007	60	24.7 \pm 23.3	40.9 \pm 30.9
RMSE			42.5
Bias			2.8
N			304

Figure Captions

Fig. 1. Model grid (light grey lines) and bathymetry (in meters). The black lines delineate areas used during model analysis and are referred to as Mississippi Delta, Mississippi Intermediate, Atchafalaya Plume and Mid-shelf region in the text. The black dots are stations where primary production (Lehrter et al. 2009) and respiration rates (Murrell et al. 2013) were collected.

Fig. 2. Mississippi and Atchafalaya River freshwater discharge (upper panel) and nutrient loads (lower panel) in 2004-2007. The dash line indicates the long-term climatology (1983-2010).

Fig. 3. Schematic of the biological model.

Fig. 4. Time series of simulated and observed dissolved oxygen concentration (DO) in bottom water in the Mississippi Delta, Mississippi Intermediate, Atchafalaya Plume and Mid-shelf regions. For the simulations, the medians are shown as solid lines (Model: blue line, Model+CCR: red line), the range between the 25th and 75th percentiles as dark blue/red area and the range between the minimum and maximum value as light blue/red area. For the observations, the medians of monthly binned observations are shown as black dots, the range between the 25th and 75th percentiles as thick vertical lines and the range between minimum and maximum values as thin vertical lines. The number of observations in each monthly bin is given above each maximum value. The dashed line indicates the hypoxia criterion of $62.5 \text{ mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$. Observations are from Rabalais et al. (2007), Lehrter et al. (2009, 2012), Nunnally et al. (2012), Murrell et al. (2014), and the MCH program.

Fig. 5. Vertical profiles of model bias (model minus observations, $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-3}$) in dissolved oxygen (DO) calculated from 2004 to 2007 for June to August in the 4 sub-regions. The vertical axis is the scaled depth, where 0 corresponds to the surface and -1 to the bottom. The light grey areas represent the standard deviation in the observations. Observations are from Rabalais et al. (2007), Lehrter et al. (2009, 2012), Murrell et al. (2014), and the MCH program.

Fig. 6. Vertically integrated rates of observed and simulated primary production (upper panel) and water column respiration (lower panel) in the 4 sub-regions. The error bars indicate the standard deviation. The number of observations in each sub-region is given above the error bars.

Fig. 7. Model simulated sediment oxygen consumption (SOC) versus bottom dissolved oxygen (DO) for the period 2004 to 2007, including the median (solid line) and the range between 25th and 75th percentiles (shaded area). Also shown for comparison are observations from Rowe et al. (2002), McCarthy (2013), Lehrter et al. (2012) and Murrell and Lehrter (2011).

Fig. 8. Simulated net community production (PP-TR) versus air-sea flux of oxygen for the 4 sub-regions. The colored dots represent monthly means averaged over 2004 to 2007. Positive air-sea flux indicates oxygen is taken by water whereas negative air-sea flux indicates oxygen outgasses. Positive (PP-TR) suggests autotrophic whereas negative (PP-TR) suggests heterotrophic. Standard deviations of the air-sea flux in different months and sub-regions range widely from 13 to 58 $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$ and standard deviation of (PP-TR) range from 12 to 63 $\text{mmol O}_2 \text{ m}^{-2} \text{ d}^{-1}$, both of which are higher in Mississippi Delta and Atchafalaya Plume and lower in the other two regions.

Fig. 9. Simulated 4-year (2004-2007) mean oxygen balance in summer for the 4 sub-regions. Oxygen source and sink terms are given for the surface layer above the pycnocline, for the mid layer and for the 5-m thick bottom layer. The average depth of the pycnocline, depth at 5 m above bottom and the average water column depth are indicated for each sub-region. The open circles indicate the balance of primary production (PP) and respiration+nitrification (WR) in each layer. For the bottom layer, the bars for respiration+nitrification (WR) and sediment oxygen consumption (SOC) are shown stacked and SOC is repeated separately. The net rate of oxygen change in each layer (i.e. the sum of all oxygen source and sink terms) is given and denoted as Net.

Fig. 10. Time series of simulated hypoxic extent for the full model (black line) and the model without biological processes in the water column (red line). Also shown is the observed hypoxic extent in late July (black dots). The observed hypoxic extent was estimated by linearly interpolating the observed oxygen concentrations onto the model grid and then calculating the area with oxygen concentrations below the hypoxic threshold (Fennel et al., 2013).

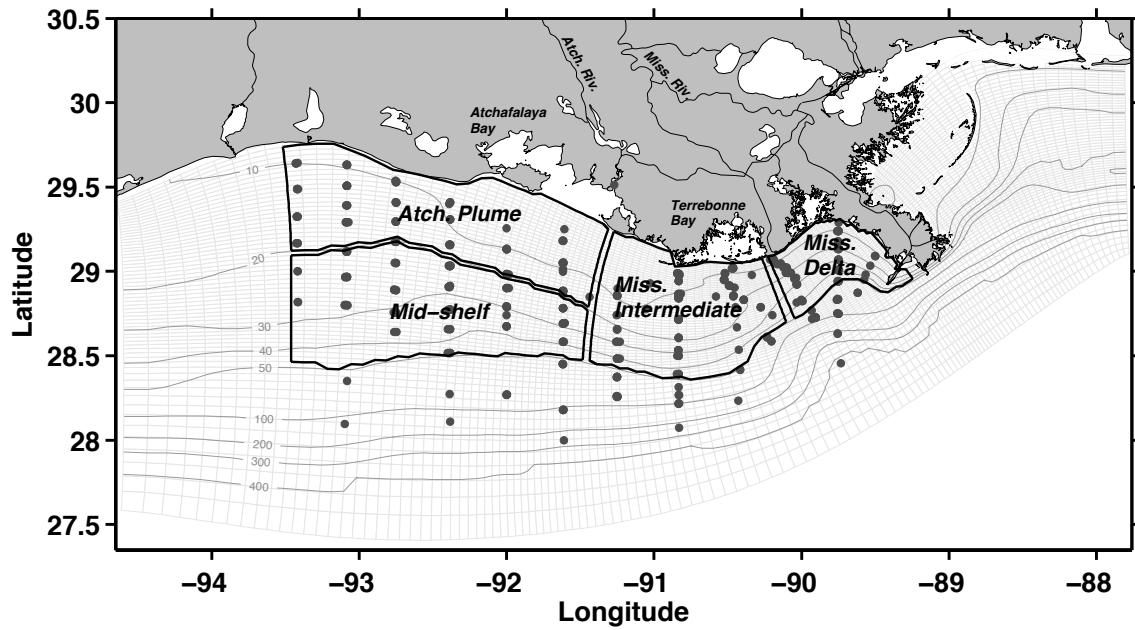


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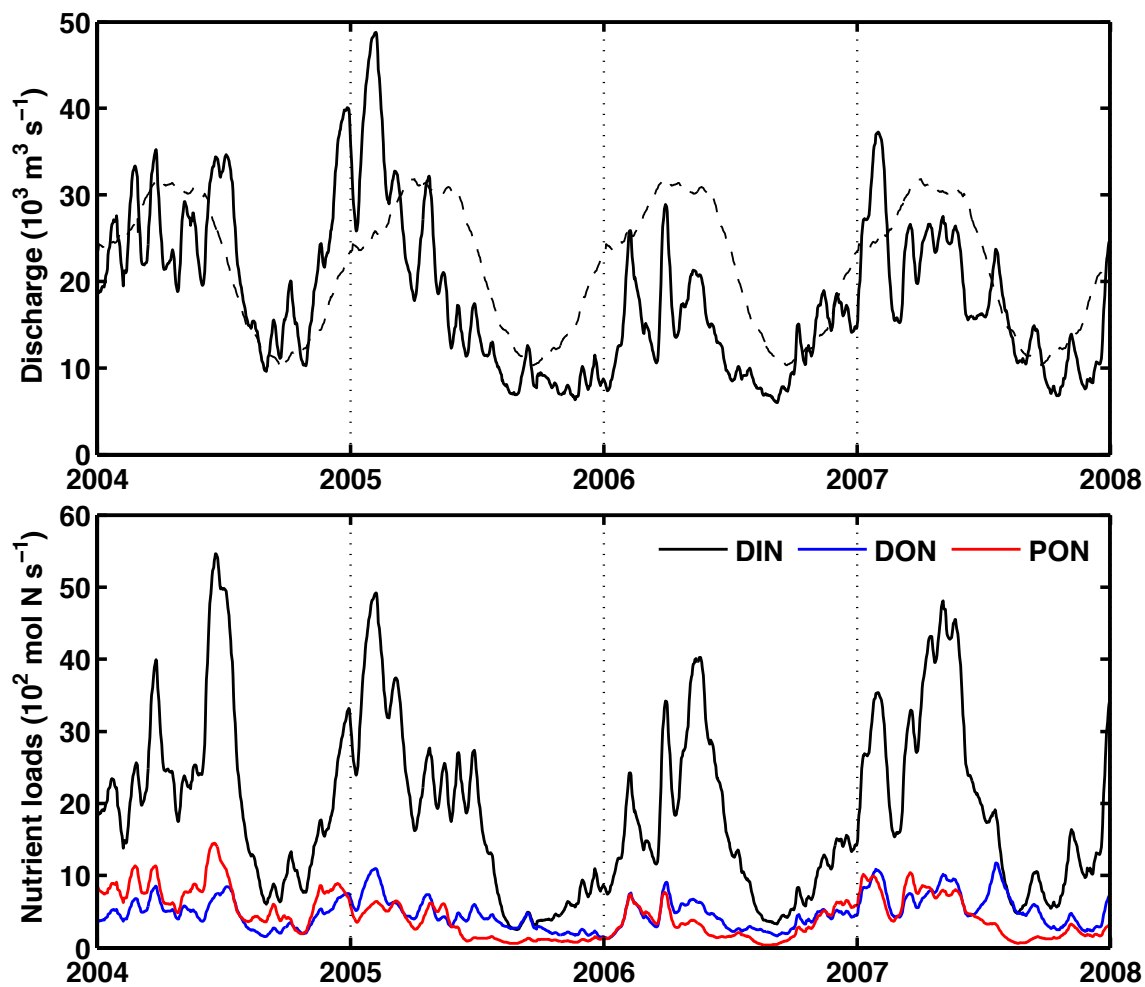


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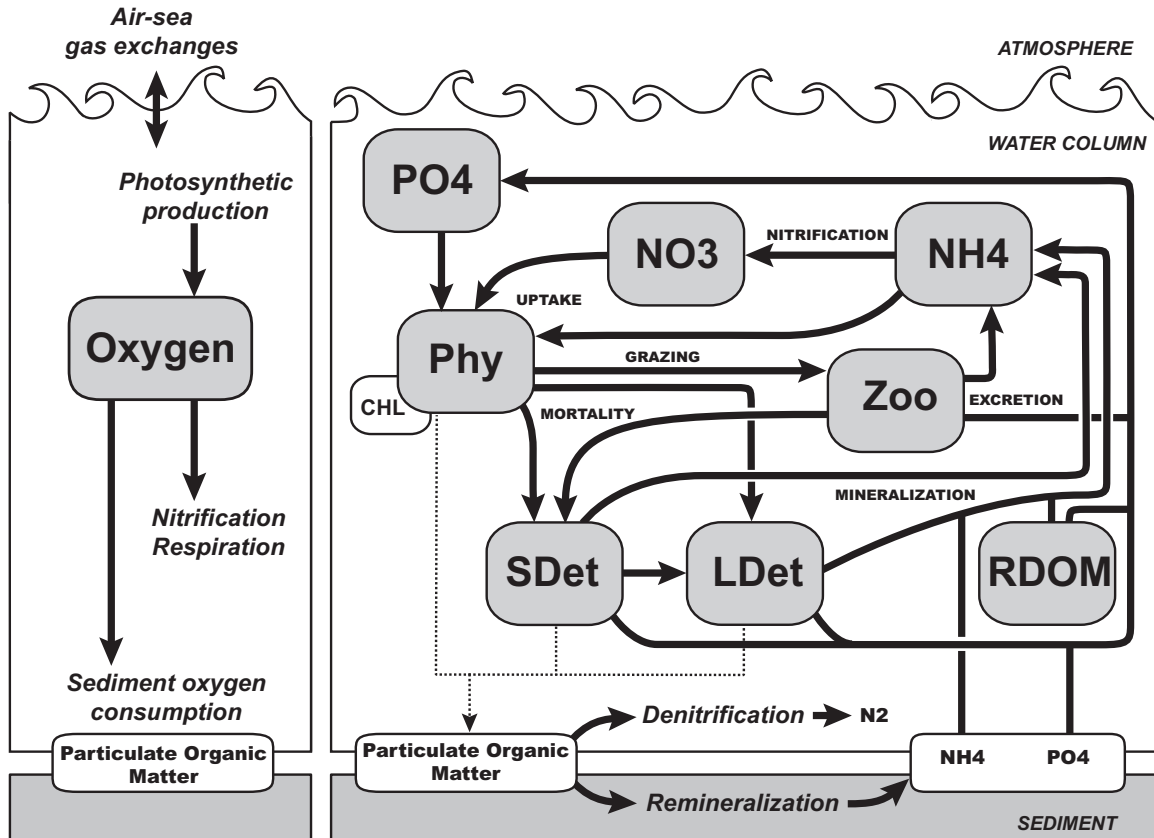


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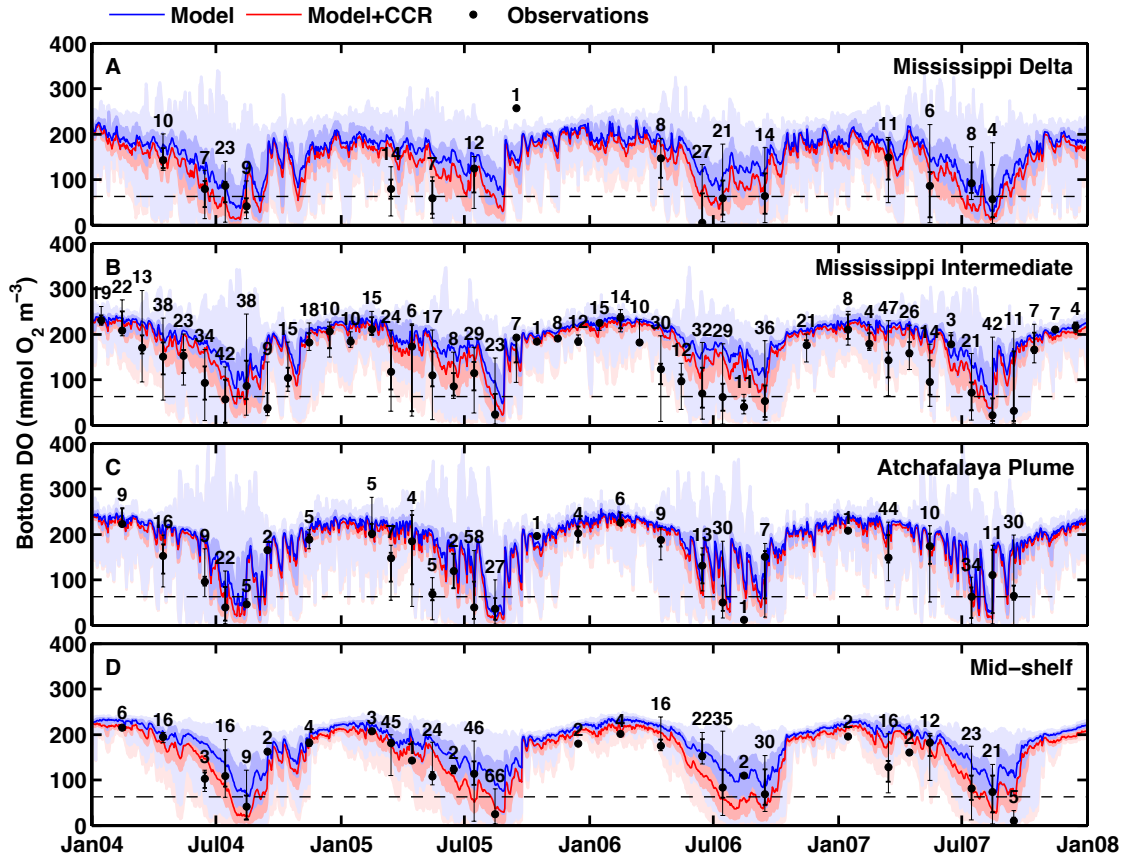
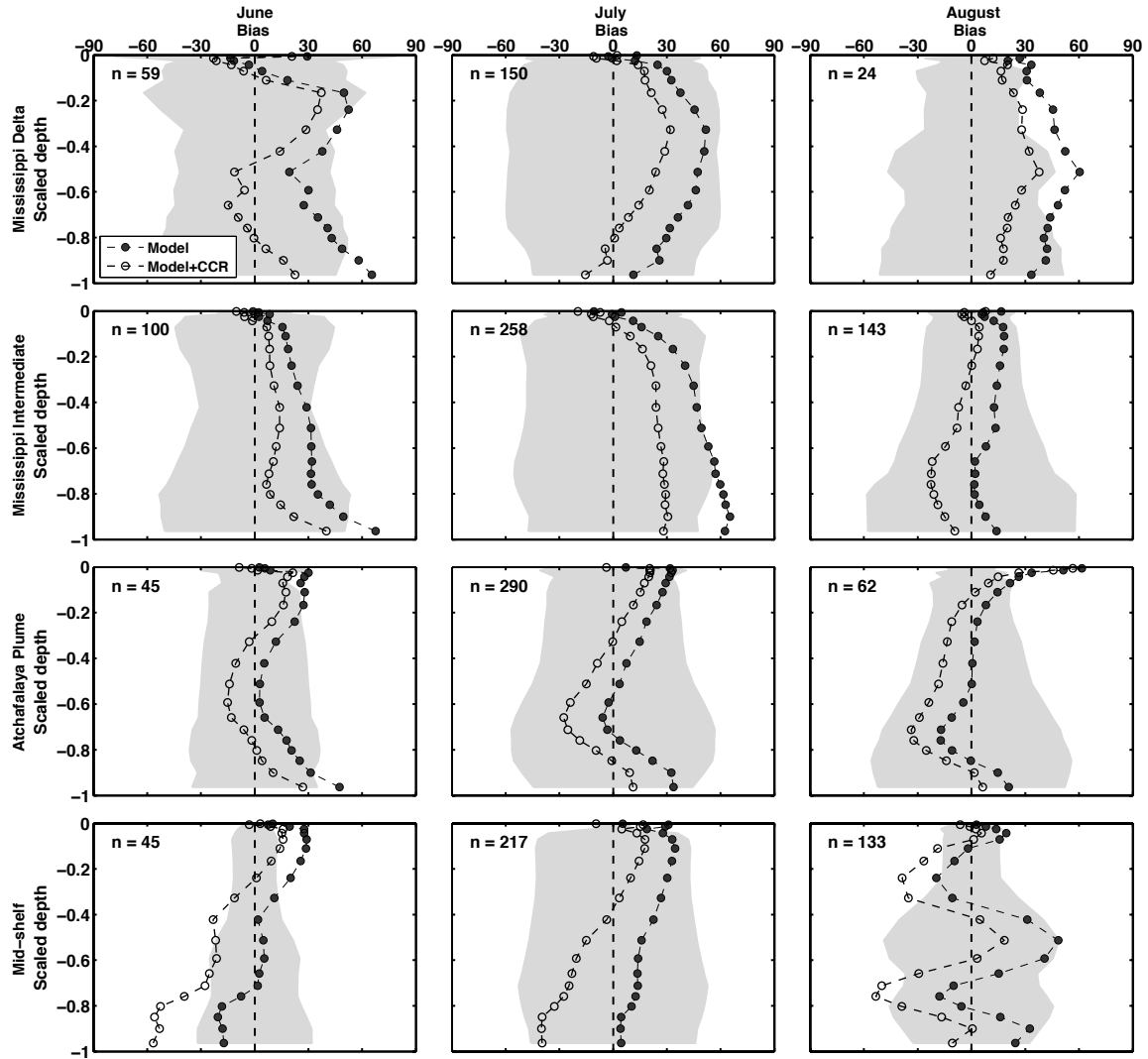


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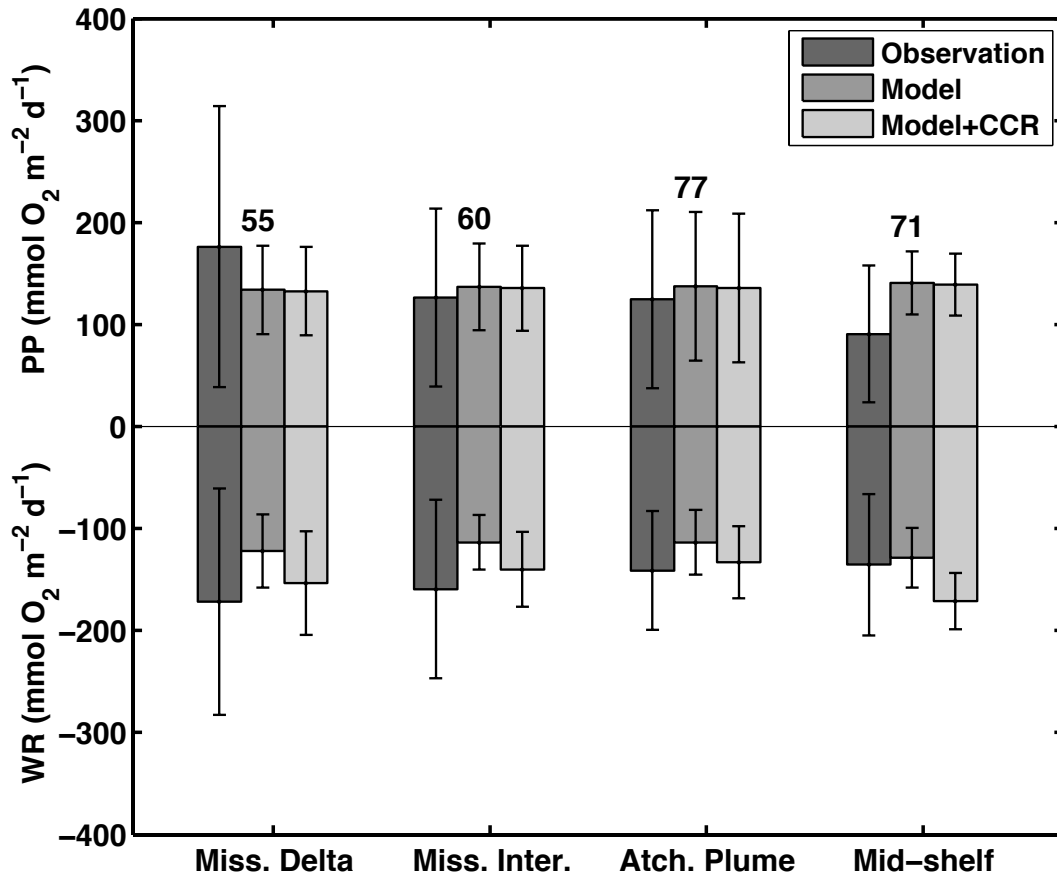


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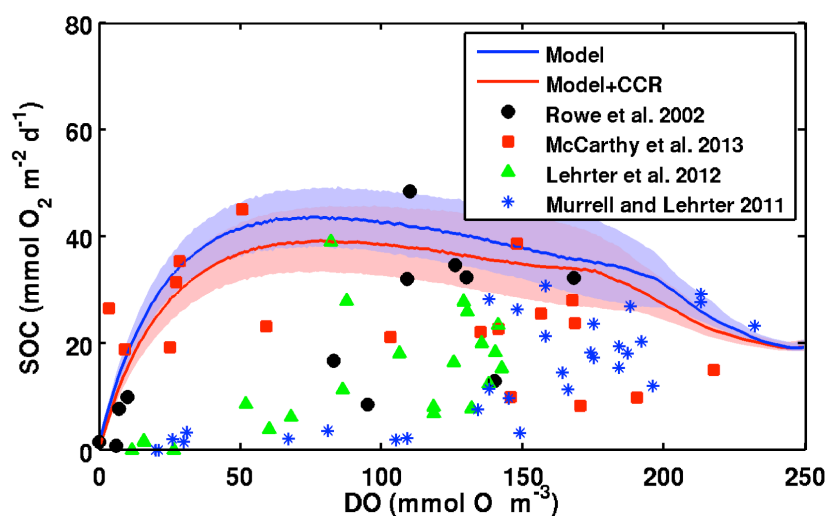


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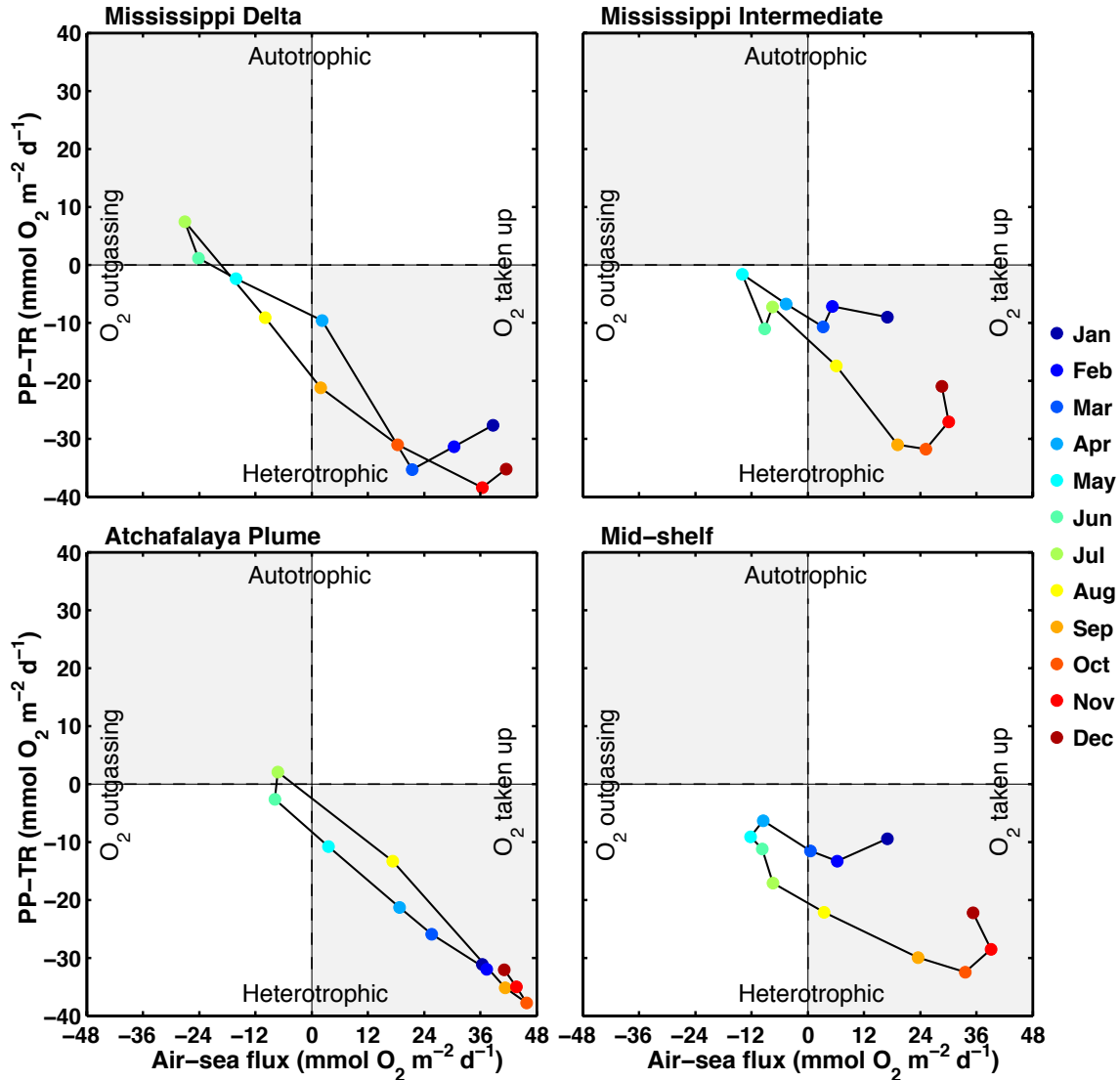


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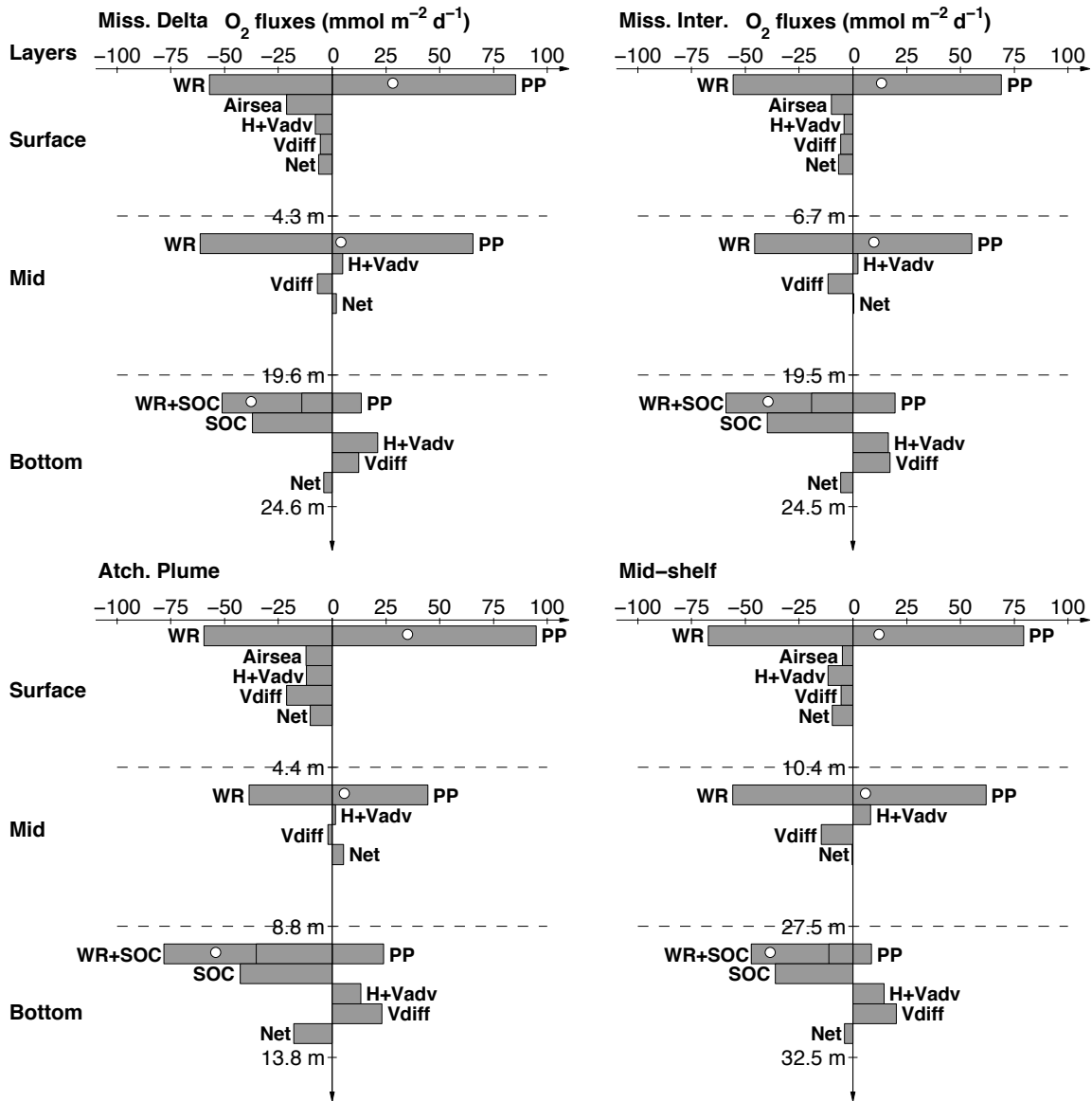
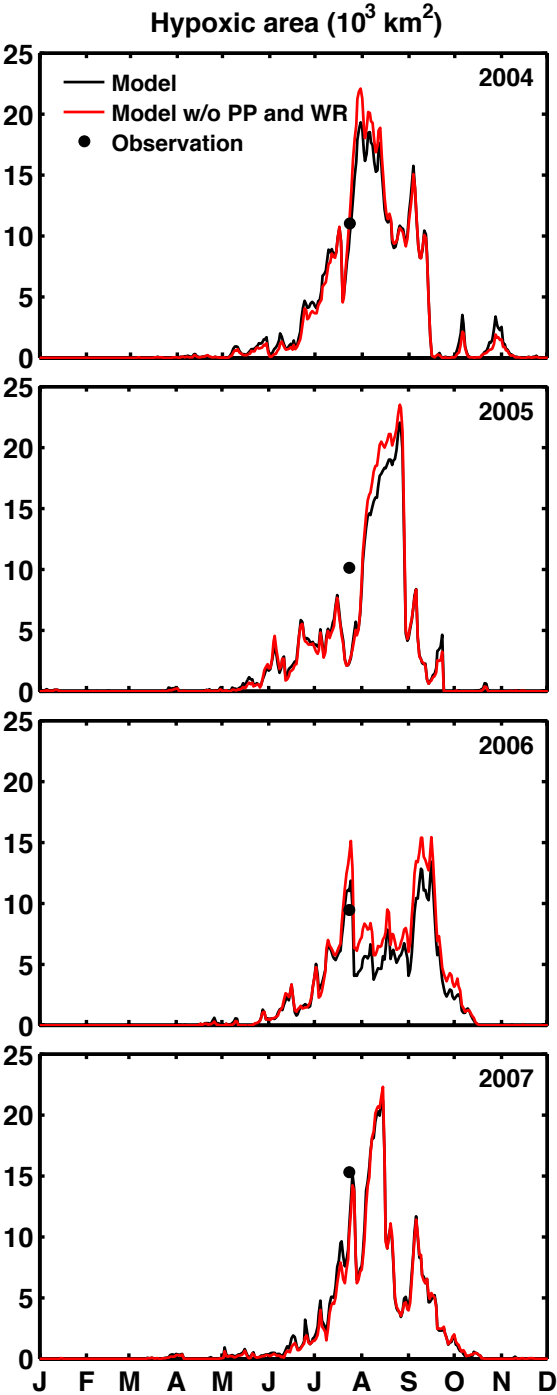


Fig. 9. Simulated 4-year (2004-2007) mean oxygen balance in summer for the 4 sub-regions. Oxygen source and sink terms are given for the surface layer above the pycnocline, for the mid layer and for the 5-m thick bottom layer. The average depth of the pycnocline, depth at 5 m above bottom and the average water column depth are indicated for each sub-region. The open circles indicate the balance of primary production (PP) and respiration+nitrification (WR) in each layer. For the bottom layer, the bars for respiration+nitrification (WR) and sediment oxygen consumption (SOC) are

855 shown stacked and SOC is repeated separately. The net rate of oxygen change in each
856 layer (i.e. the sum of all oxygen source and sink terms) is given and denoted as Net.

857



858

Fig. 10. Time series of simulated hypoxic extent for the full model (black line) and the model without biological processes in the water column (red line). Also shown is the observed hypoxic extent in late July (black dots). The observed hypoxic extent was estimated by linearly interpolating the observed oxygen concentrations onto the model grid and then calculating the area with oxygen concentrations below the hypoxic threshold (Fennel et al., 2013).