



4220 King Street
Alexandria, VA 22302
P: (703) 379-2480
F: (703) 379-7563

www.americangeosciences.org

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Contact: Megan Sever
msever@earthmagazine.org

EARTH Magazine: Tiny Ants Are Heroic Weathering Agents

Alexandria, Va. — Earth's abundant silicate minerals are degraded over time by exposure to water, chemical dissolution, and physical and chemical weathering by tree roots and even insects such as ants and termites. Such weathering plays a significant role in decreasing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, as carbon dioxide is consumed in chemical weathering reactions and the resultant carbonate becomes sequestered in the form of limestone and dolomite.

To study the effects of weathering over time, researchers buried basalt sand at multiple test sites and dug up the samples every five years for 25 years to measure the degradation. What they found shocked them: Ants broke down the minerals 50 to 300 times faster than controls. What the ants are doing with the stone and whether the tiny titans' weathering prowess can be harnessed to draw down carbon dioxide levels remains to be seen. Read more in the November issue of EARTH magazine: <http://bit.ly/ZHZsTc>.

For more stories about the science of our planet, check out EARTH magazine online or subscribe at www.earthmagazine.org. The November issue, now available on the digital newsstand, features commentaries on how glaciation led to the U.S. Civil War, how the IPCC could have better communicated its findings to the public, and the lessons learned about hazard communication in the wake of Super-Typhoon Haiyan, which struck the Philippines last November, plus much, much more.

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Keep up to date with the latest happenings in Earth, energy and environment news with EARTH Magazine online at: <http://www.earthmagazine.org>. Published by the American Geosciences Institute, EARTH is your source for the science behind the headlines.

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