Principle 2: Grades 9-12

Principle 2:
The ocean and life in the ocean shape the features of the Earth.

All matter on Earth cycles through various reservoirs: the atmosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere and lithosphere.

Biogeochemical Cycles

B.
The ocean plays a major role in the biogeochemical cycles that are fundamental to life on Earth.

B.1.
All elements are present in ocean water at various concentrations. Many elements in the ocean are needed by all living organisms. These include C, P, N, S, O, and many other metals (Fe, Zn), as well as other elements (Na, K). Other elements (Si, Sr) are needed by some select organisms.

Carbon Cycle

B.2.
The ocean is the largest reservoir of rapidly cycling organic and inorganic carbon on Earth.

B.3.
Carbon in the form of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere enters the ocean by diffusion, convective mixing and bubble entrainment. Carbon is present in the ocean in dissolved inorganic (CO_2, H_2CO_3, HCO_3, CO_3, CH_4), organic (carbohydrates, lipids, amino acids) and in particulate forms (carbonate minerals and living and dead organisms).

B.4.
Inorganic carbon is converted by photo- and chemoautotrophs to organic matter in the process of carbon fixation (e.g., photo- and chemosynthesis).

B.7.
Inorganic carbon dissolved in seawater is used by some organisms, such as corals, protozoa and mollusks, to form calcium carbonate ($CaCO_3$) shells and other skeletal parts.

B.5.
Most of the organic carbon is converted back to inorganic carbon through the process of respiration.

B.8.
Much of the calcium carbonate from shells dissolves in the deep ocean.

B.6.
Some organic carbon sinks to the seafloor where it accumulates over time and may become fossil fuel.

B.9.
Some calcium carbonate from shells and corals accumulates to form sedimentary rocks, i.e. limestone, chalk and carbonate banks.

B.10.
Uplift and accretion processes, as well as sea level changes, may relocate sedimentary rocks containing both organic and inorganic carbon onto land, where the rocks can undergo weathering and erosion before eventually returning to the ocean.

B.11.
Anthropogenic burning of fossil fuels converts organic (petroleum) to inorganic carbon (CO_2) and releases carbon back into the atmosphere, which has affects on the climate and pH balance of ocean water.

See Principle 3: B2

See Principle 1: B2
See Principle 6: D2

Phosphorus Cycle

B.12.
All life on Earth depends on phosphorus (for ATP and DNA, phospholipids).

B.13.
Terrestrial weathering of rocks is the primary source of phosphorus (P) in the ocean.

B.14.
Phosphorus (P) is present in the ocean in dissolved inorganic (HPO_4, PO_4) and organic forms (phospholipids, sugars), as well as in particulate forms (e.g., minerals, such as apatite), and living and dead organisms.

B.15.
Phytoplankton and other primary producers take up phosphorus dissolved in seawater and convert it to biomass, which is consumed by heterotrophic organisms higher in the food chain. In the process of respiration and regeneration, dissolved and particulate organic phosphorus is converted back to dissolved inorganic forms. Upwelling brings inorganic phosphorus back to the surface.

B.16.
Some organic (e.g., lipids, sugars) and inorganic (e.g., minerals such as apatite) phosphorus accumulates in ocean sediments, where it undergoes transformations and, over time, becomes part of sedimentary rocks.

B.17.
Uplift and accretion processes, as well as sea level changes may relocate oceanic sedimentary rocks containing both organic and inorganic phosphorus onto land, where the rocks can undergo weathering and erosion before eventually returning to the ocean.

B.18.
Anthropogenic loading of phosphorus to waterways, (e.g., rivers, runoff, lakes and groundwater) from fertilizers and waste water reaches the ocean, where it becomes available to primary producers. Phosphorus may cause eutrophication (i.e., harmful algal blooms) and alter food webs.

See Principle 6: D15 & E11

See Principle 6: D18

Nitrogen Cycle

B.19.
All life on Earth depends on nitrogen for amino acids and proteins. Most of the nitrogen (N) on Earth is in the atmosphere as N_2, which cannot be used directly by most organisms.

B.20.
Some bacteria (including cyanobacteria) in the ocean can fix N_2 in the atmosphere and convert it to organic forms at the cellular level, thus making nitrogen available to other marine organisms.

B.21.
Nitrogen (N) is continuously transformed between various oxidation states (NO_3, NO_2, NH_4) and compounds (amino acids, urea) in the ocean through biologically-mediated transformation processes, such as nitrogen fixation, nitrification, denitrification, assimilation, ammonification and anaerobic ammonium oxidation.

B.22.
Phytoplankton and other primary producers take up nitrogen dissolved in seawater and convert it to biomass, which is consumed by heterotrophic organisms higher in the food chain. In the process of respiration and regeneration, dissolved and particulate organic nitrogen is converted back to dissolved inorganic forms. Upwelling brings inorganic nitrogen back to the surface.

B.23.
Some organic forms of nitrogen (e.g., lipids, sugars) accumulate in ocean sediments, where they become part of the organic matter in sedimentary rocks.

B.24.
Uplift and accretion processes, as well as sea level changes, may relocate oceanic sedimentary rocks containing nitrogen onto land, where the rocks can undergo weathering and erosion before eventually returning to the ocean.

B.25.
Anthropogenic loading of nitrogen to waterways (e.g, rivers, runoff, lakes and groundwater) and the atmosphere, from fertilizers, waste water and fossil fuel combustion, may reach the ocean, where it becomes available to primary producers. Nitrogen may cause eutrophication (i.e., harmful algal blooms) and alter food webs.

See Principle 1: B1

Silica Cycle

B.26.
Some oceanic organisms (e.g., diatoms, radiolarian, sponges) use silica to construct the hard parts of their body, such as tests, frustules and spines.

B.27.
Terrestrial weathering of rocks and volcanic eruptions are the primary sources of silica (Si) in the ocean. Rivers transport the silica weathered from rocks from land to the ocean.

B.28.
Silica (Si) is present in the ocean in dissolved inorganic (SiO_2) and particulate forms (clays and other minerals from land and biogenic skeletal materials).

B.29.
Most of the biogenic silica skeletal material is dissolved in the ocean after the organisms die, and is converted back to dissolved inorganic silica. Upwelling brings inorganic silica back to the surface.

B.30.
Some relatively small fractions of the biogenic silica accumulates in ocean sediments, where it undergoes transformations and, over time, becomes part of sedimentary rocks, such as chert, diatomite and clay minerals.

B.31.
Uplift and accretion processes, as well as sea level changes, may relocate oceanic sedimentary rocks containing silica onto land, where the rocks can undergo weathering and erosion before eventually returning to the ocean.

B.32.
Anthropogenic activities that alter continental weathering rates (e.g., acid rain) and affect the global water cycle may change the flux of silica into the ocean.