



Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

SCIENCE @ DIRECT®

C. R. Geoscience 337 (2005) 107–123



<http://france.elsevier.com/direct/CRAS2A/>

External Geophysics, Climate and Environment

# Fluvial filtering of land-to-ocean fluxes: from natural Holocene variations to Anthropocene

Michel Meybeck<sup>a,\*</sup>, Charles Vörösmarty<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Sisyphé, université Paris-6/CNRS, 4, place Jussieu, 75252 Paris cedex 05, France*

<sup>b</sup> *Water System Analysis Group, Complex systems, University of New Hampshire, Morse Hall, Durham, NH 03824, USA*

Received 12 July 2004; accepted after revision 11 September 2004

Available online 26 November 2004

Written on invitation of the Editorial Board

## Abstract

The evolution of river systems and their related fluxes is considered at various time scales: (i) over the last 18 000 years, under climatic variability control, (ii) over the last 50 to 200 years (Anthropocene) due to direct human impacts. Natural Holocene variations in time and space depend on (i) land-to-ocean connections (endorheism, glacial cover, exposure of continental shelf); (ii) types of natural fluvial filters (e.g., wetlands, lakes, floodplains, estuaries). Anthropocene changes concern (i) land–ocean connection (e.g., partial to total runoff reduction resulting from water management), (ii) modification and removal of natural filters, (iii) creation of new filters, particularly irrigated fields and reservoirs, (iv) acceleration and/or development of material sources from human activities. The total river basin area directly affected by human activities is of the same order of magnitude ( $> 40 \text{ Mkm}^2$ ) as the total area affected over the last 18 000 years. A tentative analysis of 38 major river systems totaling  $55 \text{ Mkm}^2$  is proposed for several criteria: (i) trajectories of Holocene evolution, (ii) occurrence of natural fluvial filters, (iii) present-day fluvial filters: most river basins are unique. Riverine fluxes per unit area are characterized by hot spots that exceed the world average by one order of magnitude. At the Anthropocene (i.e., since 1950), many riverine fluxes have globally increased (sodium, chloride, sulfate, nitrogen, phosphorous, heavy metals), others are stable (calcium, bicarbonate, sediments) or likely to decrease (dissolved silica). Future trajectories of river fluxes will depend on the balance between increased sources of material (e.g., soil erosion, pollution, fertilization), water abstraction for irrigation and the modification of fluvial filters, particularly the occurrence of reservoirs that already intercept half of the water and store at least 30% of river sediment fluxes. In some river systems, retention actually exceeds material production and river fluxes are actually decreasing. These trajectories are specific to each river and to each type of river material. Megacities, mining and industrial districts can be considered as hot spots of contaminants fluxes, while major reservoirs are global-scale sinks for all particulates. Global picture should therefore be determined at a fine resolution, since regional differences in Anthropocene evolution of river fluxes may reach one order of magnitude, as illustrated for total nitrogen. **To cite this article:** M. Meybeck, C. Vörösmarty, C. R. Geoscience 337 (2005). © 2004 Académie des sciences. Published by Elsevier SAS. All rights reserved.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [michel.meybeck@ccr.jussieu.fr](mailto:michel.meybeck@ccr.jussieu.fr) (M. Meybeck), [charles.vorosmarty@unh.edu](mailto:charles.vorosmarty@unh.edu) (C. Vörösmarty).

## Résumé

**Le filtrage des flux continents–océans dans les systèmes fluviaux : variations au cours de l’Holocène et état à l’Anthropocène.** L’évolution des systèmes fluviaux à l’échelle globale et de leurs flux aux océans est considérée (i) sur les derniers 18 000 ans, (ii) sur les 50 à 200 dernières années (période Anthropocène). Pendant l’Holocène, environ 40 Mkm<sup>2</sup> sont soumis à des variations temporelles et spatiales importantes, contrôlées par (i) des facteurs climatiques régissant les connexions continents–océans (endoréisme, recouvrement glaciaire, exposition de la plate-forme continentale), (ii) des facteurs propres à chaque bassin régissant la rétention et la transformation des matériaux dans les filtres fluviaux (zones humides, lacs, plaines d’inondation, estuaires). Les changements anthropocènes concernent une superficie du même ordre, caractérisée par (i) la réduction partielle à totale des écoulements fluviaux, (ii) la modification, voire la suppression, des filtres naturels, (iii) la création de nouveaux filtres fluviaux particulièrement les zones irriguées et les réservoirs, (iv) l’accélération et le développement de multiples sources de matériaux résultant des activités humaines. L’analyse des 38 grands systèmes fluviaux, totalisant une superficie de 55 Mkm<sup>2</sup>, porte sur (i) leurs évolutions naturelles depuis 18 000 ans, (ii) l’importance relative des divers filtres naturels, (iii) la situation actuelle des filtres fluviaux : les caractéristiques et les trajectoires de ces systèmes fluviaux sont en général uniques. Les flux spécifiques (t km<sup>-2</sup> an<sup>-1</sup>) de matière varient de deux ordres de grandeur et environ 30 % de la surface terrestre génère 90 % des flux. À l’Anthropocène (depuis 1950), la plupart des flux fluviaux ont globalement augmenté (sodium, chlorure, sulfate, azote, phosphore, métaux lourds), certains sont stables (calcium, bicarbonates, sédiments), d’autres ont probablement diminué (silice dissoute). Leur évolution future dépendra de l’équilibre entre, d’une part, l’accroissement des sources de matériaux fluviaux (érosion des sols, pollution, fertilisation) et, d’autre part, la consommation de l’eau par l’agriculture irriguée et la modification des filtres fluviaux. Les réservoirs interceptent déjà la moitié des eaux fluviales et stockent au moins un tiers des sédiments fluviaux. Dans certains bassins, la rétention excède la production de matériaux fluviaux et les flux sont en régression. Les grandes villes, les régions minières ou industrielles ainsi que les grands réservoirs sont des « points chauds » de production ou de rétention de matériaux fluviaux. L’évolution de chaque fleuve est caractérisée par un ensemble de trajectoires spécifiques à chaque type de matériau. La vision globale des systèmes fluviaux et de leur évolution future nécessite donc une résolution fine, tant pour les facteurs de contrôle naturel qu’anthropique. *Pour citer cet article : M. Meybeck, C. Vörösmarty, C. R. Geoscience 337 (2005).*

© 2004 Académie des sciences. Published by Elsevier SAS. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Global river fluxes; Global change; Fluvial filters; Holocene; Anthropocene; Earth-system analysis

*Mots-clés :* Apports fluviaux globaux ; Changement global ; Filtres fluviaux ; Holocène ; Anthropocène ; Système terrestre

## 1. Introduction

Rivers represent the major link between continents and oceans in most biogeochemical cycles; therefore, riverine fluxes have been considered by scientists working on the Earth system as geochemists and biogeochemists since the first study of Clarke in 1924 [4,10,33]. For water managers, rivers are prime targets for direct water resource, and are also used for energy supply, commercial transportation. Yet the transformation of river systems by humans is now reaching a level at which this essential Earth system’s component is controlled more by anthropogenic forcing than by natural drivers as climate, relief or lithology, at least where there are significant populations of humans [39,47,67,73]. This is a state that characterizes the Anthropocene era, as first postulated by Vernadski in 1926 [69]. This concept has been recently revived

by Crutzen [12,13] mainly for the climate evolution, but it is also highly applicable to the evolution of river systems [42,44,73].

The global evolution of riverine fluxes during geological times has shaped the coastal zone, and fed the oceans with essential nutrients as phosphorus and silica [33,38], regulated long-term climate through CO<sub>2</sub> uptake during continent weathering [3], and supporting biodiversity of continental aquatic systems [30]. The recent evolution of riverine fluxes over the last century is now beginning to impact the whole Earth system [53,65], yet this type of global change has so far not been expressively considered within the integrated water management concept advocated for a better use of the water resources [59,79], although it will be a central question of major Earth system’s science initiatives [65], such as the newly consolidated