

An underwater photograph showing a large school of small, silvery fish swimming in clear blue water. The fish are moving in a loose, coordinated pattern. In the foreground, there are dark, rocky structures covered in green algae or coral. Sunlight filters down from the surface, creating a bright, shimmering effect at the top of the frame.

GLOBAL CHANGE ECOLOGY AND SUSTAINABILITY
a.a. 2025-2026

Conservation and Management of Marine Ecosystems
Prof. Stanislao Bevilacqua (sbevilacqua@units.it)

The marine environment

The importance of oceans

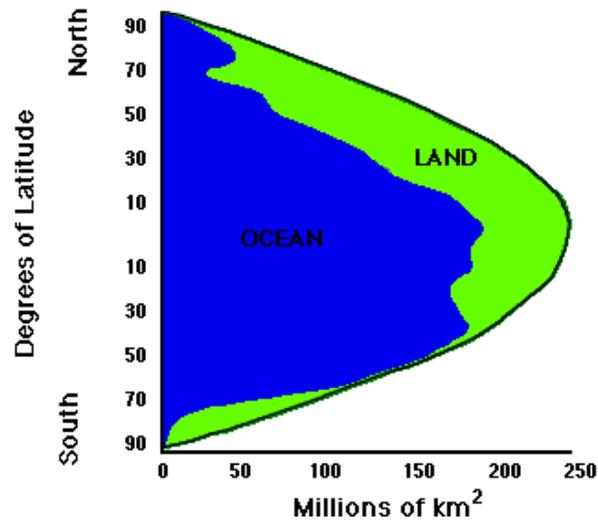
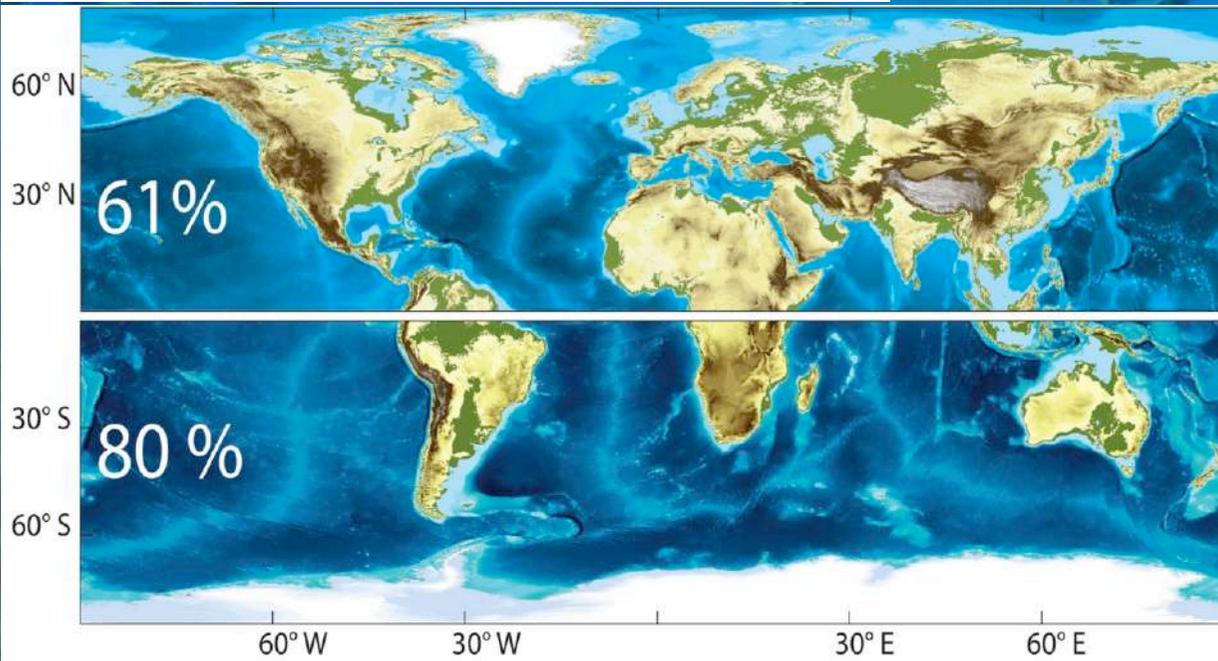


Diagram showing the distribution of land and water with latitude. The shaded portion is land and the area to the left of that is ocean. Note the large percentage of land in the Northern hemisphere as compared with the southern hemisphere.

More than 70% of Earth's surface is covered by sea water, with 1300 billion km³ in volume

1. 80% of international trade is carried by the sea
2. By the year 2020, 75% of world's population live within 60 km from the sea shore
3. The world fish catch amounts to about 20% of total human consumption of animal proteins
4. The offshore production of oil and gas accounted for about 30% of world's total and is increasing
5. Coastal marine environments and wetlands may provide as much as 43% of the estimated value of the world's ecosystem services, and yet over 65% of such areas have been already undergone severe environmental degradation



The importance of oceans

- 1. We do not know the impact of most activities on our seas**
 - Increasing impact from old (e.g., oil) and new chemicals
 - Overexploitation of marine resources
 - New pollution sources
- 2. Systematic underestimation of marine ecosystems and their economical functions**
 - Europe has 89,000 km of coastline with a very high coast to surface ratio
 - European and Italian economy are increasingly dependent upon resources from the sea
- 3. Increasing tourism impact:**
 - 75,000,000 international tourists (EU)
 - 60,000,000 domestic tourists every year (EU)
- 4. Increasing economical and societal role:**
 - >600,000 persons in Europe work in the fields of aquaculture, fisheries, and related industries

The importance of oceans

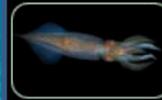
Main threats

1. Hydrocarbons and other contaminants
 - New forms of chemical pollution (micropollutants and secondary metabolites)
2. Habitat destruction
3. Eutrophication
4. Pathogenic forms and sanitary problems
5. Overfishing
6. Introduction of alien species
7. Climate changes and potential consequences on marine biodiversity

Ecosystems goods and services



Benthic – pelagic coupling



Pelagic or planktonic species lay eggs, or have larval or juvenile stages in benthos

Life cycles



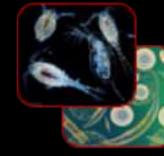
Benthic species spent part of their life as adult, juvenile or larvae in plankton



Herbivores and predators from the water column feed on benthos



Benthic species have adults or juveniles feeding on plankton or on larval - juveniles of nekton



Planktonic species have resting stages in benthos. Organic matter (fecal pellets, dead organisms, etc.) fall on the bottom

Organic matter

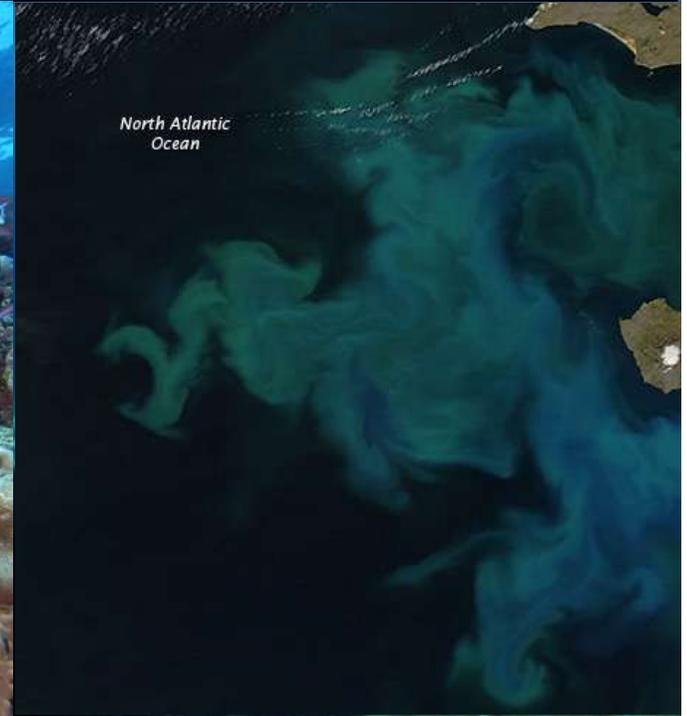
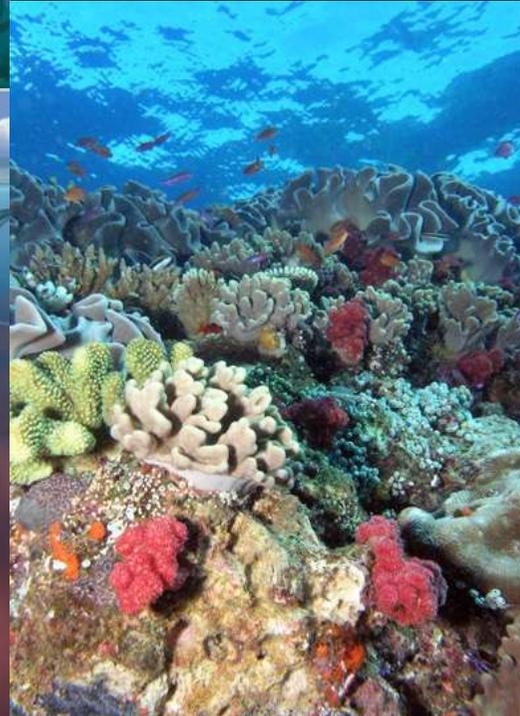
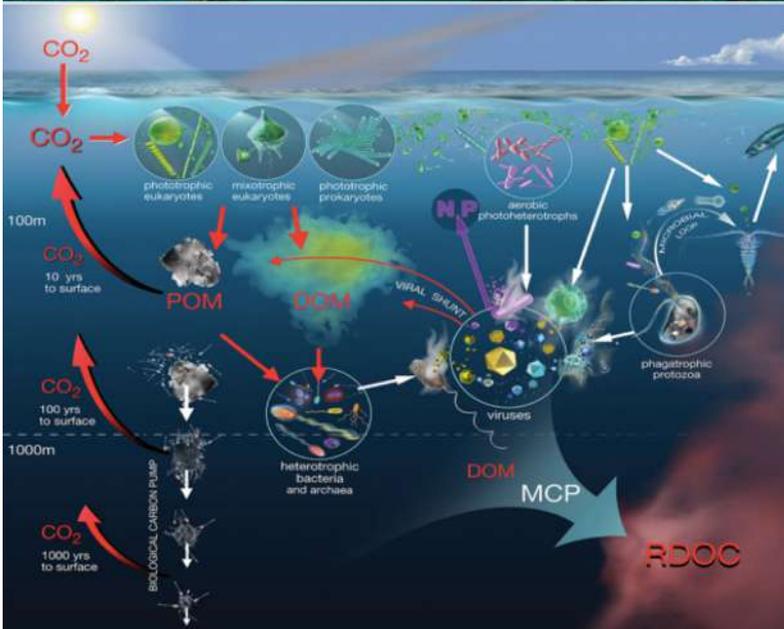
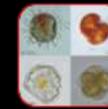


Resting stages disclose and turn back to the plankton. Benthic species feed on particles and could turn in the water column via life cycles



Nutrients and gases reach the bottom and can turn back as living matter or through upwelling

Biogeochemical cycles

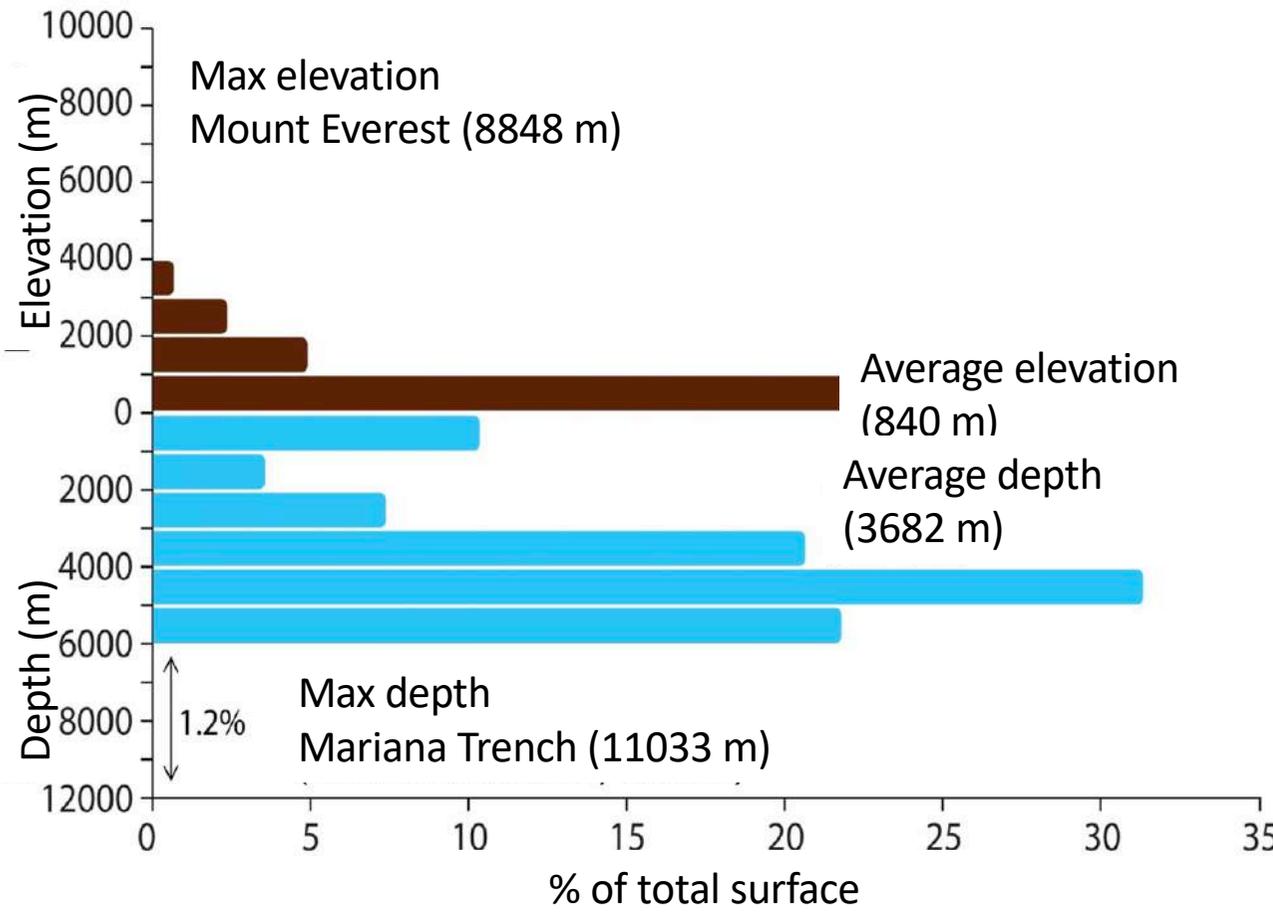


The importance of oceans

Managing the oceans means:

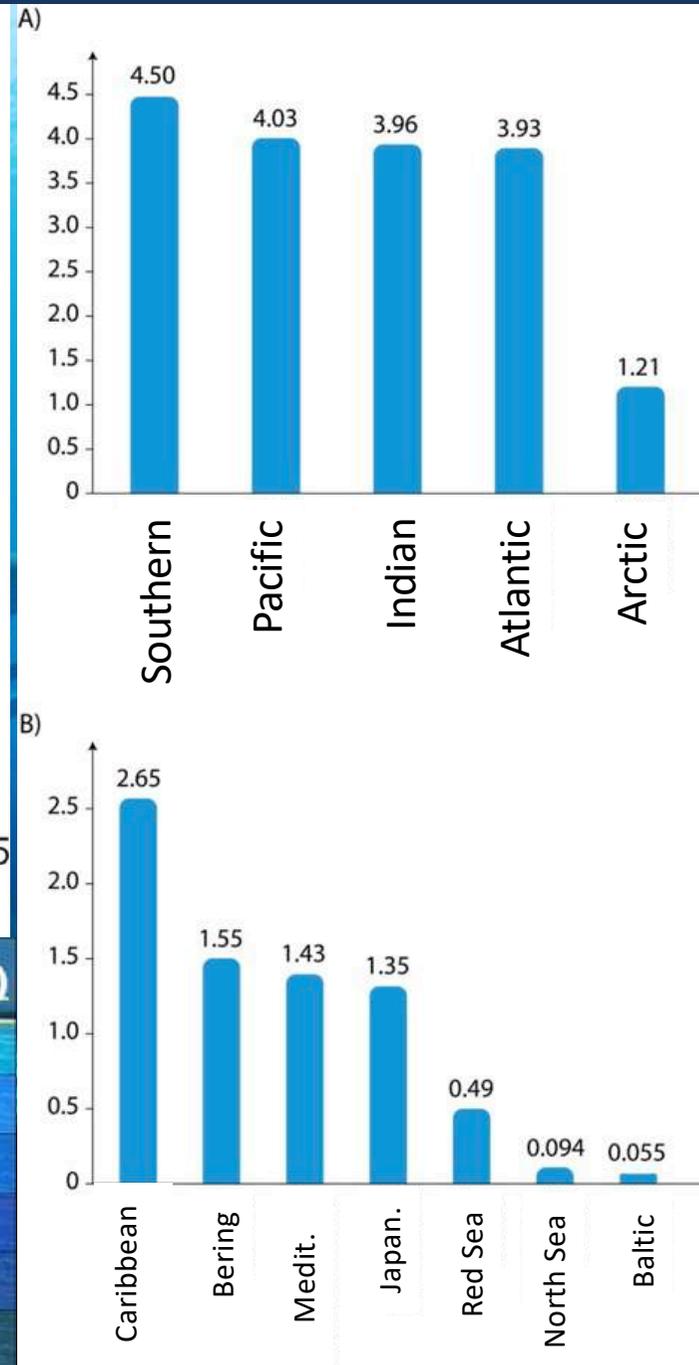
1. Scientific and socio-economic basis for sustainable development based on seas and their resources
2. Understanding and predicting impacts due to human exploitation of natural resources, pollution and climate changes
3. New frontiers in research and technologies

Depth

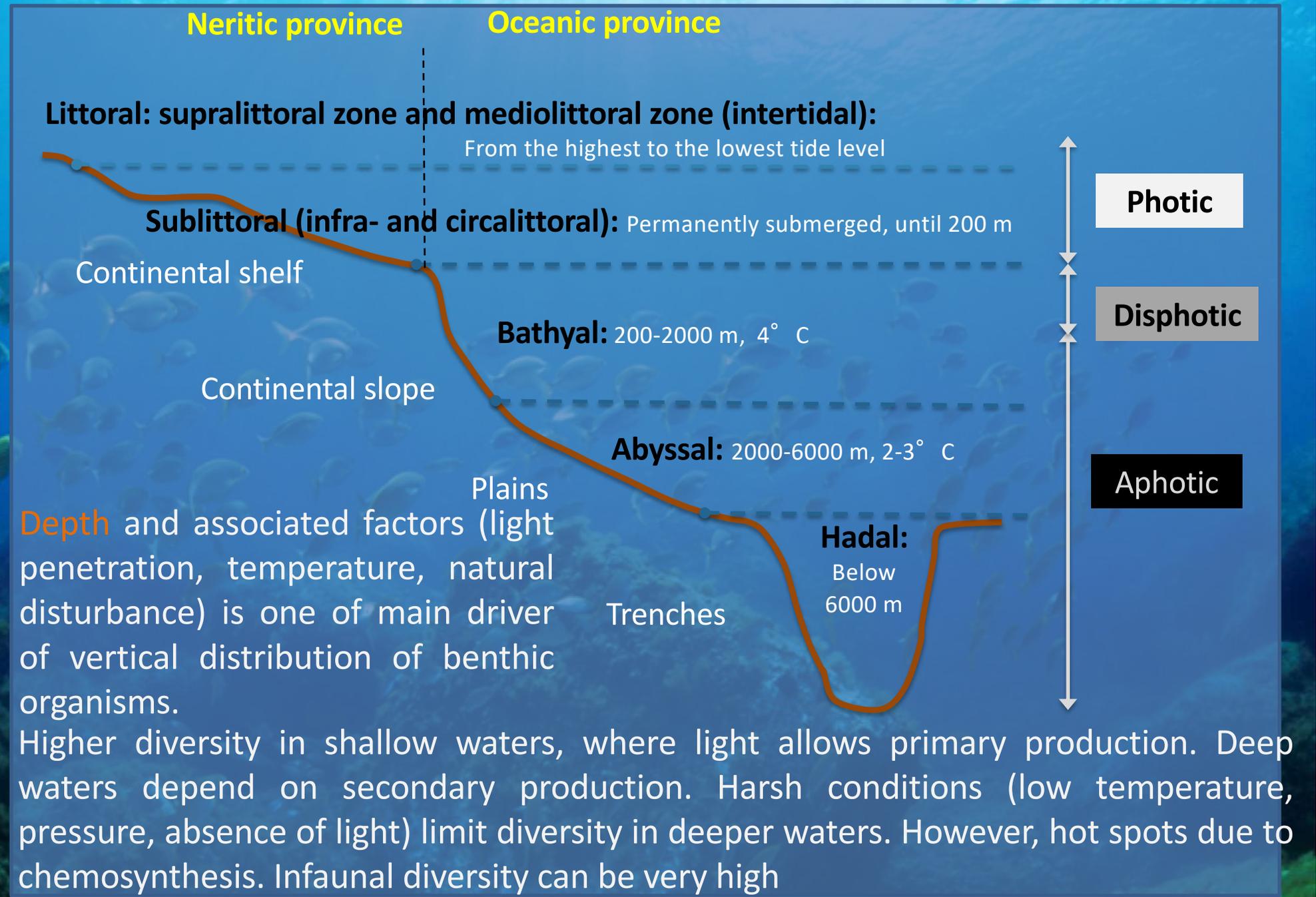


>80% of the seafloor (and therefore of the Earth's surface) and 98% of volume are 2 km under the surface

Depth (m)	Pressure (bar)
(surface) 0	1
10	2
20	3
30	4
40	5
50	6

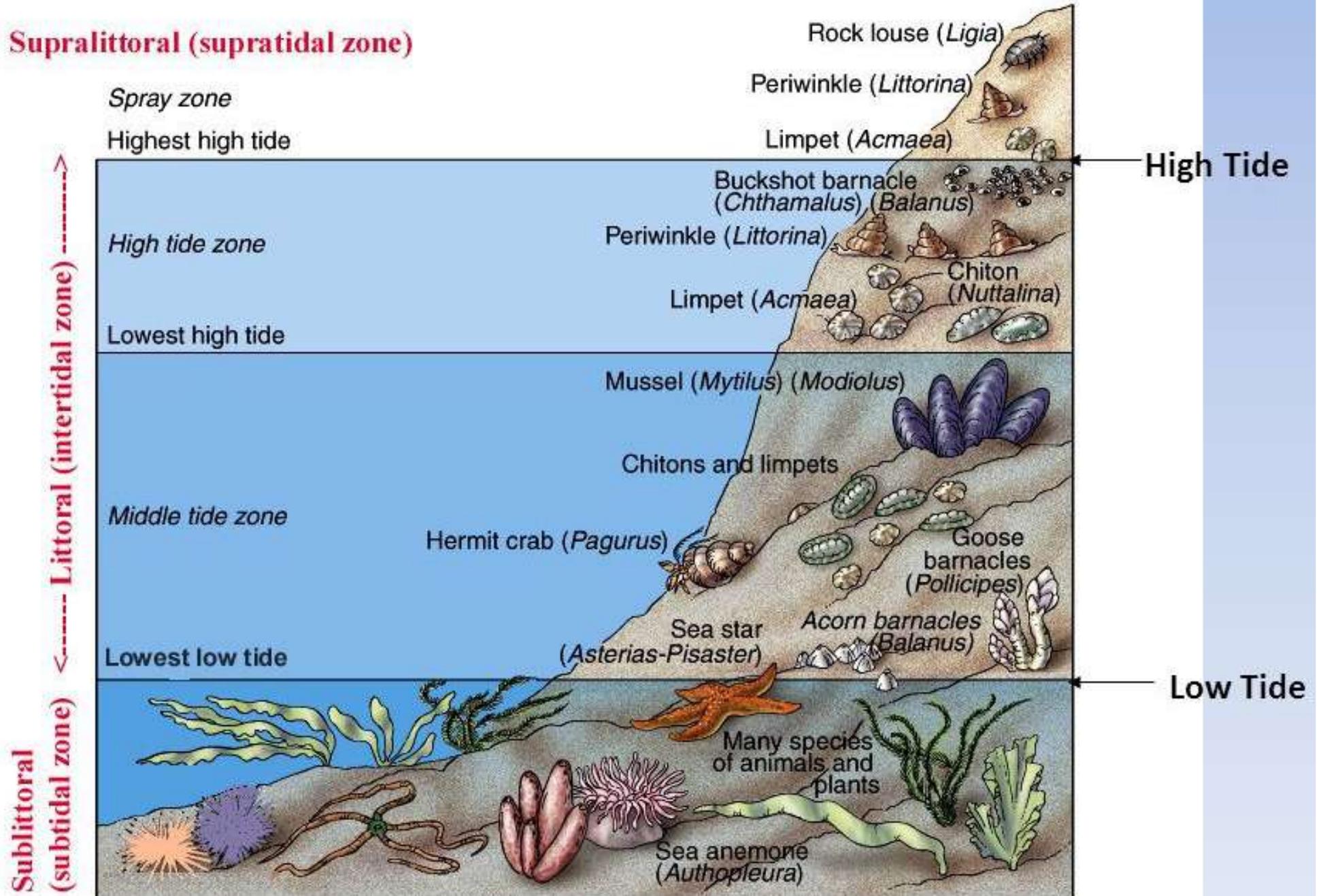


The benthic domain

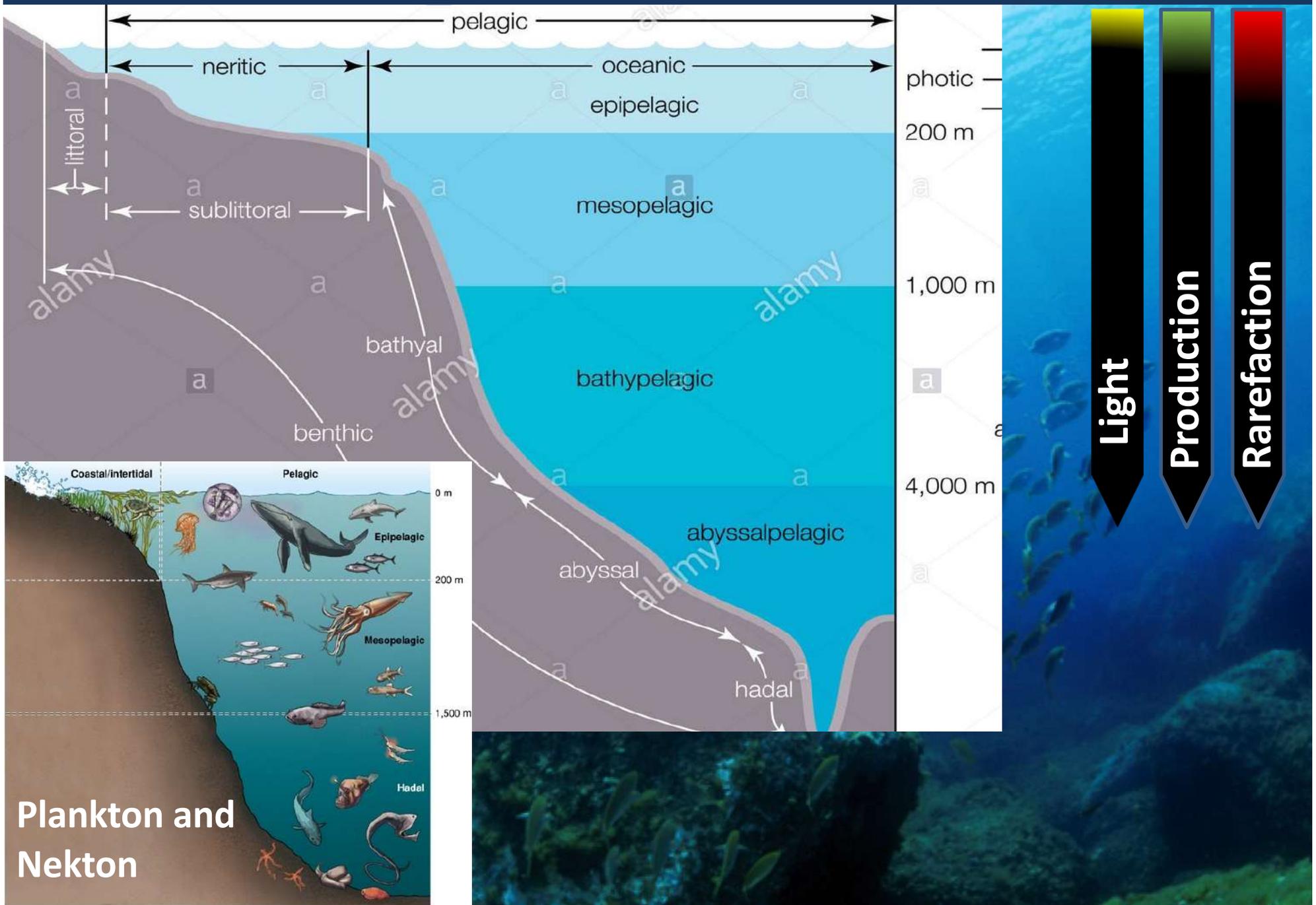


Zonation on sea

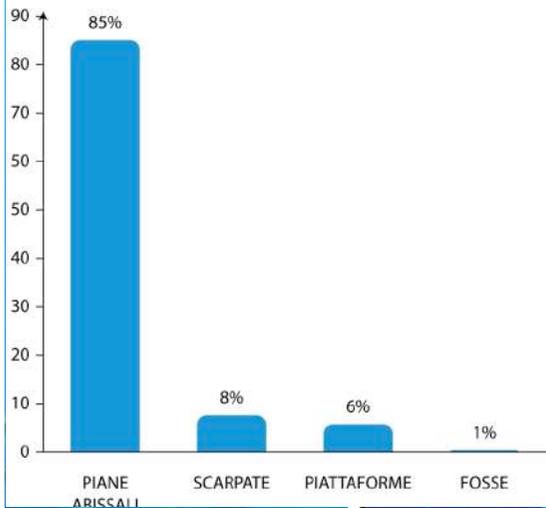
Supralittoral (supratidal zone)



The pelagic domain

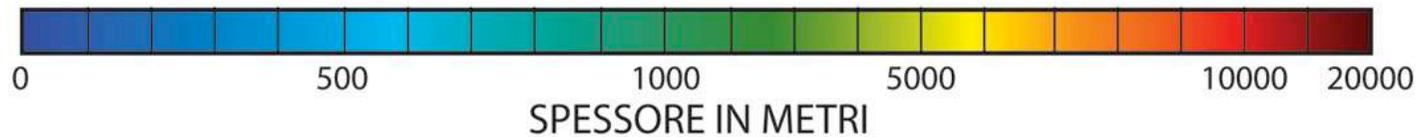
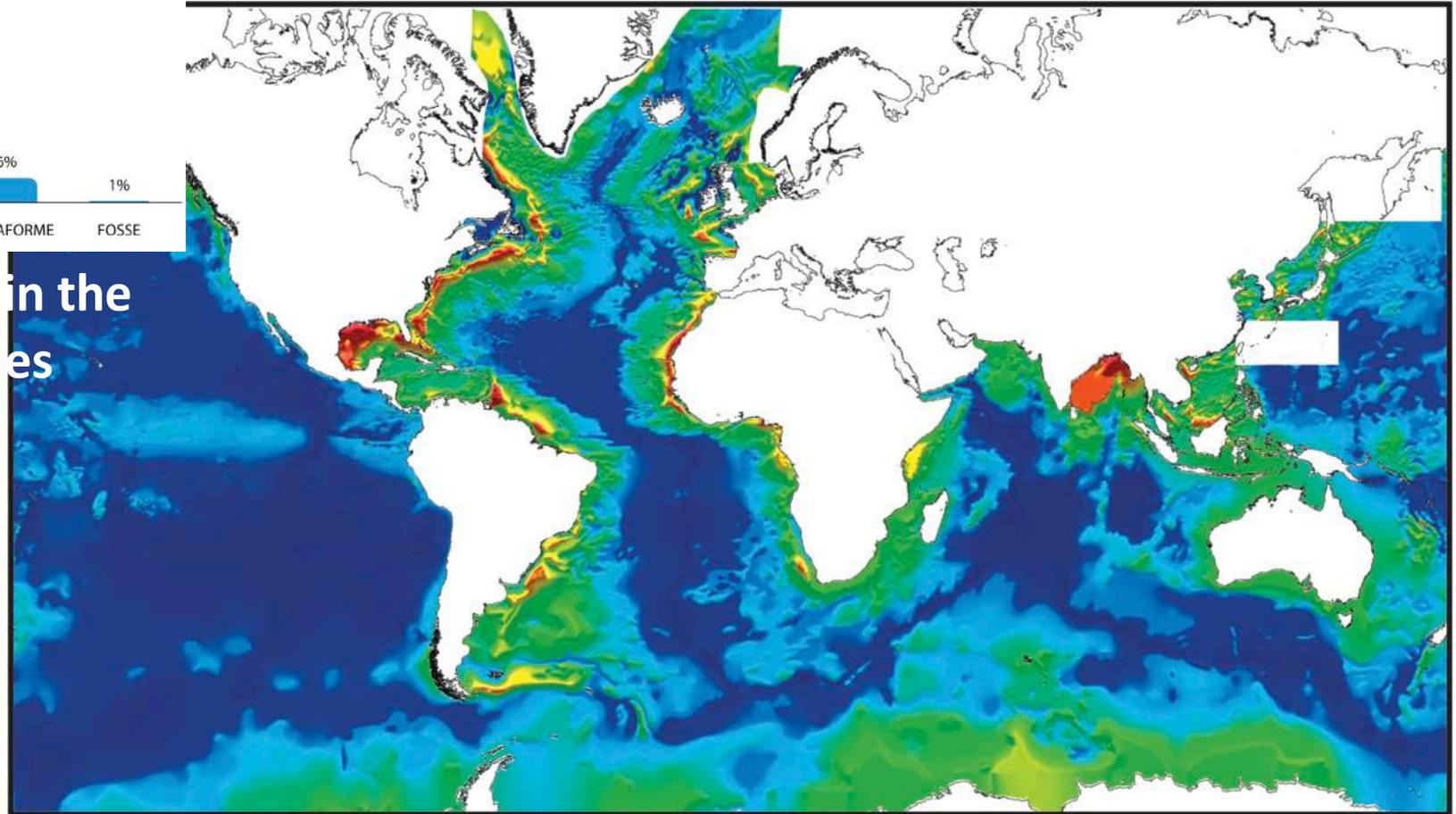


Sediments

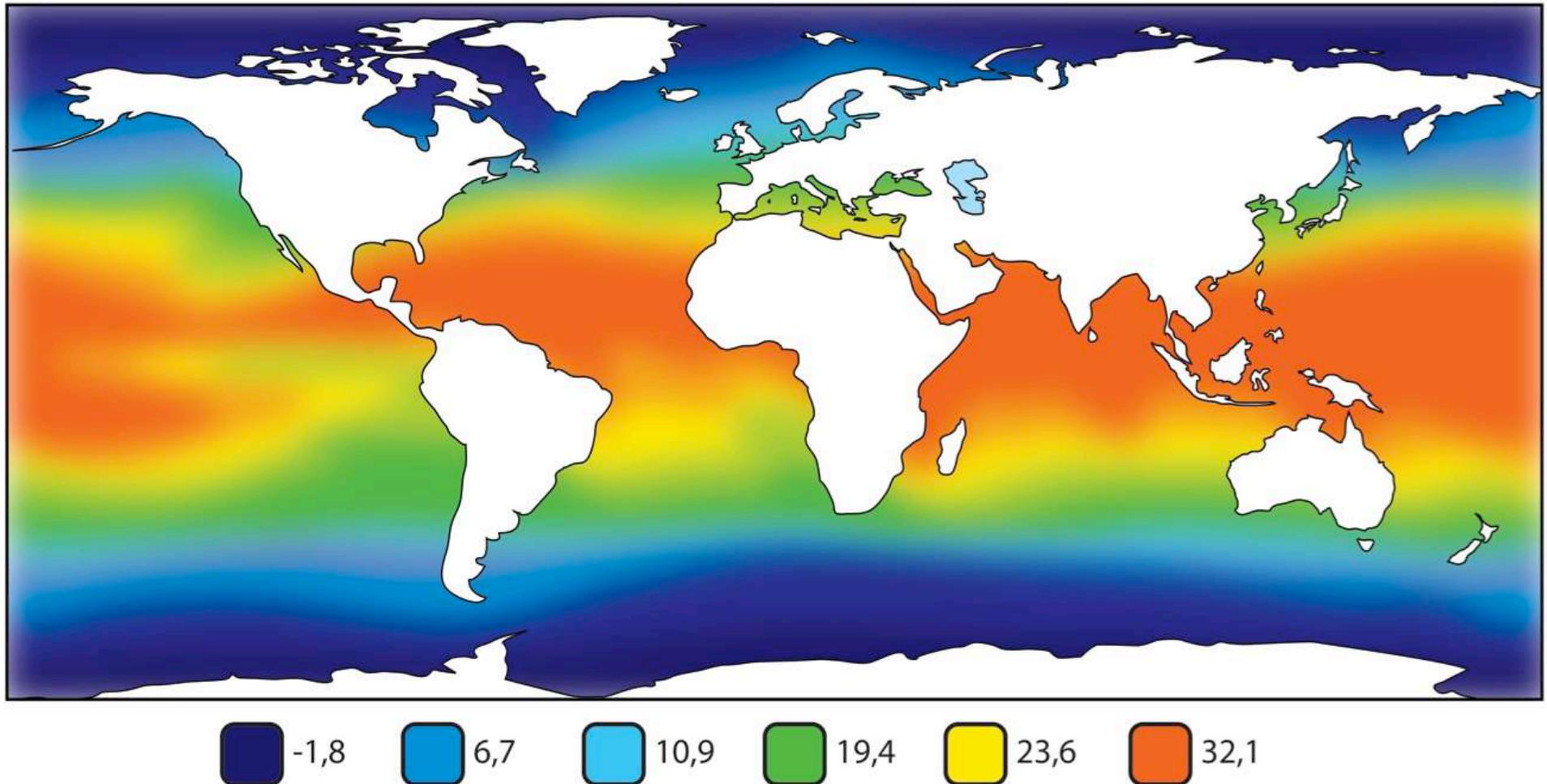


% of surface in the different zones

Thickness of sediments in the ocean

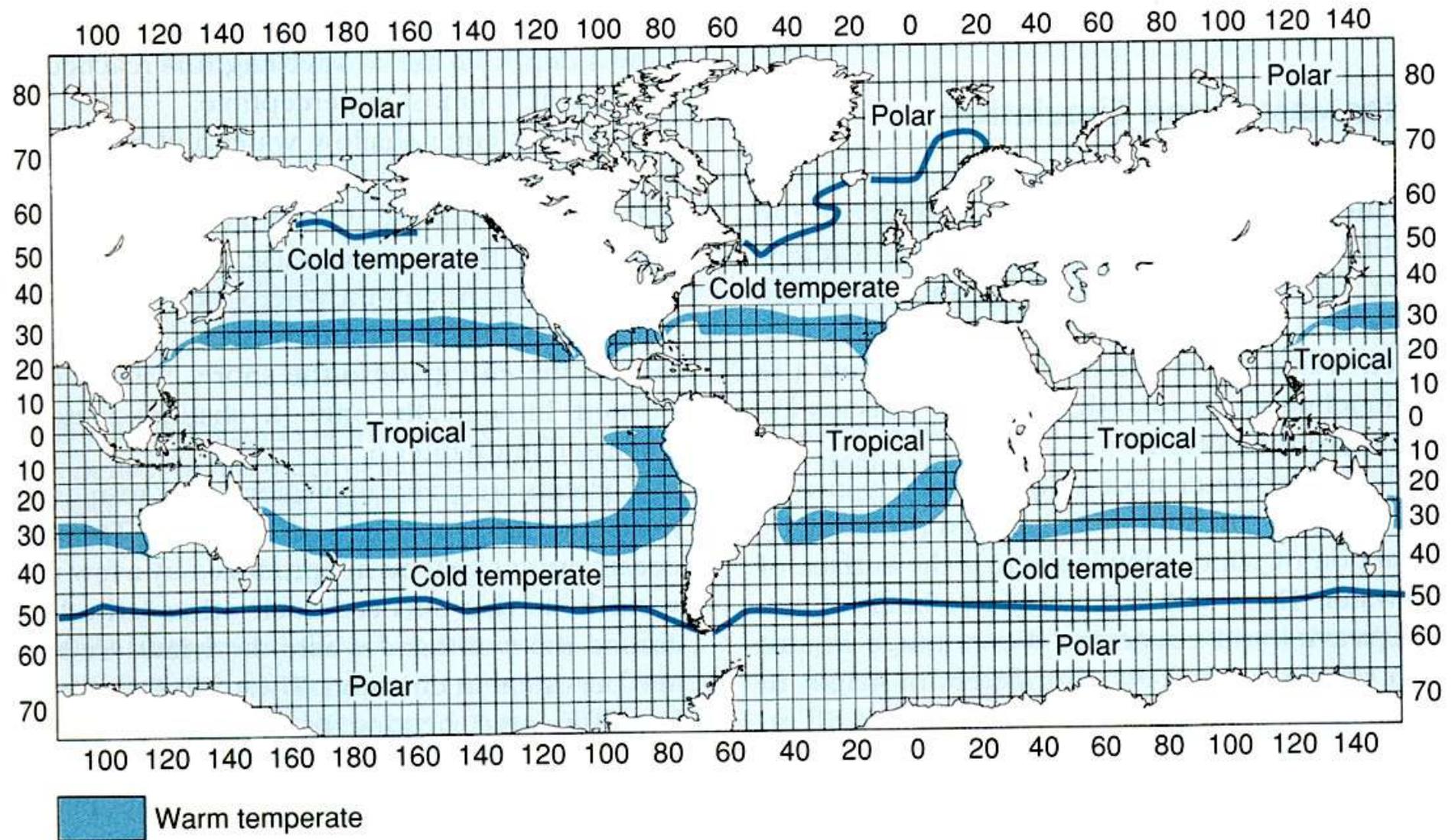


Temperature

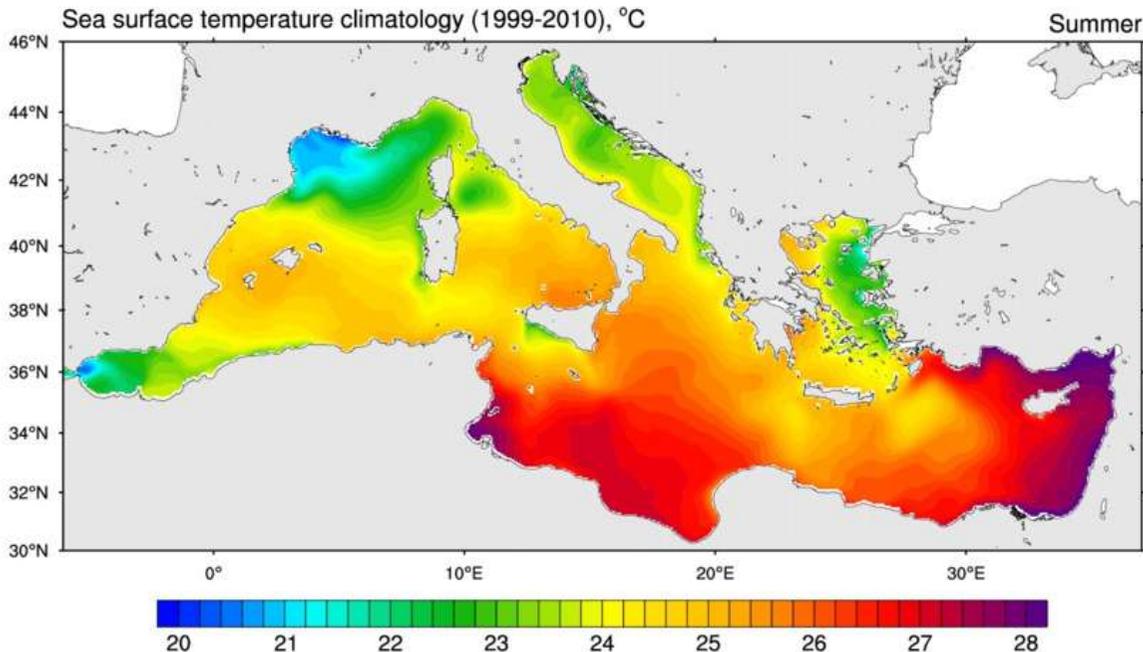
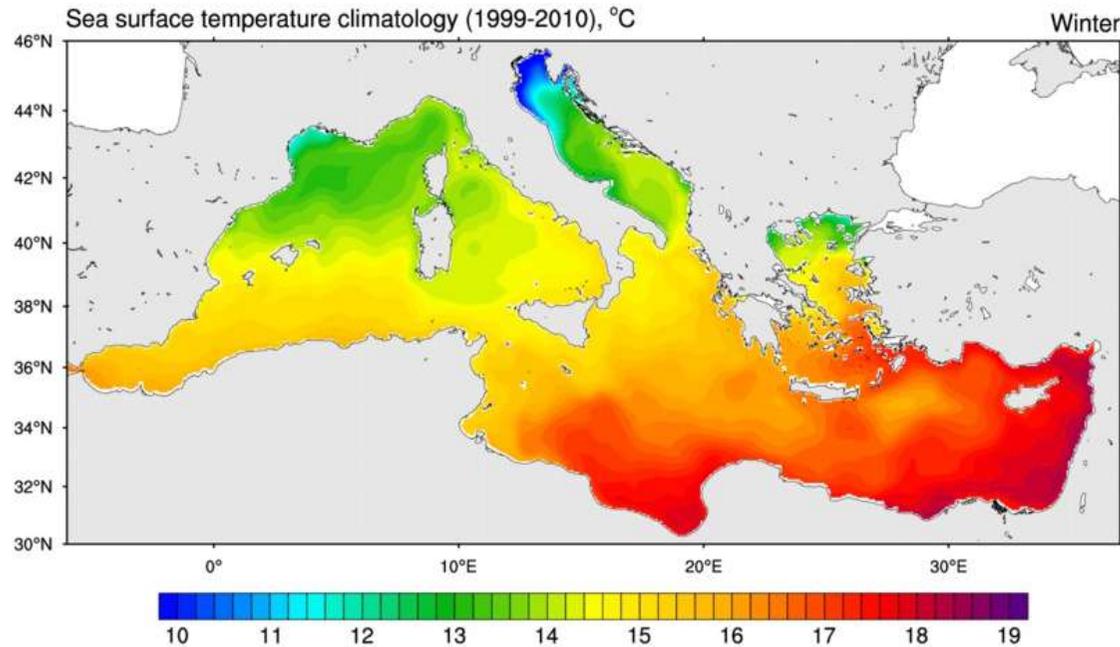


Average SST range from about -2°C at the poles to 35°C in tropical areas. Seasonal variations in superficial water are typical of temperate areas and depend also on geomorphology and other characteristics of the basin

Temperature

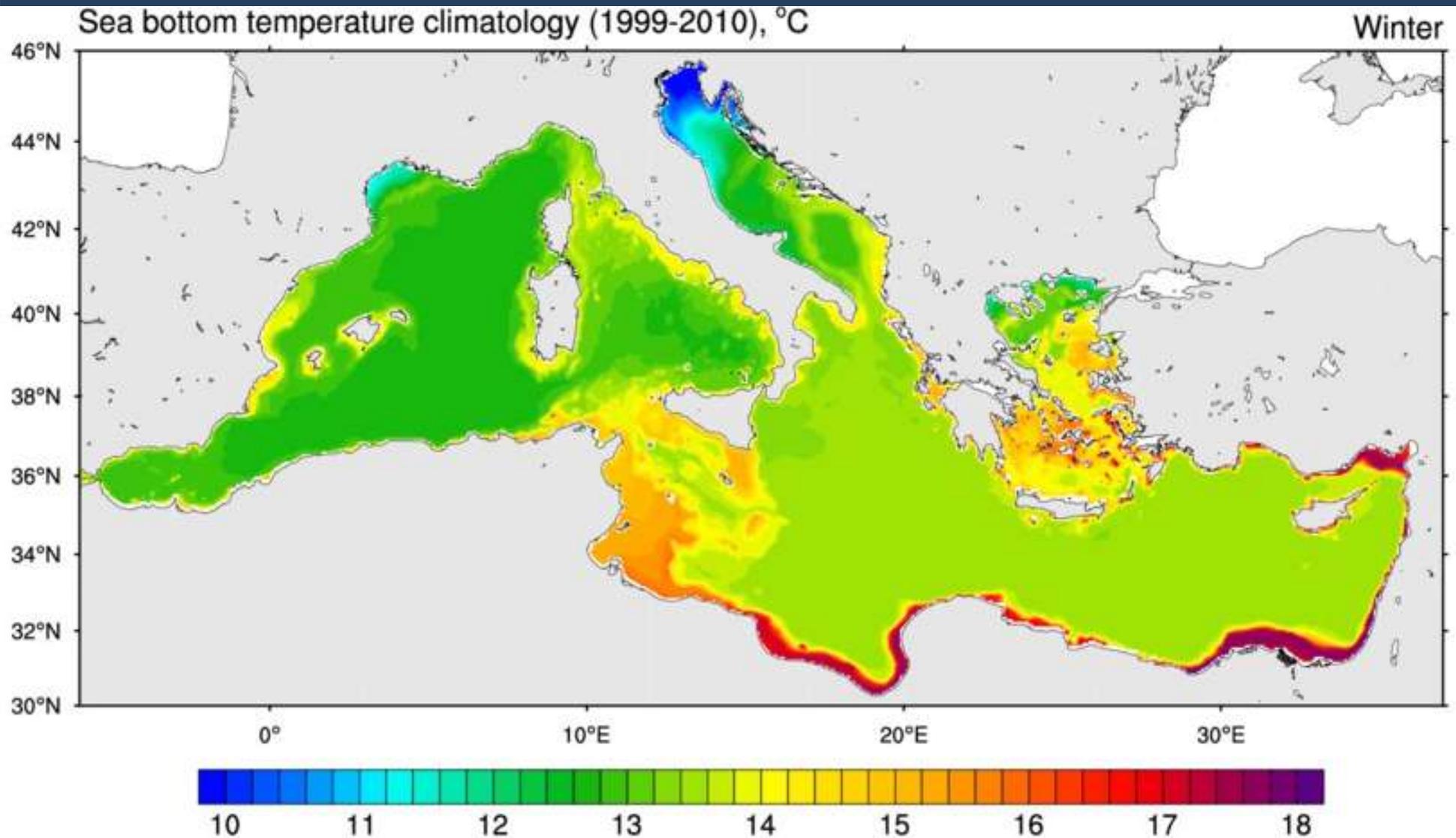


Temperature



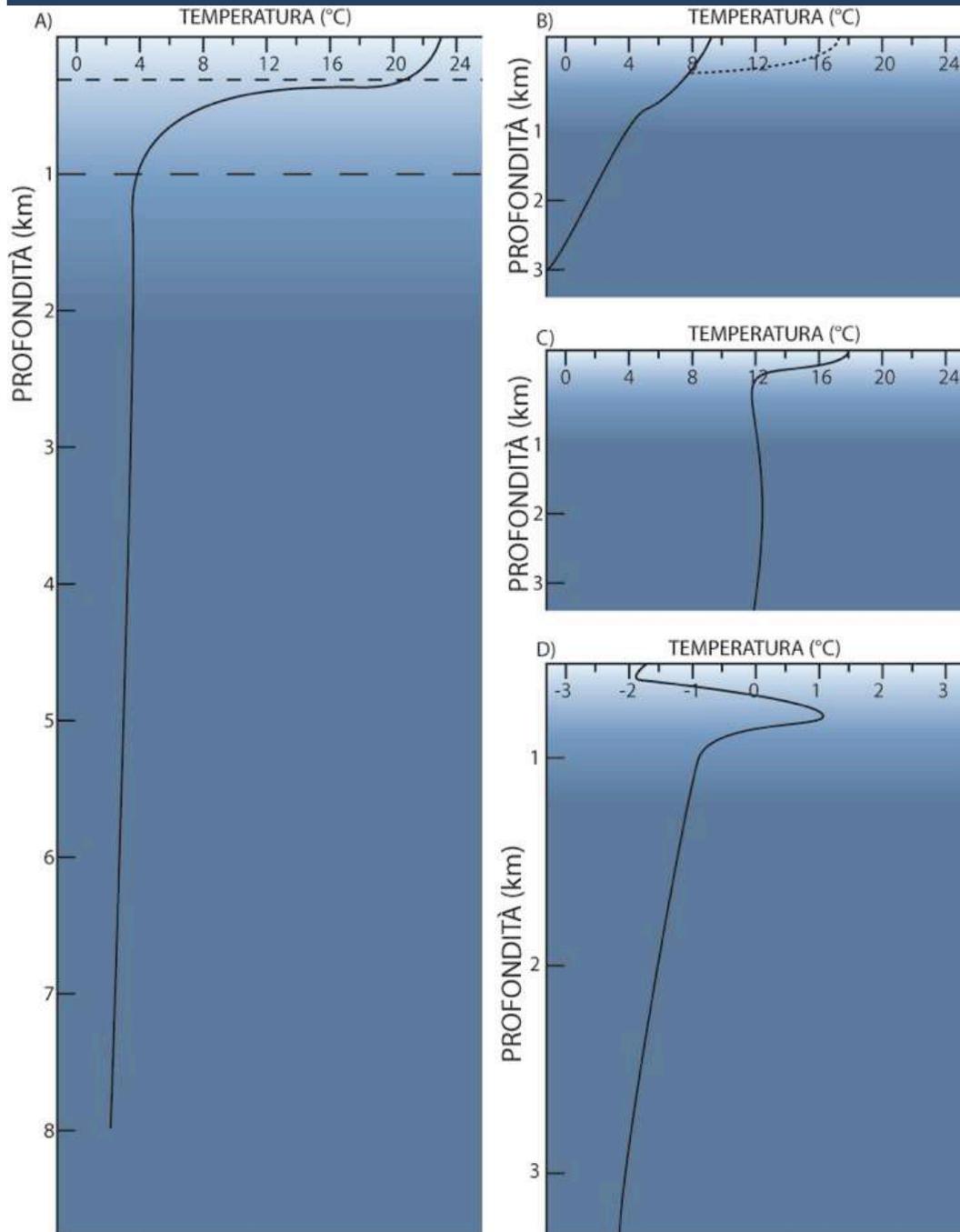
The Mediterranean Sea has a dual nature as far as temperature. It is close to a subtropical sea, in the southeast basin, and a temperate sea in the western basin. The seasonal variability in temperature, light availability and dissolved nutrient concentrations are similar to temperate seas, but the average values are closer to subtropical seas.

Temperature



Temperature of deep waters is constant and around 12° C

Thermocline



Thermocline is a water layer where a sharp variation of water temperature occurs (0.1°C or more every m depth).

Thermocline pattern changes with latitude. At low latitude, in tropical areas, the thermocline is stable all year round, at about 500 m depth (a, c). In temperate seas and low latitudes, the thermocline is less sharp and deeper in the cold season, whereas in the warm season it becomes sharper and shallower. In the Mediterranean Sea, for example, it is at about 400 m depth in winter and at 15-40 m in summer.

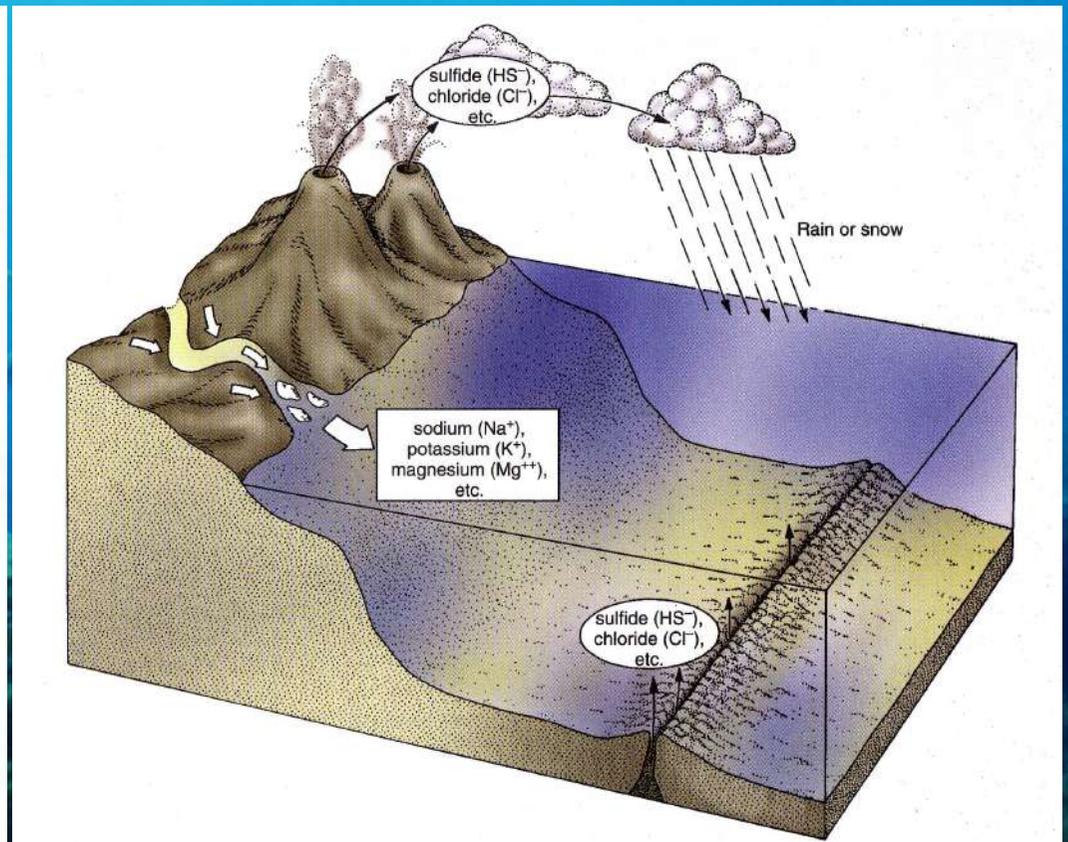
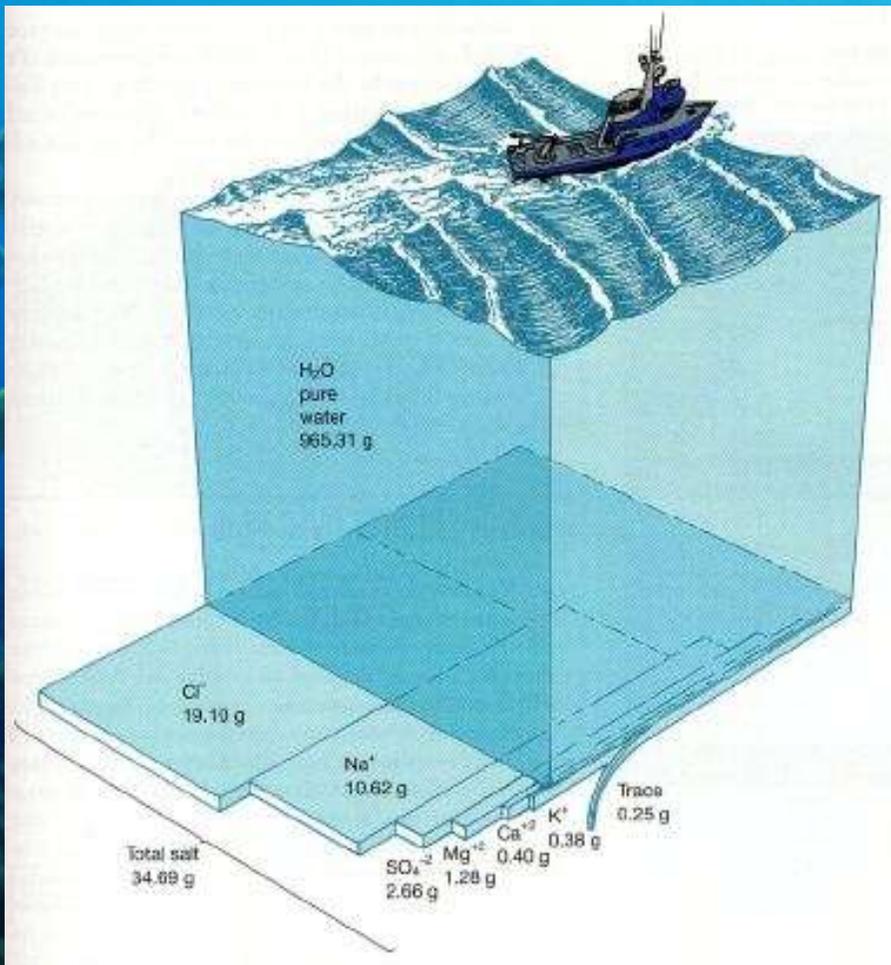
At high latitudes, the thermocline could be inverted or there could be two thermoclines, due to different layers (d).

Salinity

Average salinity: 35‰ (0.5-40 ‰)

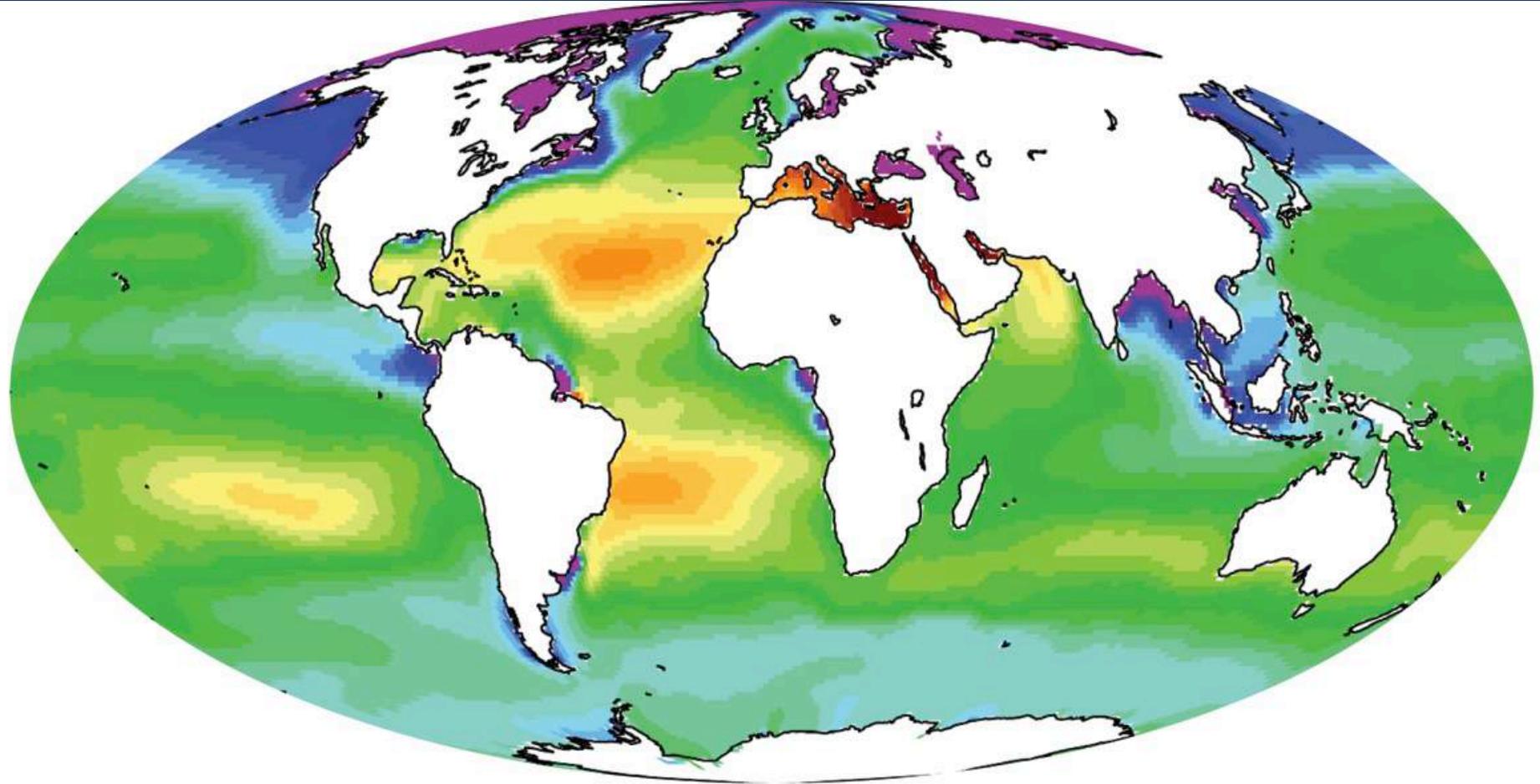
Freshwater inputs, evaporation, morphology, depth determine the salinity range

Elements derive from erosion on mainland, river transport and volcanic activity

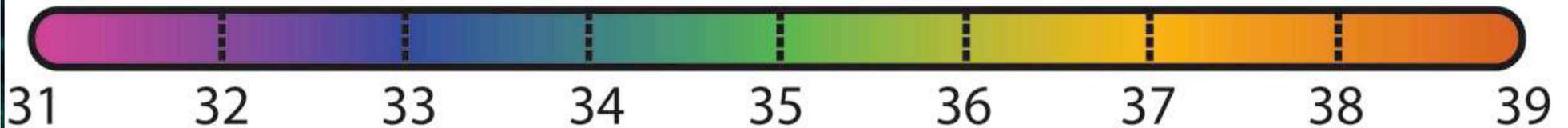


Sodium chloride, magnesium chloride, magnesium, calcium and potassium sulfate, calcium carbonate

Salinity: global average



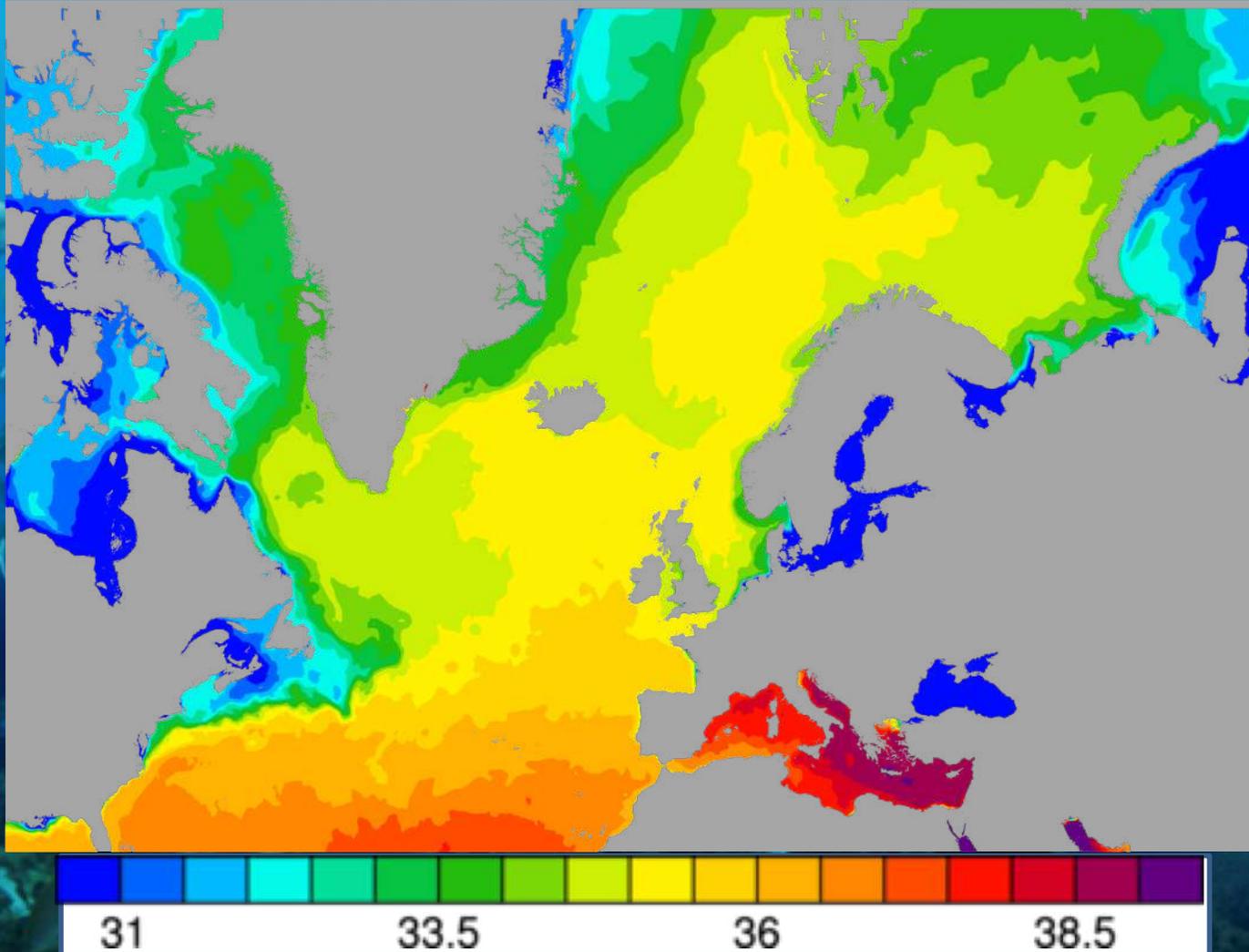
SALINITÀ SUPERFICIALE



Salinity: N Atlantic



North Atlantic: sea-surface salinity - Autumn 2012 (PSU)

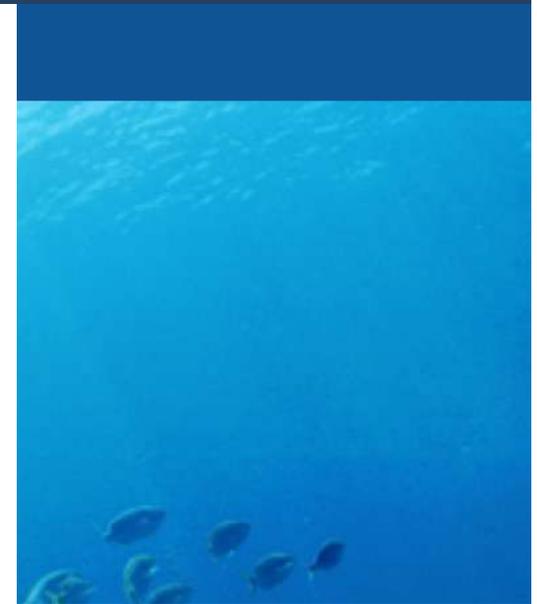
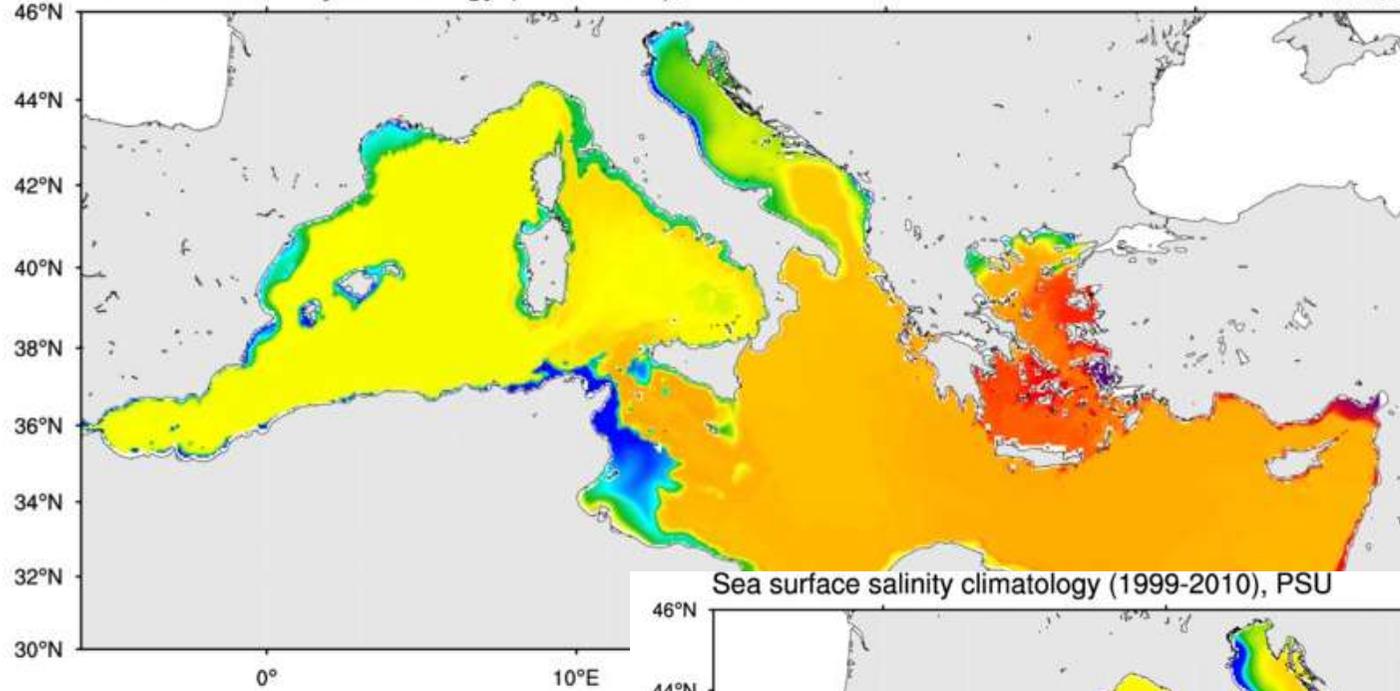


Note in dark blue areas (below 31) salinity values can equate to anything between 0-31psu

The Mediterranean Sea

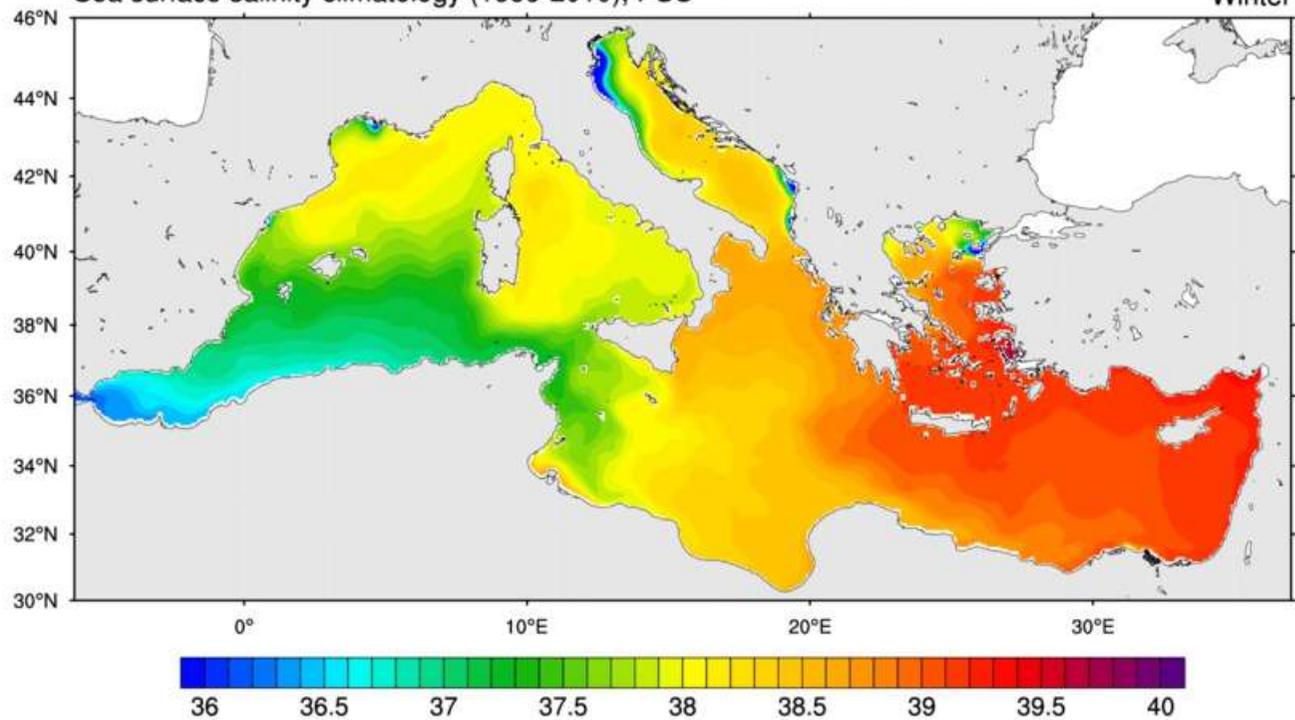
Sea bottom salinity climatology (1999-2010), PSU

Winter

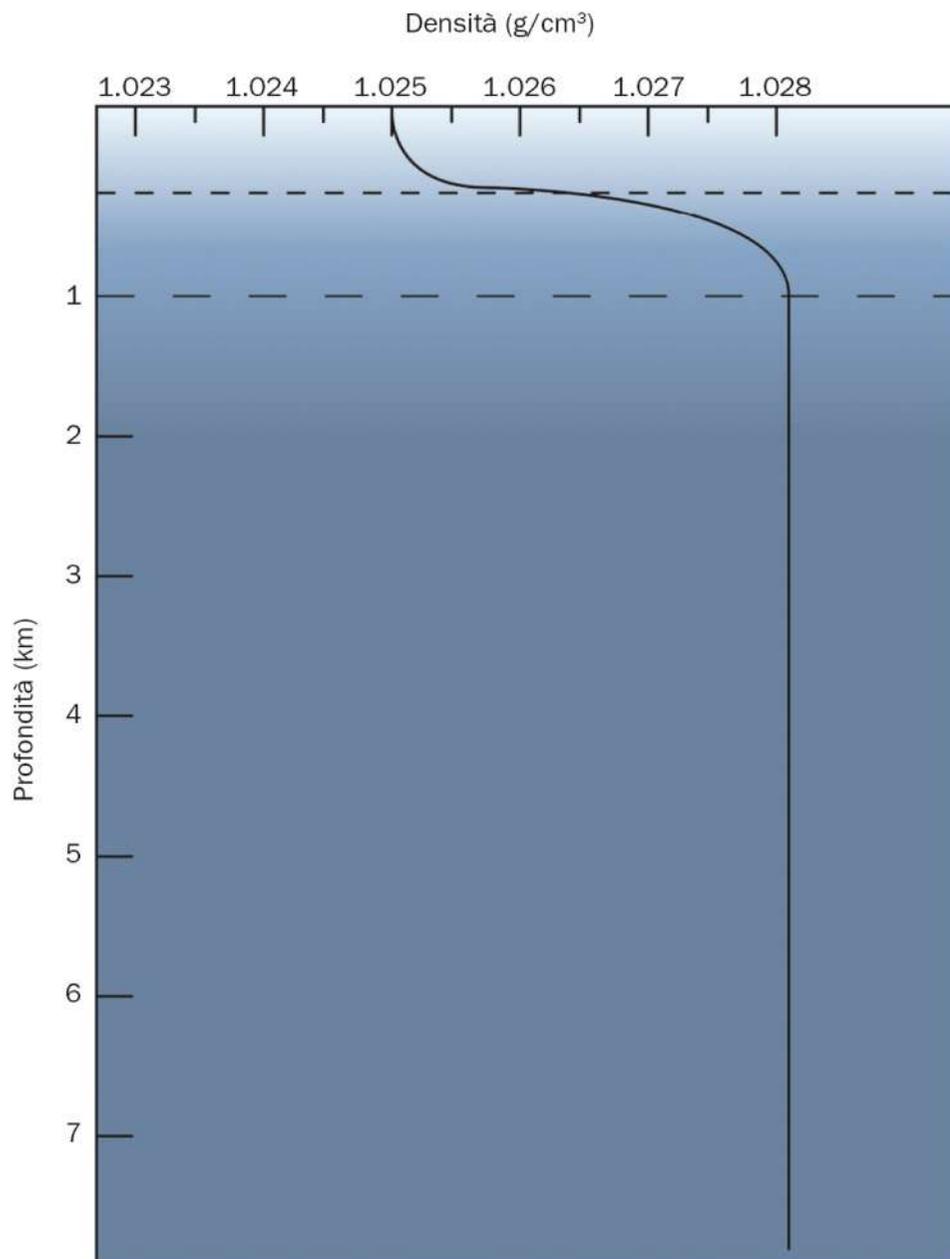


Sea surface salinity climatology (1999-2010), PSU

Winter



Density



Density changes depending on temperature, pressure, and salinity.

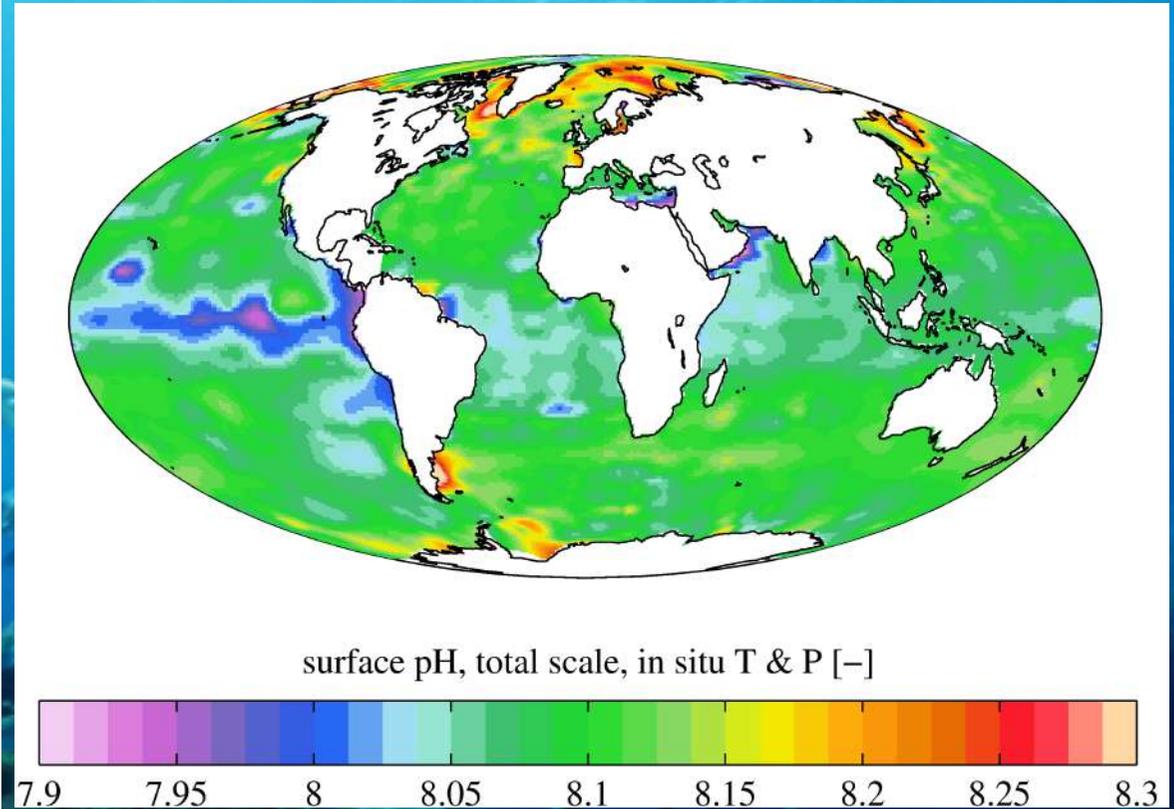
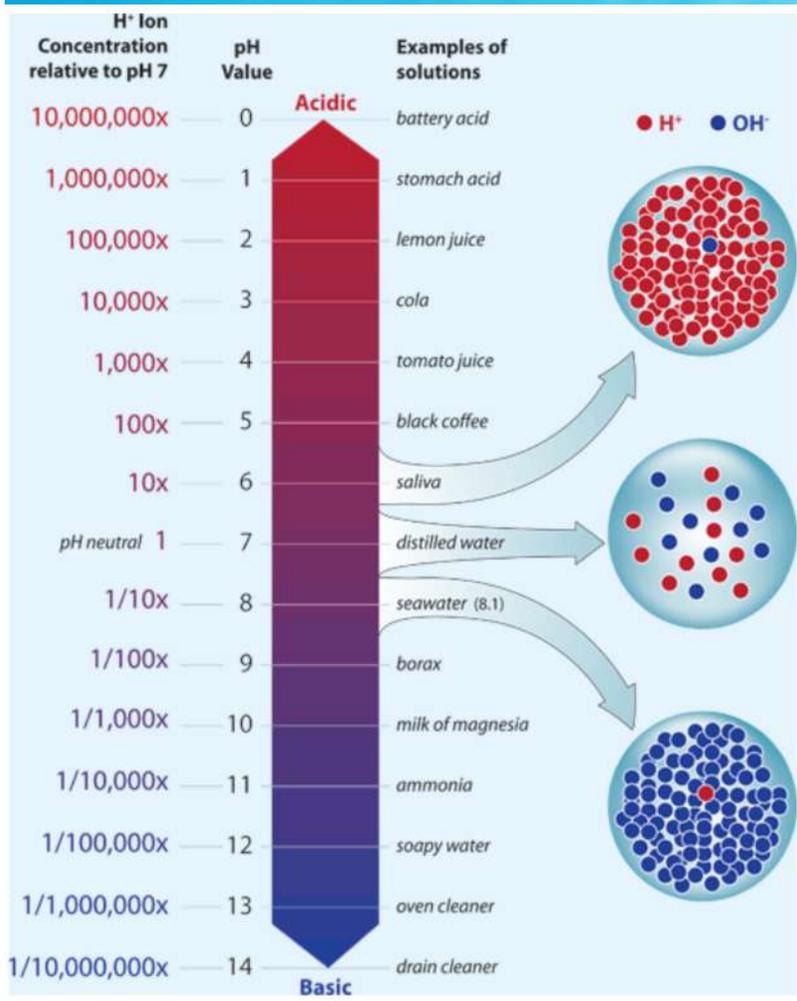
Warm waters are less dense than cold waters.

Increased salinity increases sea water density

The contribution of temperature to density is stronger than that one of salinity

Generally, superficial waters are less dense than deep waters. Density increases with depth until the *pycnocline* and then becomes more stable and virtually constant at increasing depth.

pH



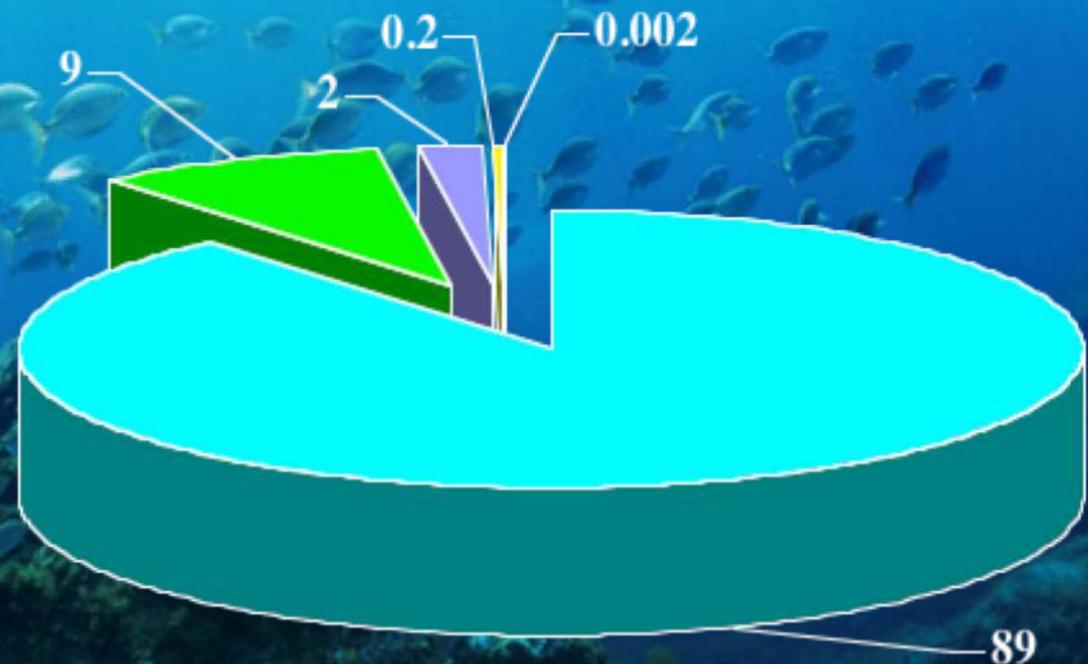
Average pH = 8.1

Mostly depend on CO₂ diffusion in seawater. Changes in pH could strongly affect marine organisms

Organic matter

Most of organic carbon in the ocean is detritus, “*non-predatory loss of organic carbon from each trophic level or inputs from external sources*” (Wetzel et al., 1972). So, everything non-living and organic, irrespective of its size, composition and origin.

■ DOM ■ POM ■ Fitoplancton ■ Zooplancton ■ Pesci



DOM (dissolved organic matter)

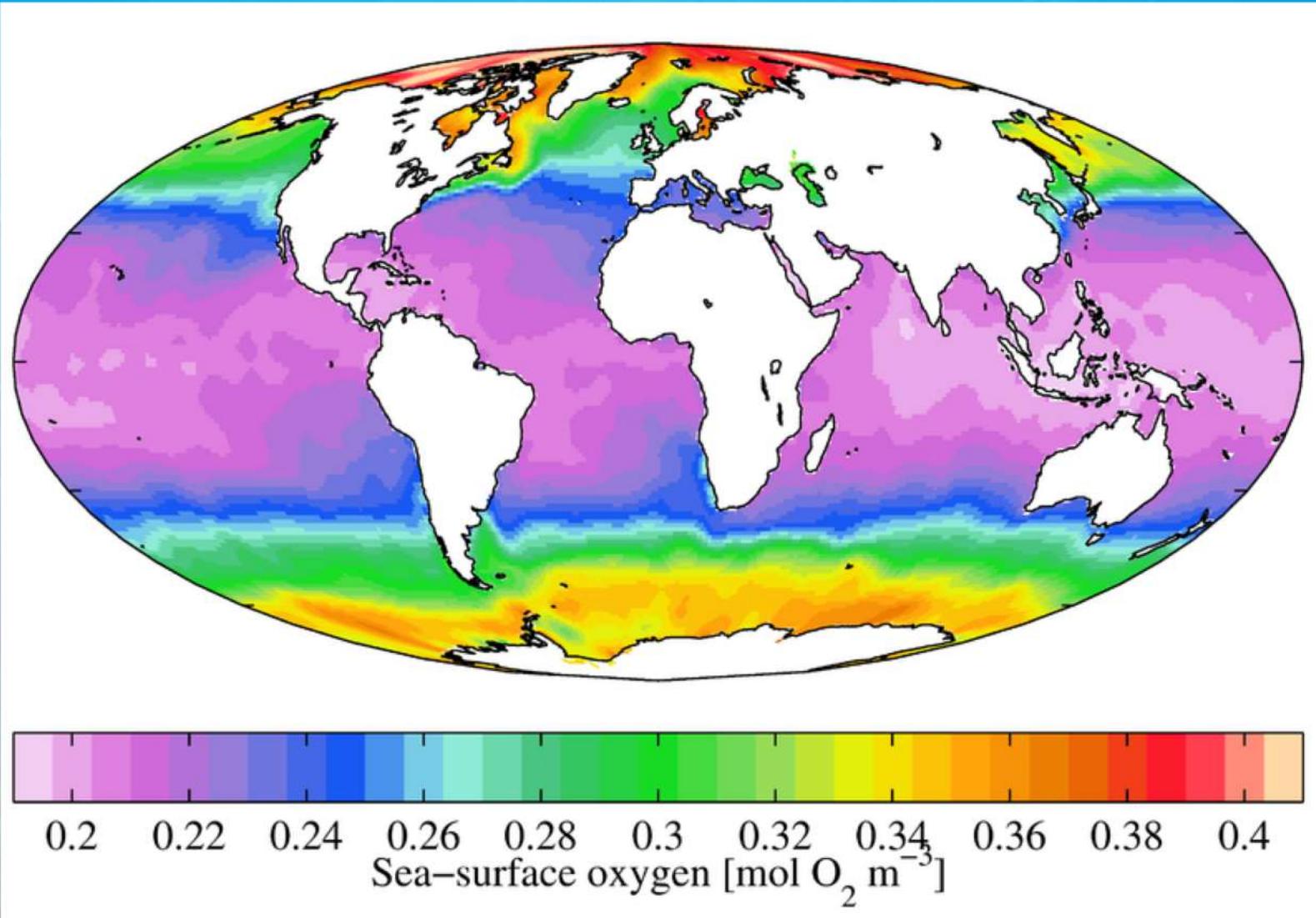
POM (particulated organic matter)

Oxygen

Absent on Earth 4 billions years ago

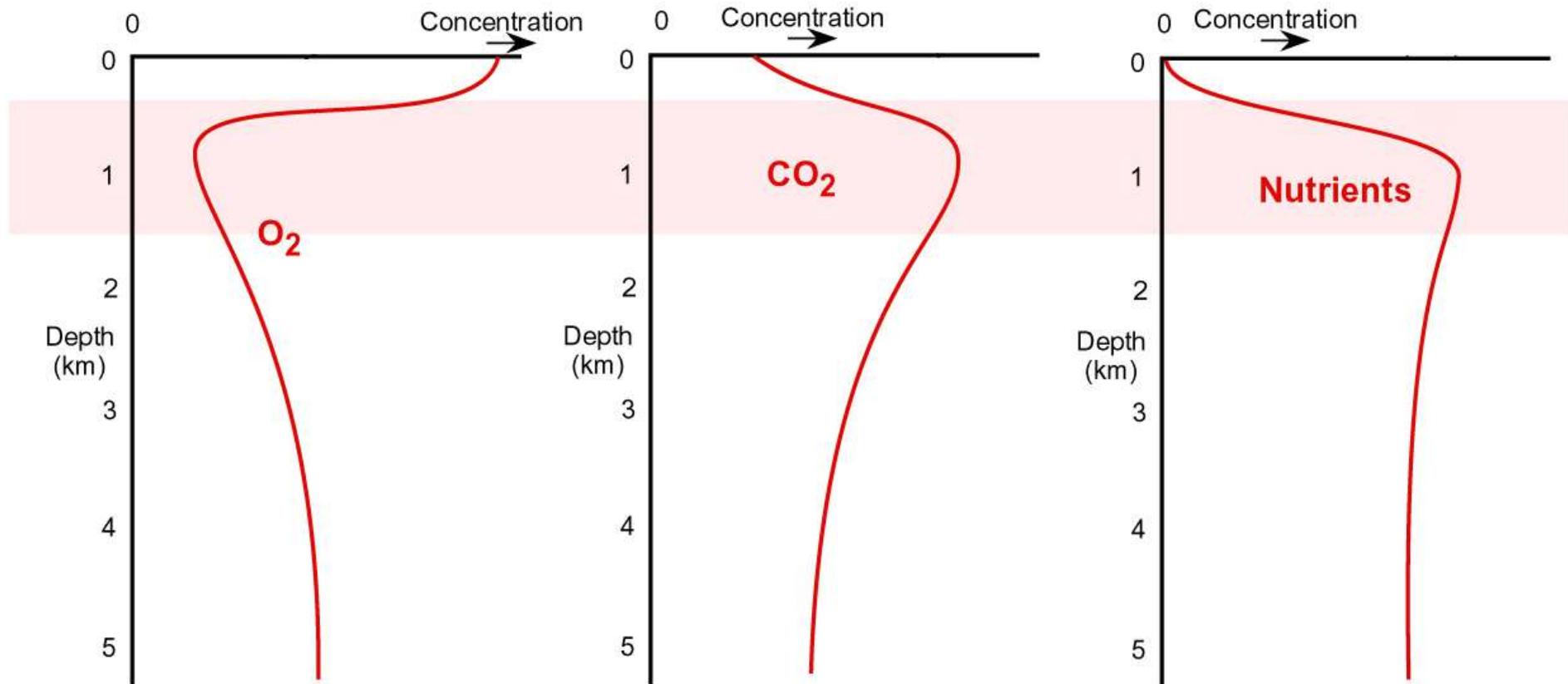
On Earth constant concentration (21%)

In seawater variable concentration, from 0 to 8 ml/l



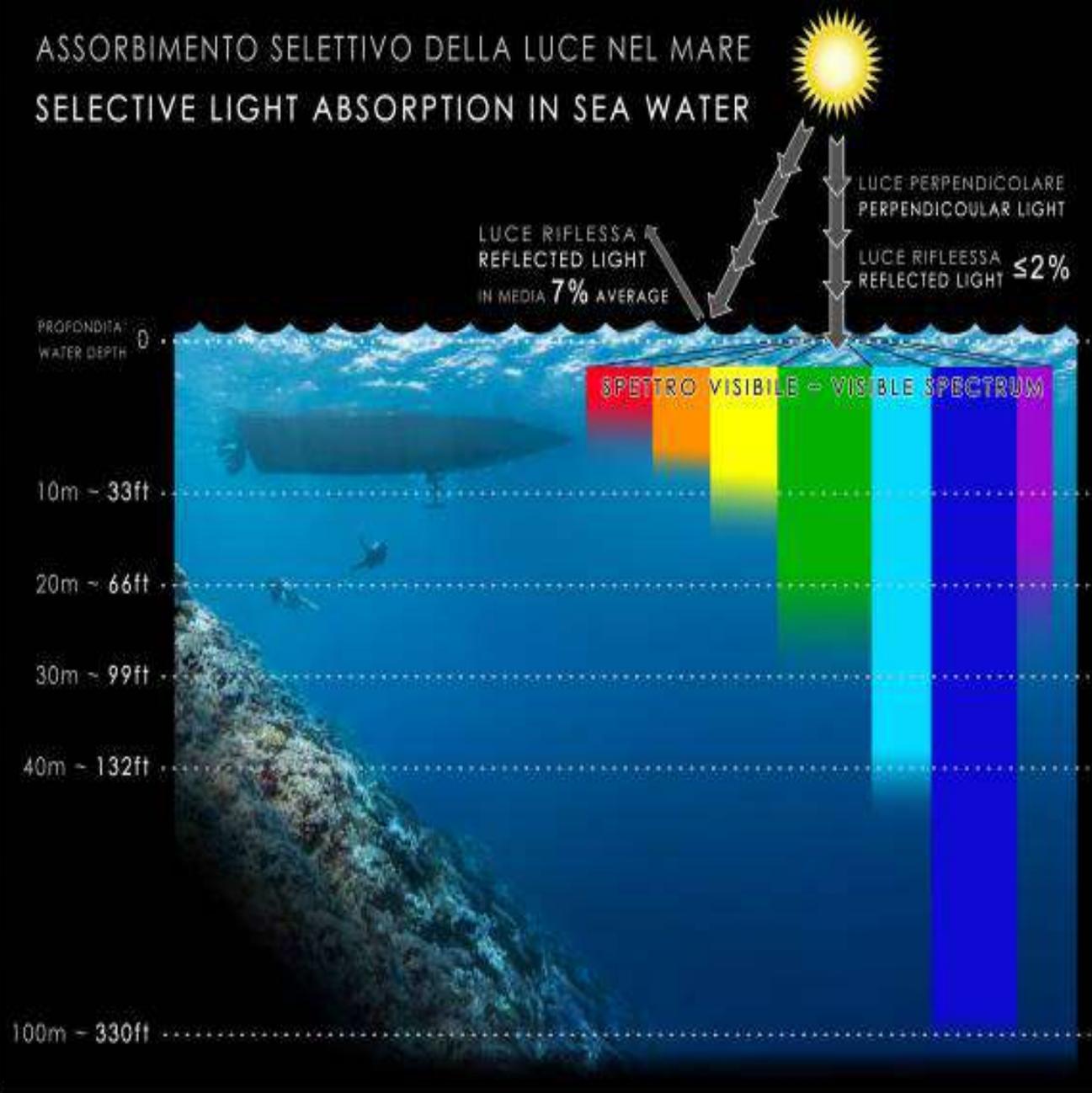
Main environmental features

In the photic zones oxygen is produced by macroalgae and plants, that consume carbon dioxide and nutrients. O_2 decreases with depth due to decline of photosynthetic activity and oxidation of organic matter, whereas CO_2 and nutrients increase due to respiration and increased solubility (high P and low T). Min of O_2 and max of CO_2 and nutrients is achieved at about 1000 m. Below this threshold, nutrients remain stable, O_2 slightly increases due to oxygenation from the surface through currents, and CO_2 slightly decreases due to reduced respiration rates (rarefaction of organisms)

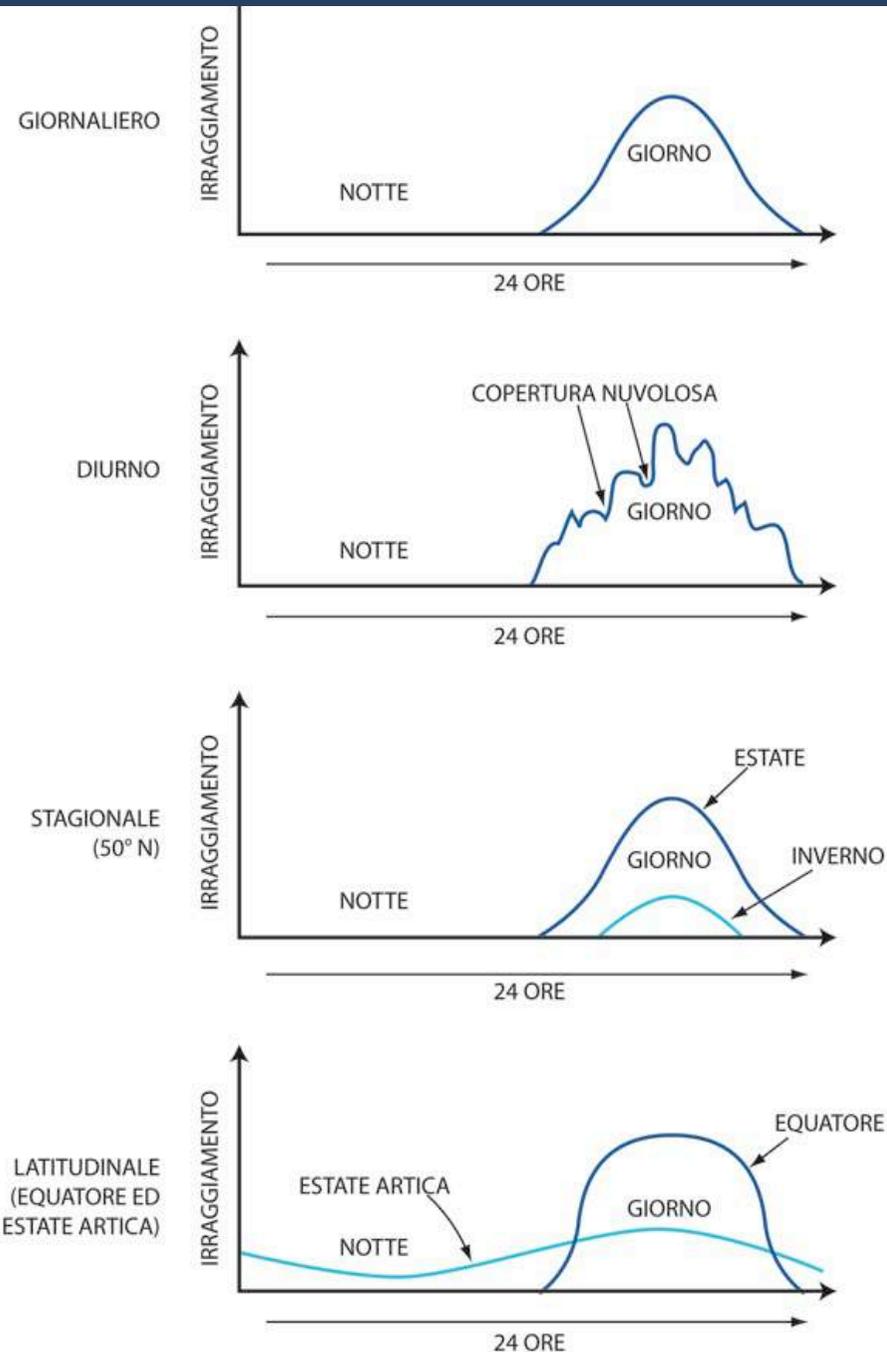


Light

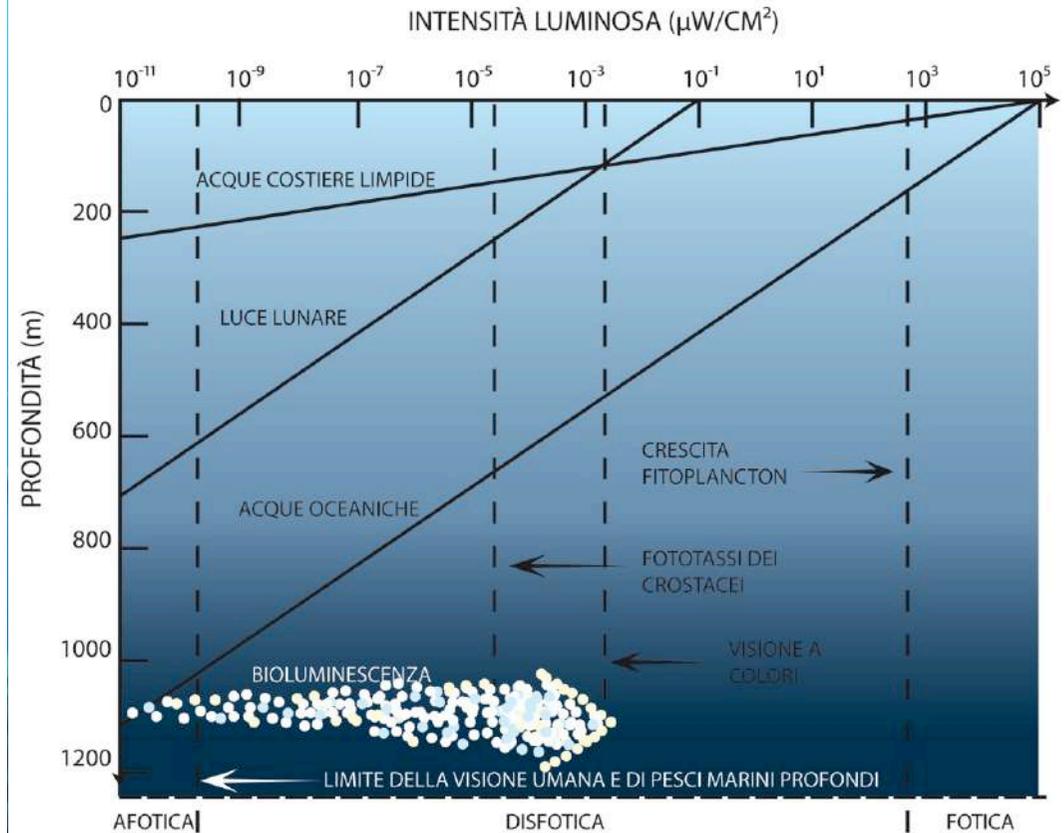
ASSORBIMENTO SELETTIVO DELLA LUCE NEL MARE SELECTIVE LIGHT ABSORPTION IN SEA WATER



Light

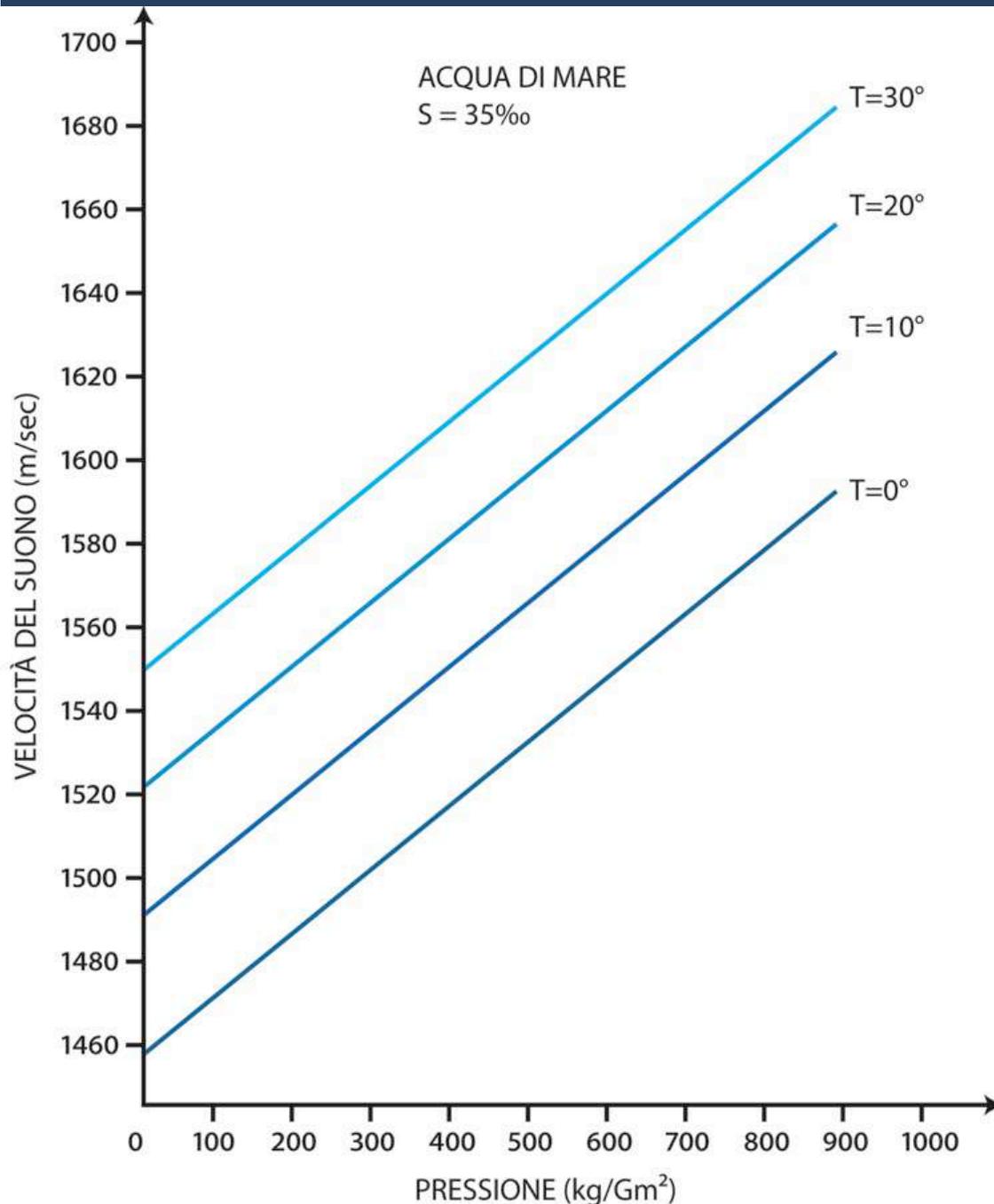


Light varies during the day and with seasons in temperate areas.



Light intensity decrease with depth: (in open waters) photic zone (0-200 m), disphotic (200-1000 m), aphotic zone (below 1000 m). Primary photosynthetic production occurs only in the photic zone.

Sound



Sound propagate more quickly in water than in the air (340 ms^{-1}). Typically, sound speed in the sea water is around 1500 ms^{-1}

Sound speed increase with temperature, pressure (depth) and also salinity

Sound is crucial for marine organisms, more than one could imagine, since it is involved in their communication, predation, mating and many other aspects of their life

Deep sea circulation

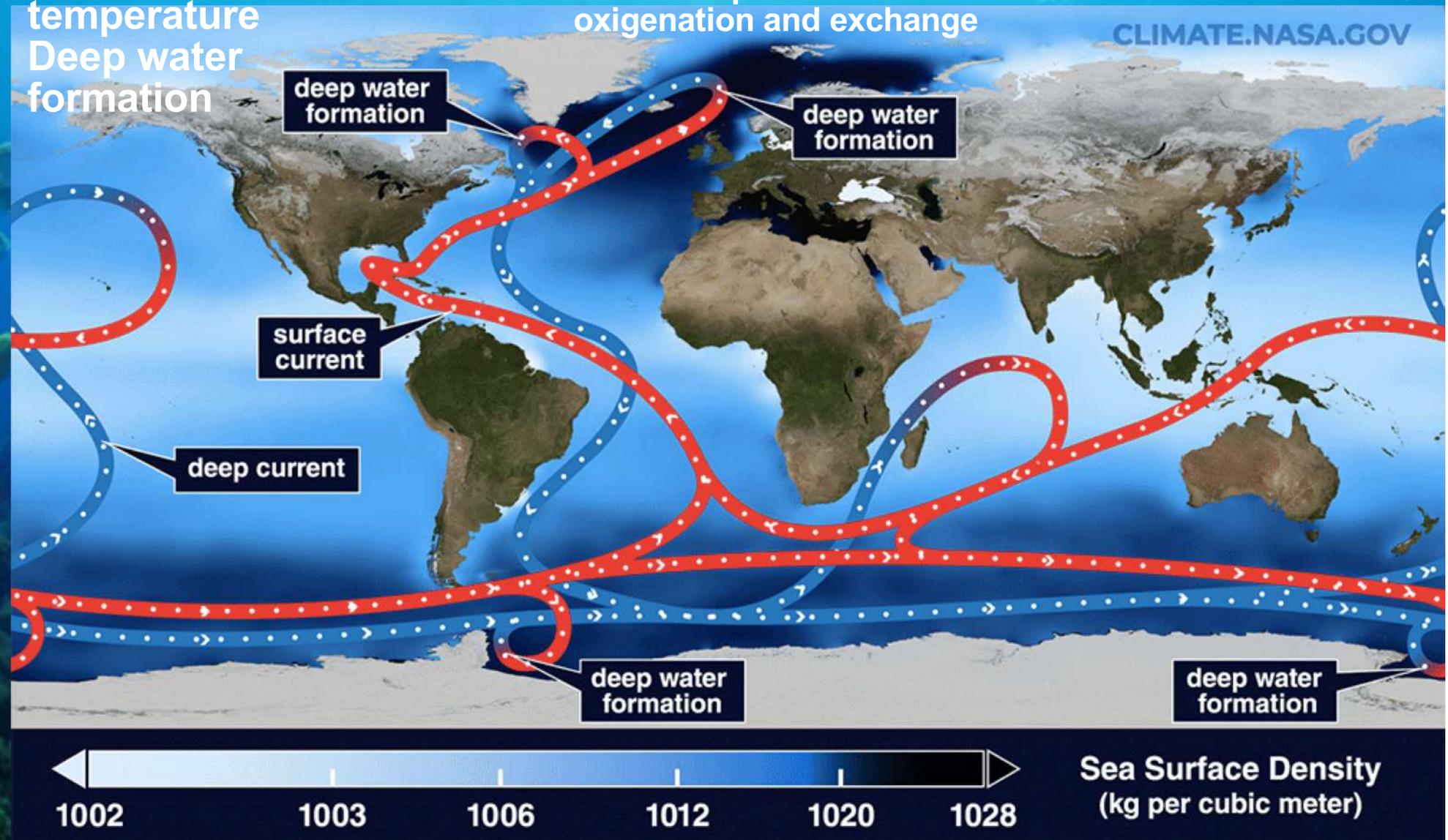
The great conveyor belt

Salinity and temperature
Deep water formation

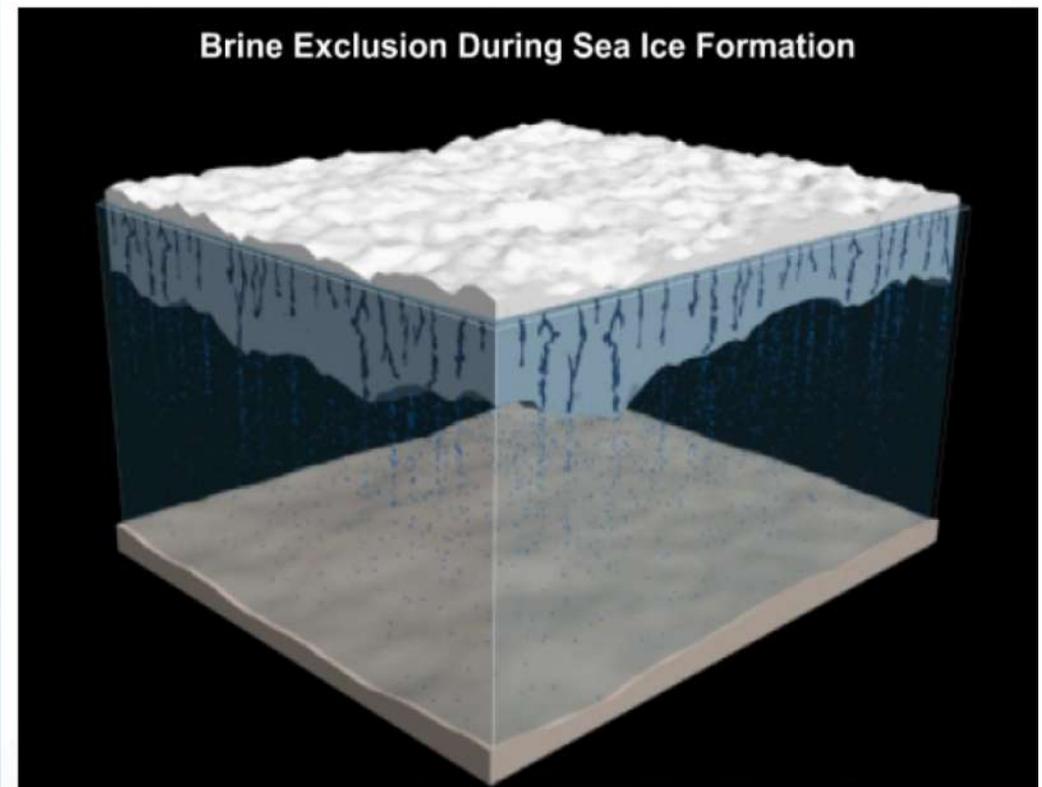
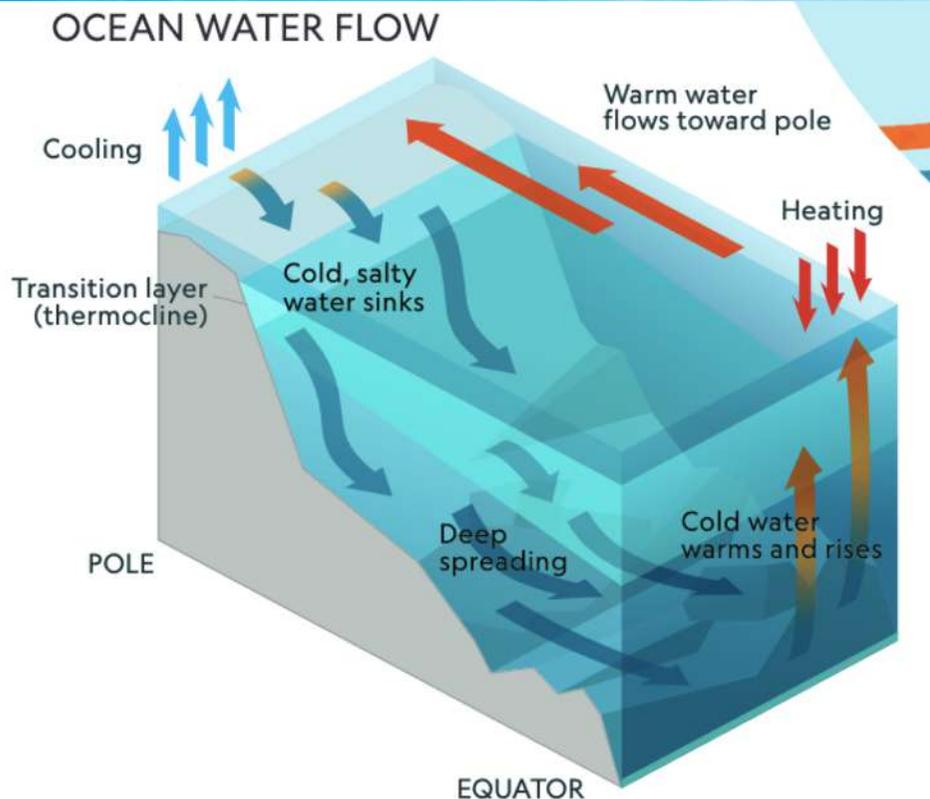
Thermohaline circulation (few cm s^{-1})

In the Atlantic Ocean higher mixing between the surface and the deep waters with respect to the Pacific Ocean, where deep water formation lacks. This lead to lower oxygenation and exchange

CLIMATE.NASA.GOV



Deep water formation

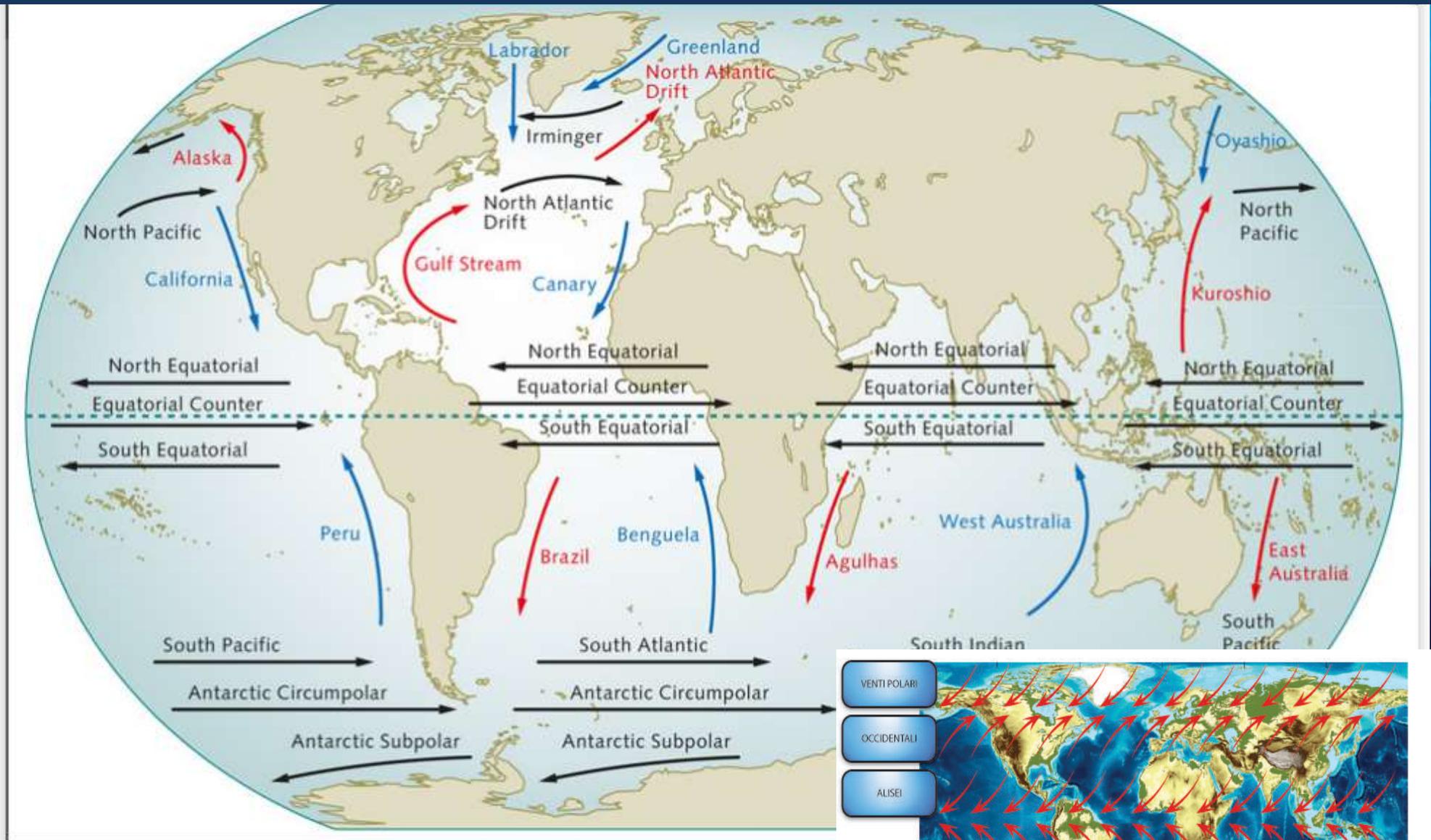


Cold polar winds cause evaporative cooling of seawater, and increase of salinity

Ice formation further increase salinity through brine exclusion

Increased salinity and cooling of waters lead to dense water masses that sink, moving towards the deep ocean, representing the cold engine of the ocean circulation

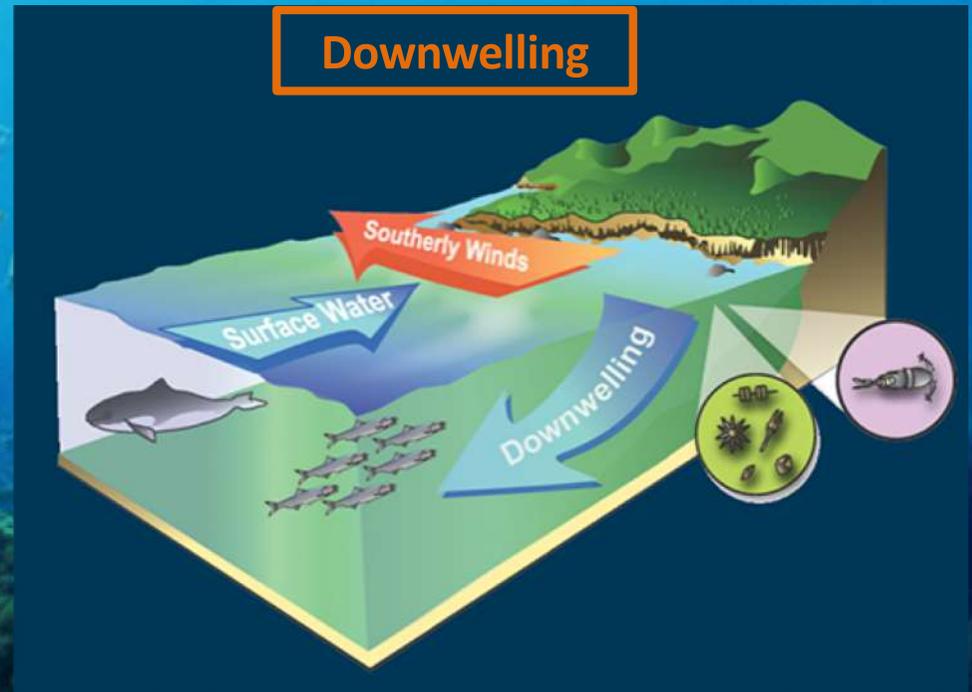
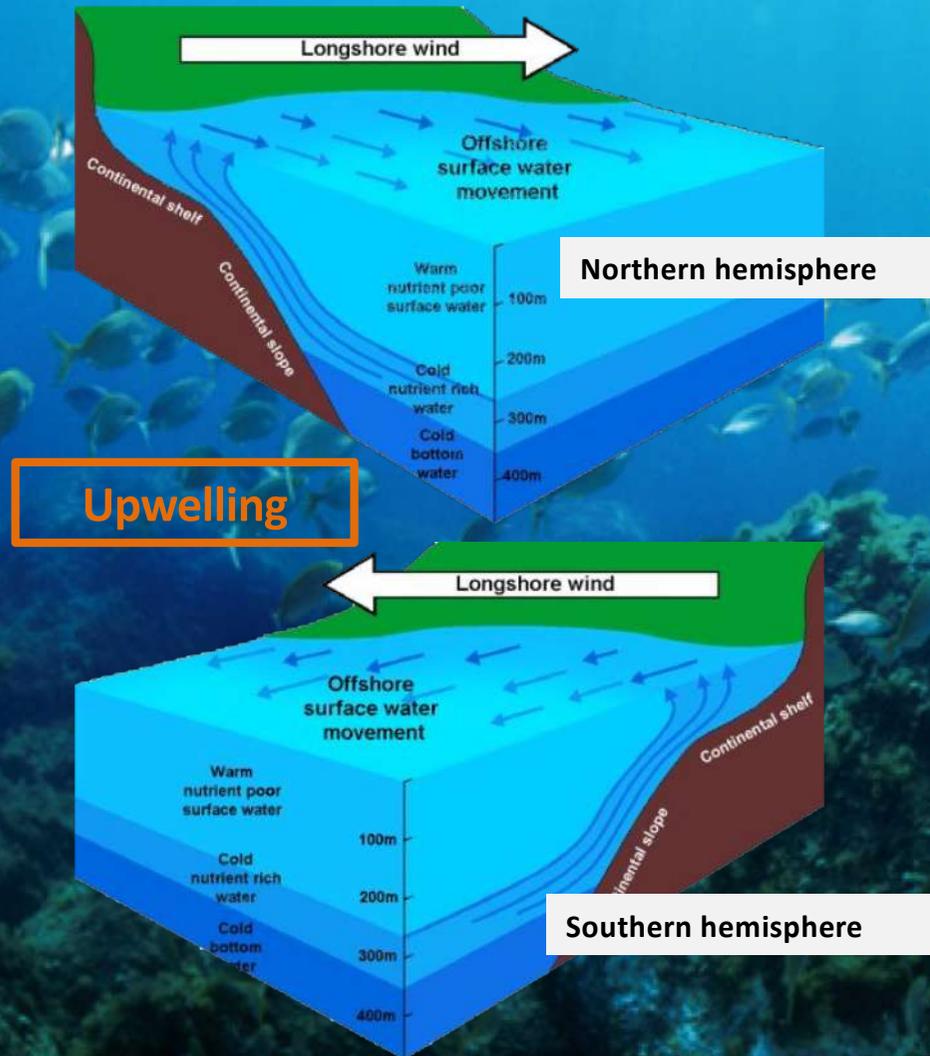
Main surface currents



Surface currents are driven by winds, continental shapes, Earth rotation

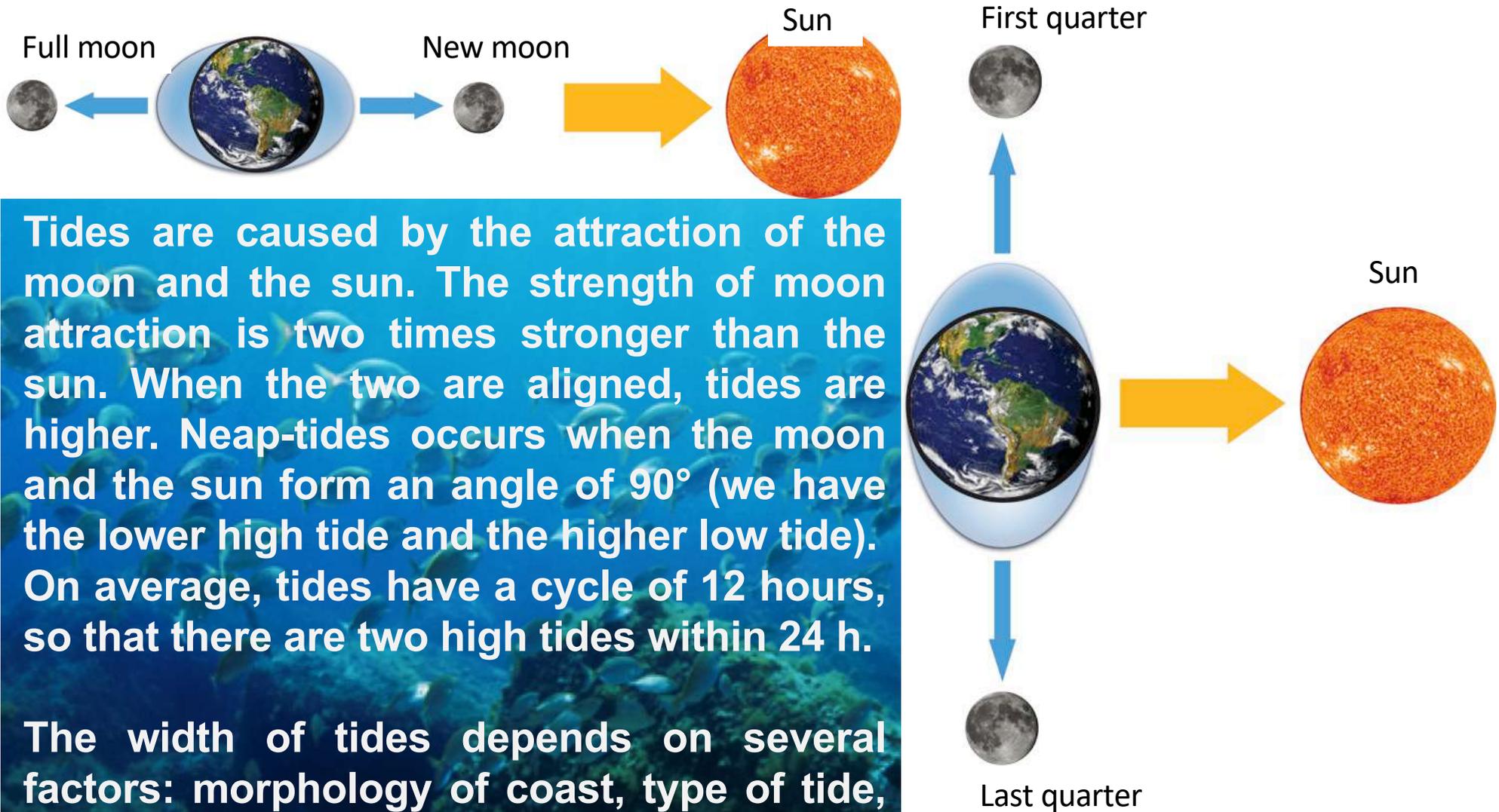
Vertical circulation

Vertical circulation is also important for the functioning of marine ecosystems. It allows replacing warm and nutrient-poor surface waters with cold and nutrient-rich waters from the bottom, and to transport oxygen towards the bottom



Winds and Earth's rotation generate water movements from the surface to the bottom and vice versa along the coast, but also in open waters

Tides

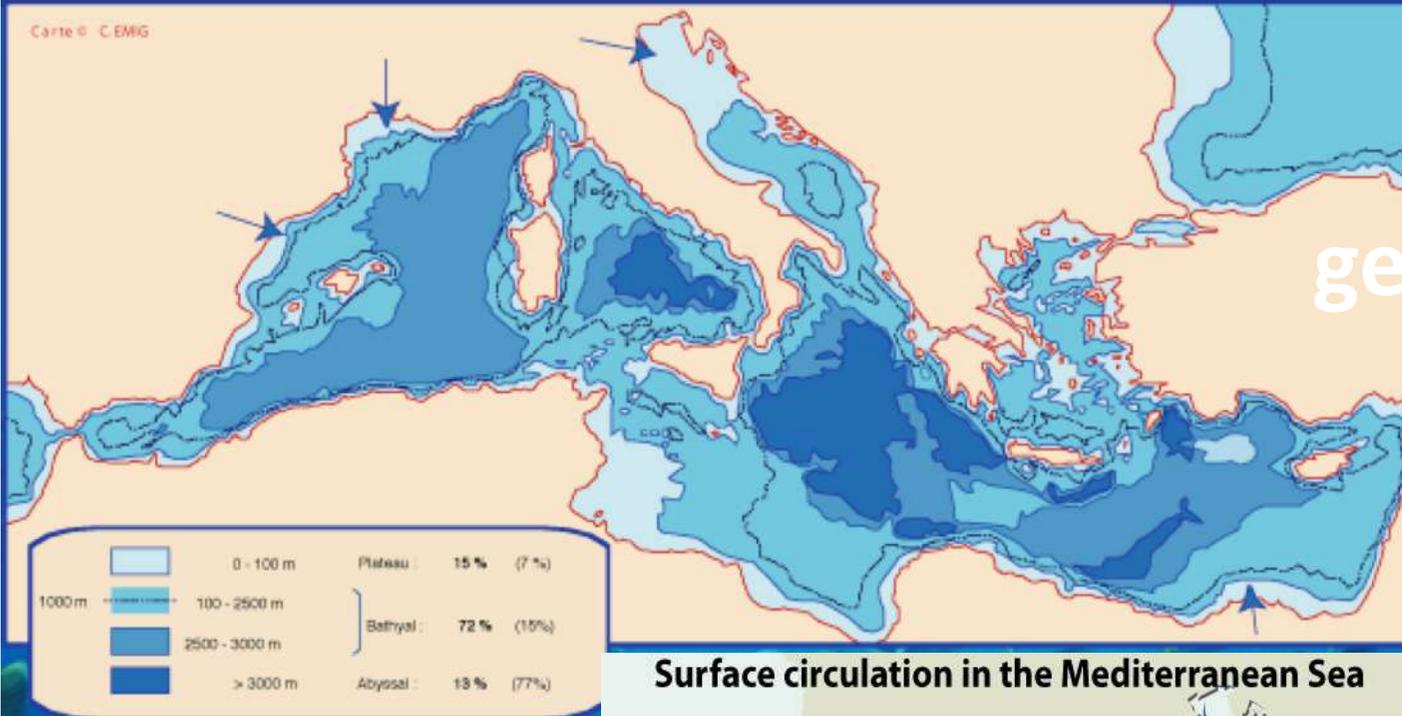


Tides are caused by the attraction of the moon and the sun. The strength of moon attraction is two times stronger than the sun. When the two are aligned, tides are higher. Neap-tides occurs when the moon and the sun form an angle of 90° (we have the lower high tide and the higher low tide). On average, tides have a cycle of 12 hours, so that there are two high tides within 24 h.

The width of tides depends on several factors: morphology of coast, type of tide, winds, closed seas.

They range between few tens of cm (e.g. Mediterranean Sea) until several m (e.g., 20 m in the Bay of Fundy, Canada)

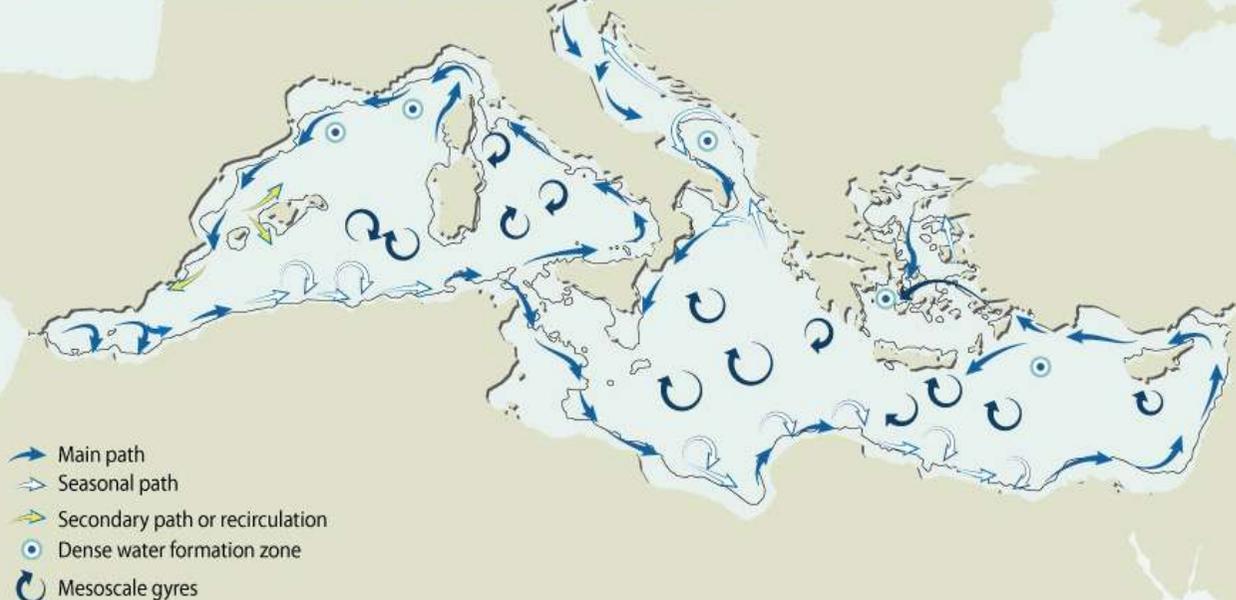
The Mediterranean Sea



depth
geomorphology
historical
factors

Currents and
circulation

Surface circulation in the Mediterranean Sea



Sources: C. Millott and Taupier-Letage, I. (2005). Circulation in the Mediterranean Sea. Hdb Env Chem Vol. 5, Part K, 29-66

Biogeography of the basin

