Greenhouse gas balance of open peatlands is globally governed by soil water content and archaeal abundance

Sandeep Thayamkottu1, Jaan Pärn1, Mohammad Bahram2,3, Mikk Espenberg1, Leho Tedersoo3,4, Ülo Niinemets5, and Ülo Mander1

1Department of Geography, Institute of Ecology and Earth Sciences, University of Tartu, Vanemuise 46, 51014, Tartu, Estonia
2Department of Ecology, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Ulls väg 16, 756 51, Uppsala, Sweden
3Department of Botany, Institute of Ecology and Earth Sciences, University of Tartu, 40 Lai St. Tartu, Estonia
4Natural History Museum, University of Tartu, Vanemuise St. 46, 51014, Tartu, Estonia
5Institute of Agricultural & Environmental Sciences, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Kreutzwaldi 1, 51006 Tartu, Estonia

There is a general consensus that peatlands are the source of about 10% of the global CO₂, CH₄ and N₂O greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Yet, our knowledge about underlying processes and environmental factors that regulate the GHG are limited. Here, we found that the GHG balance of CO₂, CH₄ and N₂O in 48 open peatland sites on five continents can be predicted by a model that incorporates soil water content (SWC) and archaeal abundance. We used our global database (2011–2019) on peat characteristics and field-measured soil respiration (ER), CH₄ and N₂O emissions. Furthermore, we used the gross primary productivity (GPP) dataset by Running, Mu & Zhao (2015) on the basis of satellite data from the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectrometer (MODIS) sensors alongside the ER to derive net ecosystem exchange (NEE) of carbon. The GHG balance follows SWC along a bell-shaped curve and increases with archaeal abundance and decomposition rate of peat-forming plant species. Thus, the net GHG emission peaks at intermediate SWC. These factors combined explains 61.9% (adjusted R² = 0.587) of GHG balance and most of this variance is made up by the NEE of carbon (adjusted R² = 0.97).