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The influence of atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration on the carbon isotope composition of plant tissues

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Many environmental controls influence the ratio of ^{12}C : ^{13}C fixed within plant tissue. However, how the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide, a raw material for photosynthesis that affects many aspects of plant biology, affects the net isotopic discrimination between plant tissue and atmospheric CO_2 has remained uncertain. Here we present a relationship quantifying how atmospheric CO_2 concentration ($p\text{CO}_2$) affects plant carbon isotope fractionation that is based on chamber and field studies conducted on a great diversity of C_3 plants. This relationship reconciles the wide range of fractionation factors previously reported and provides the framework for applying the $p\text{CO}_2$ effect to periods of changing $p\text{CO}_2$ level. Our analysis provides a minimum value for the fractionation due to catalysis by RuBisCO, which has implications for reconstructing plant water-use efficiency across any interval of $p\text{CO}_2$ change. Our work also helps to explain why terrestrial substrates commonly show a larger carbon isotope excursion than marine substrates during intervals of rapid changes in the global carbon cycle, and can be used to quantify the background and maximum $p\text{CO}_2$ levels for these events. We conclude that the effect of changing $p\text{CO}_2$ level on plant carbon isotope fractionation must be accounted for when analysing $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ records from terrestrial substrates across any interval of $p\text{CO}_2$ change.