

Q14

Do changes in the Sun and volcanic eruptions affect the ozone layer?

Yes, factors such as changes in solar radiation, as well as the formation of stratospheric particles after volcanic eruptions, do influence the ozone layer. However, neither factor can explain the average decreases observed in global total ozone over the last three decades. If large volcanic eruptions occur in the coming decades while ODS levels remain high, ozone depletion will increase for several years afterward.

Changes in solar radiation and increases in stratospheric particles from volcanic eruptions both affect the abundance of stratospheric ozone. Global total ozone in the early 1990s had decreased by about 5% when compared to pre-1980 values, and is now about 3% below pre-1980 values (see Q13). The depletion is primarily attributed to increases in reactive halogen gases, with additional depletion in the early 1990s associated with the volcanic eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. Reactive halogen gases are represented by changes in *equivalent effective stratospheric chlorine* (EESC). EESC values account for stratospheric chlorine and bromine abundances and their different effectiveness in destroying ozone (see definition in Q16). A comparison of the smooth year-to-year changes in ozone and EESC shows that the quantities are inversely related to each other, with ozone first decreasing while EESC increased (see Figure Q14-1). After the mid-1990s, the annual changes in both quantities remained constant and then slowly reversed sign. Changes in solar output and volcanic activity do not show such smooth long-term changes, as discussed below, and therefore cannot be the cause of long-term global ozone depletion.

Total ozone and solar changes. The formation of stratospheric ozone is initiated by ultraviolet (UV) radiation coming from the Sun (see Figure Q2-1). As a result, an increase in the Sun's radiation output increases the amount of ozone in Earth's atmosphere. The Sun's radiation output and sunspot number vary over the well-documented 11-year solar cycle. Observations over several solar cycles since the 1960s show that global total ozone levels vary by 1 to 2% between the maximum and minimum of a typical cycle. Changes in incoming solar radiation at a wavelength of 10.7 cm are often used as a surrogate for changes in solar output at UV wavelengths. The long-term changes in the 10.7-cm output in Figure Q14-1 clearly show alternating periods of maximum and minimum values in total solar output separated by about 5 to 6 years. If changes in solar output were the cause of global ozone depletion, a gradually decreasing output would have been observed around 1980 or earlier, slowing sharply in the mid-1990s. Since such a decrease was not observed, nor is expected based on longer-term solar observations, the long-term decreases in global ozone cannot result from changes in solar output alone. Most analyses presented in this and previous international scientific assessments quantitatively account for the influence of the 11-year solar cycle on long-term variations in ozone.

Total ozone and past volcanoes. Explosive volcanic eruptions inject sulfur gases directly into the stratosphere, causing new sulfate particles to be formed. The particles initially form in the stratosphere downwind of the volcano and then spread throughout the hemisphere or globally as air is transported by stratospheric winds. One method of detecting the presence of volcanic particles in the stratosphere uses observations of the transmission of solar radiation through the atmosphere (see Figure Q14-1). When large amounts of new particles are formed in the stratosphere over an extensive region, solar transmission is measurably reduced. The eruptions of Mt. Agung (1963), El Chichón (1982), and Mt. Pinatubo (1991) are the most recent examples of sulfur injections that temporarily reduced solar transmission.

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Laboratory measurements and stratospheric observations have shown that chemical reactions on the surfaces of volcanically produced particles can increase ozone destruction by increasing the amounts of the highly reactive chlorine gas, chlorine monoxide (ClO). The ozone response depends on the total abundance of EESC after the eruption (see Q16). At times of relatively low EESC, such as the early 1960s, ozone is not very sensitive to stratospheric injection of volcanic sulfate particles. At times of higher EESC amounts, such as from 1980 to the present, global ozone is expected to decrease significantly following large explosive eruptions. The most recent large eruption was that of Mt. Pinatubo, which resulted in as much as a 10-fold increase in the number of particles available for surface reactions. Both El Chichón and Mt. Pinatubo increased global ozone depletion for a few years (see Figure Q14-1). EESC was too low for ozone depletion to occur after the Mt. Agung eruption in 1963. The effect on ozone diminishes during the years following an eruption as volcanic particles are gradually removed from the stratosphere by gravitational settling and large-scale atmospheric transport. As particles are removed, solar transmission is restored. Based on the short residence time of volcanic particles in the stratosphere, the two large eruptions in the past three decades cannot account directly for the continuous long-term decreases in global total ozone observed over the same period.

Reactive chlorine from volcanoes. Explosive volcanic plumes generally contain large quantities of reactive chlorine in the form of hydrogen chloride (HCl). HCl is a reactive halogen gas that can be converted to ClO, which rapidly destroys ozone (see Figure Q8-3). The plumes also contain a considerable amount of water vapor, which forms rainwater and ice in the rising fresh plume. Rainwater and ice efficiently scavenge and remove HCl while it is still in the lower atmosphere (troposphere). As a result, most of the HCl in explosive volcanic plumes does not enter the stratosphere. After recent explosive eruptions, observations of HCl in the stratosphere have confirmed that increases are small compared with the total amount of chlorine in the stratosphere from other sources.

Antarctic volcanoes. Volcanoes on the Antarctic continent are of special interest due to their proximity to the Antarctic ozone hole. An explosive eruption could in principle inject volcanic aerosol and small amounts of HCl directly into the stratosphere over Antarctica, which could lead to ozone depletion. However, to be a possible cause of the annually recurring ozone hole beginning in the early 1980s, explosive Antarctic eruptions would need to have occurred at least every few years to maintain volcanic emissions in the stratosphere. This is not the case. Only the Mt. Erebus volcano is currently active in Antarctica. No explosive eruptions of Mt. Erebus or any other Antarctic volcano have occurred since 1980. Therefore, explosive volcanic eruptions in the last three decades have not caused the Antarctic ozone hole and, as noted above, have not been sufficient to cause the long-term depletion of global total ozone.

Total ozone and future volcanoes. Observations and atmospheric models indicate that the record-low ozone levels observed in 1992–1993 resulted from the large number of particles produced by the Mt. Pinatubo eruption, combined with the relatively large amounts of EESC present in the stratosphere in the early 1990s. If the Mt. Pinatubo eruption had occurred before 1980, changes to global ozone would have been much smaller than observed in 1992–1993 because EESC values were much lower. EESC values will remain substantial in the early decades of the 21st century even as ODSs decline globally, with 1980 values not reached until about 2050 (see Figures Q16-1 and Q20-2). Large volcanic eruptions in the intervening years will cause more ozone depletion. If an explosive eruption larger than Mt. Pinatubo were to occur, peak ozone losses could be larger than previously observed and substantial ozone losses could persist for longer time periods. As halogen gas abundances gradually decline, the effect of volcanic eruptions on ozone will lessen.

Figure Q14-1. Solar changes and volcanoes.

Global total ozone values have decreased beginning in the early 1980s. Ozone values shown are the 3-month averages without corrections for solar or volcanic effects and annual averages corrected for seasonal and solar effects (from Figure Q13-1). These long-term ozone decreases are primarily attributable to equivalent effective stratospheric chlorine (EESC), which has increased over the same time period. Since the mid-1990s, changes in both quantities have slowed and reversed sign. Incoming solar radiation varies on a well-recognized 11-year cycle related to sunspot activity. The amount of incoming solar radiation at a wavelength of 10.7 cm is often used as a surrogate for incoming solar radiation at UV wavelengths that produce stratospheric ozone. The 10.7-cm radiation values clearly show the recent periods of solar maximum and minimum. A comparison of the solar radiation and ozone changes strongly indicates that the cyclic changes in solar output alone cannot account for the long-term decrease in total ozone. Following large volcanic eruptions, transmission of solar radiation to Earth's surface is reduced by the large number of new sulfur-containing particles formed in the stratosphere. The three large volcanic eruptions that occurred between 1960 and 2010 temporarily decreased solar transmission as measured in Hawaii. Volcanic particles increase ozone depletion only for a few years before they are removed from the stratosphere by natural processes. As a consequence, the two most recent volcanic eruptions cannot be the cause of the continuous long-term decrease found in global total ozone.

