

# A Review of Atmospheric Micro/Nanoplastics: Insights into Source and Fate for Modelling Studies

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### Abstract

Micro/nanoplastics (MNPs), as emerging pollutants, have attracted increasing attention due to their potential adverse effects on human health, ecosystems, and climate. The rapid, turbulent, and large-scale nature of atmospheric transport facilitates both horizontal and vertical movement of MNPs over long distances within a short time, largely independent of topographical constraints, thereby accelerating their global cycle and exacerbating their impacts. Research on the atmospheric life cycle of MNPs primarily relies on a combination of observations and numerical modelling, yet emission estimates remain the major source of uncertainty, posing substantial challenges for lifecycle assessment. This review synthesises findings from atmospheric observations and numerical modelling studies conducted over the past five years to examine the sources and long-range transport dynamics of MNPs, as well as the key factors influencing their transport, while also quantifying uncertainties in emission flux estimates. Two major uncertainties persist: the wide variability in marine emission estimates, which span four orders of magnitude, and the unresolved question of whether terrestrial or marine sources are the dominant contributors to atmospheric micro/nanoplastic emissions. Furthermore, this review highlights critical factors driving these uncertainties, including limited data availability, inconsistencies in observational methodologies, oversimplified simulations, and gaps in understanding atmospheric cycling mechanisms. Additionally, variations in the particle size ranges targeted by different observational and modelling studies hinder cross-comparisons and model evaluations, representing another important source of uncertainty. To address these issues, we call for establishing a global network of standardised observations, improving sampling and simulation practices, and incorporating artificial intelligence. These strategies will enhance our understanding of the complete atmospheric cycle of MNPs, paving the way for more effective environmental management and better-informed policy decisions.

**Keywords:** microplastics, nanoplastics, emission, atmospheric transport and lifecycle, modelling

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## 1 Introduction

Global plastic production grew from 2 million tons in 1950 to 400.4 million tons in 2022, with plastic waste accumulating to 35–50 billion tons by 2019, and both are increasing at an accelerating rate [1–5]. Over time, plastic waste degrades into micro/nanoplastics

(MNPs) through physical, chemical, and biological processes, including UV radiation, weathering, oxidation, and biodegradation. [6–8]. In addition to degradation-related pathways, MNPs can be released directly from anthropogenic activities, including industrial processes such as manufacturing and plastic heating [9–11], abrasion during transportation and use, such as tire wear [12], and daily activities like textile washing and wearing [13]. According to ISO [14], environmental microplastics (MPs) are defined as particles ranging from 1  $\mu\text{m}$  to 5 mm, whereas nanoplastics (NPs) are classified as particles smaller than 1  $\mu\text{m}$ .

Characterised by their small size, low density, and inert nature, MNPs have become ubiquitous in global ecosystems due to their uncontrolled dispersion and the limited removal efficiency [15–18]. This widespread occurrence contributes to a “plastic cycle” that extends from the equator to the poles and from surface waters to deep-sea sediments [15]. MNPs have been detected in various environmental compartments—terrestrial systems (agricultural, urban, and industrial soil) [19–22], aquatic environments (rivers, lakes, groundwater, and marine) [19, 20, 23–28], atmosphere (urban air, remote regions, and marine air) [29–33], and human exposure pathways (food products and indoor spaces) [34–41]—with atmospheric transport serving as the main route of their global spread. Unlike hydrological pathways (e.g. ocean currents and water runoff), which are constrained by topography, atmospheric micro/nanoplastics (AMNPs) can be transported in multiple directions over long distances within days to weeks, often crossing continents and oceans. [42–44]. Moreover, the presence of MNPs in high-altitude regions without local MNP pollution [45], as well as in cloud water [46, 47] and stratospheric samples [48], provide strong evidence of their vertical transport. This capacity allows MNPs to cross geographical barriers and be entrained into global atmospheric circulation systems, leading to their long-range transport and ultimately settling in remote ecosystems such as protected areas [49], mountains [45, 50], deserts [51, 52] and polar ice caps [53, 54].

The ubiquity of AMNPs underscores their capacity to infiltrate both natural and anthropogenic systems via atmospheric transport, posing multifaceted risks to ecosystems [55, 56], climate [57–59], and human health [34, 60–65]. For example, inhalation is considered a primary exposure pathway for AMNPs, particularly in densely populated and industrialised regions [60–62]. Once inhaled, AMNPs can penetrate cell membranes, cross biological barriers, and distribute to various organs via the circulatory system [62, 66, 67]. The potential for bioaccumulation, coupled with toxicological effects, has serious concerns for public health [60, 68]. Beyond human health, AMNPs deposited from the atmosphere impact terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. They can alter soil microbial diversity and physicochemical properties [55, 69, 70], affect pollinator activity [56, 71–73], and interfere with plant functions such as nitrogen cycling and chlorophyll synthesis [69, 74–76], ultimately disrupting ecological balance and increasing the risk of trophic transfer. Moreover, preliminary studies suggest that AMNPs may possess physicochemical properties enabling them to influence direct radiative forcing [57] and serve as cloud condensation nuclei (CCN) [47, 58, 77] or ice nucleating particles (INP) [58, 59, 78, 79]. However, current evidence remains limited regarding their atmospheric abundance, activation efficiency, and whether they exert a measurable influence on cloud processes or the climate system, highlighting the need for

further investigation. Altogether, AMNPs threaten both environmental integrity and the stability of socioeconomic systems, hindering the achievement of more than 80% of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [80].

Research on AMNPs emerged relatively late, with initial recognition originating from detecting AMNPs by Dris et al. (2015) in Greater Paris samples [23]. Early studies remained largely limited to local observations and no research on the large-scale transport of AMNPs. This gap was primarily due to limitations in observation techniques and the delay in recognising atmospheric pathways as a major transport route for these particles [30, 81, 82]. It was not until Allen et al. (2019) combined back-trajectory modelling with observational data that the first insights into long-range transport of AMNPs were provided [30]. Currently, atmospheric research employs specialized modelling approaches, including Lagrangian Particle Dispersion Models (LPDMs) such as the FLEXible PARTicle (FLEXPART) model [83–85] and the Hybrid Single-Particle Lagrangian Integrated Trajectory (HYSPLIT) model [86, 87], as well as numerical atmospheric models like Community Earth System Model (CESM) [88] and GEOS-Chem [89]. These models are widely used for source identifications, large-scale transport simulations, and deposition assessments of AMNPs [30, 90–93]. However, the accuracy of AMNP simulations remains limited, primarily due to the substantial uncertainty in emission estimates. For example, estimates of AMNP emissions from oceanic sources vary by up to four orders of magnitude across different studies [90, 91, 94]. These uncertainties in emission estimation primarily stem from model simplifications, limitations in representing the physical and chemical properties of AMNPs, knowledge gaps in emission and transport mechanisms, and observational constraints such as data heterogeneity and uneven spatial distribution.

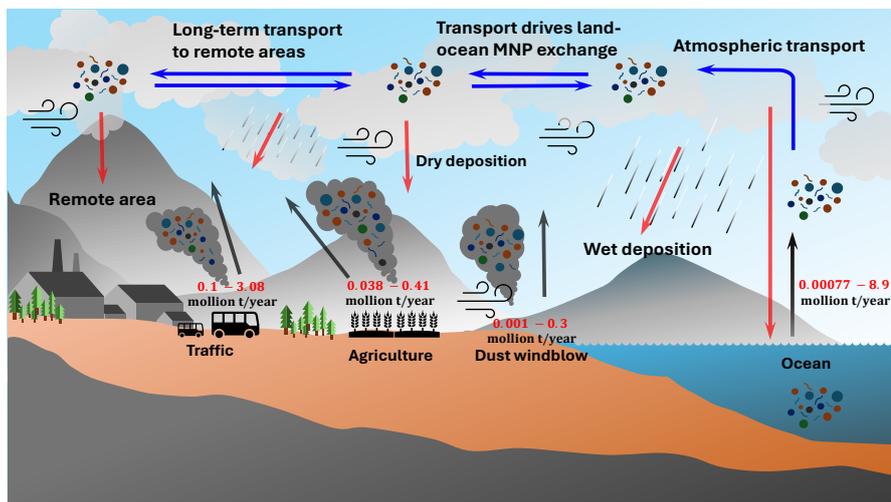
Despite notable progress in AMNP research over the past five years, with more than 50 review articles summarising advancements in AMNP collection and analysis techniques, sources, physical characteristics (shape, colour, and size) [40, 82, 95–115], atmospheric transport mechanisms [44, 116–119], and their impacts on the environment and human health [64, 67, 68, 81, 120–135], a systematic analysis of uncertainties in AMNP simulations remains largely lacking. In particular, emission flux estimation, a critical component of AMNP simulations, has not been thoroughly examined in terms of its sources of uncertainty and potential mitigation strategies. This gap not only affects the accuracy of global AMNP transport models but also limits the quantitative assessment of their environmental fate, human health risks, and climate impacts.

To bridge this research gap, this review synthesises studies on AMNPs from 2019 to 2025, covering the known and unknown aspects of their lifecycle. It places particular emphasis on existing assessments of emission fluxes. Additionally, this review discusses key uncertainties, identifies major challenges in AMNP simulations, and proposes potential solutions. The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews the lifecycle of AMNPs, discussing their occurrence, abundance, sources, major mechanisms of long-range transport, and influencing factors. Section 3 summarises current knowledge on AMNP emission fluxes, highlighting uncertainties and their underlying causes. Section 4 not only delves into strategies for addressing model uncertainties but also takes a broader perspective on the future development of AMNP research. By

integrating insights from observational data, numerical modelling, and artificial intelligence (AI) applications, this section highlights emerging opportunities and potential advancements in AMNP studies.

## 2 Atmospheric Lifecycle of MNPs

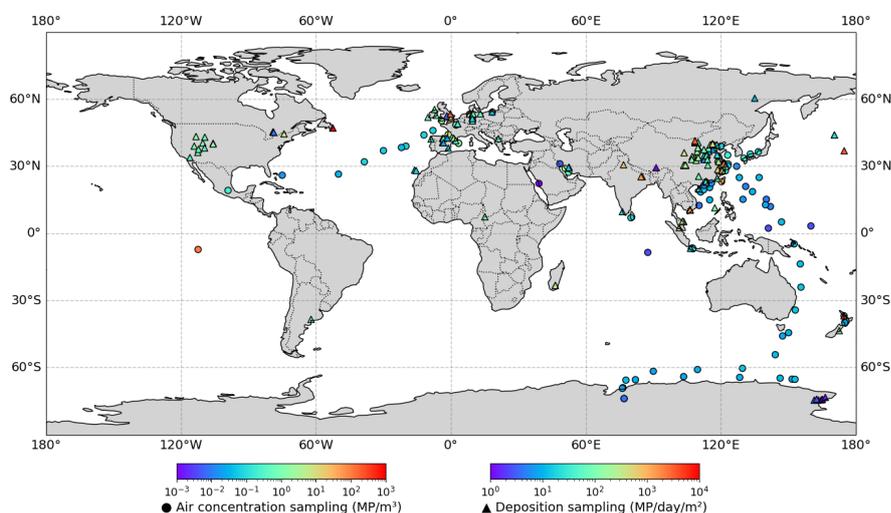
MNPs from marine and terrestrial sources can be released into the atmosphere and transported over long distances by wind and turbulence [102, 104, 117] (Figure 1). Once airborne, these particles are removed through dry deposition, gravitational settling, and wet deposition via precipitation [108, 136, 137]. Despite growing research interest, substantial knowledge gaps remain in understanding the emission source contributions to AMNPs, particularly regarding the mechanisms and magnitudes of emissions from different sources. Additionally, the influences of MNP properties, ageing processes, and atmospheric transport mechanisms on their distributions are still poorly characterised. These knowledge gaps introduce uncertainties in global AMNP cycle modelling, particularly in estimating their total atmospheric budget, the rates of emission and deposition fluxes, and long-range transport potential across regions. This section examines the current understanding and key unresolved questions related to the occurrence, sources, transport mechanisms, and major factors shaping the atmospheric lifecycle of MNPs.



**Fig. 1** Schematic of AMNPs lifecycle. The black arrows indicate the emission of MNPs into the atmosphere, primarily from terrestrial sources and marine sources [90–92, 94, 138–142]. The blue arrows illustrate the atmospheric transport process, where AMNPs are rapidly carried over long distances by airflows, unaffected by terrain, facilitating the exchange of MNPs between land and ocean and dispersing them to remote areas far from the emission sources. The red arrows represent the deposition process, which deposits AMNPs onto the ground, leading to their long-term accumulation in various ecosystems.

## 2.1 Occurrence and Abundance of AMNPs

Over the past five years, nearly 100 observational studies have been conducted on AMNPs across diverse regions worldwide (Supplementary data), including remote areas (e.g. the French Pyrenees [45], U.S. protected areas [49], the Antarctic continent [143], the Lut and Kavir Deserts [51], the Tibetan Plateau [50], the Arctic [53, 144], and the Forni Glacier [145]), urban and rural areas (e.g. China [146–152], France [38, 153], USA [154, 155], New Zealand [156–158], Thailand [159], UK [160–162], Canada [163], and Germany [164–166]), and the marine atmosphere (e.g. the North Atlantic Ocean [167], the Pacific Ocean [150, 168, 169], the Northeastern South China Sea [170]). Quantitative measurements of AMNPs primarily include passive, active, and surface sampling techniques [119, 171]. Passive sampling, such as wet and dry sediment collection, measures MNP deposition rates (unit: MP/day/m<sup>2</sup>, where “MP” means the number of MNPs detected) [43, 45, 48, 146, 147, 172]. Active sampling uses pumps to concentrate airborne particles, measuring MNP abundance in air (unit: MP/m<sup>3</sup>) [164, 165, 173–175]. Surface sampling, involving the collection of dust or snow, indicates AMNP deposition (unit: MP/g or MP/L) [53, 176–178]. Reviews discussing these techniques and their applications can be found in [96, 110, 119, 171, 179].



**Fig. 2** AMNP sampling sites and measured values. Circles represent MNP abundance (MP/m<sup>3</sup>) from air concentration sampling, while triangles indicate MNP deposition (MP/day/m<sup>2</sup>). Data are based on 86 observational studies published from 2019 to 2025 (details provided in the supporting information).

Figure 2 indicates that AMNP concentrations across terrestrial regions vary widely, spanning several orders of magnitude. For example, reported concentrations range from as low as 0.00537 MP/m<sup>3</sup> in Ahvaz, Iran [31], and 0.09 MP/m<sup>3</sup> in Sri Lanka [39] to 0.9 MP/m<sup>3</sup> in Paris, France [38], 1.77 MP/m<sup>3</sup> in Plymouth, England [180], 20.2 MP/m<sup>3</sup> in Shannan, China [32], 161 MP/m<sup>3</sup> in Gdansk Harbor, Poland [181], and as high as 5700 MP/m<sup>3</sup> in Beijing, China [148]. These variations are primarily

driven by differences in land use, human activities, and environmental conditions. In general, urban areas exhibit higher MNP concentrations than rural and remote regions (e.g. forests, mountains, and deserts) due to intensive human activities such as traffic, industry, plastic waste disposal, construction, and household emissions [32, 182–184].

### 2.1.1 Urban Areas

In urban areas, AMNP concentrations are primarily influenced by the intensity and patterns of plastic usage. Higher concentrations and deposition fluxes are typically observed in commercial and residential areas, as well as in proximity to recycling centres and incineration facilities, compared to parks and industrial zones [184–186]. This difference is mainly attributed to higher population densities, more frequent human activities, and larger amounts of plastic waste in these areas. Liu et al. (2024) found that in northern Chinese cities, MNP deposition fluxes positively correlated with population density and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with commercial districts contributing more to MNP pollution than industrial and agricultural areas [187]. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) reported that during the COVID-19 lockdown, MNP abundance in Lanzhou, China, declined from 487.38 MP/m<sup>3</sup> to 222.25 MP/m<sup>3</sup> [185]. In Paris, MNP deposition rates dropped from 110 MP/day/m<sup>2</sup> before the COVID-19 pandemic to 14.3 MP/day/m<sup>2</sup> in 2020 and then increased to 34.4 MP/day/m<sup>2</sup> in 2021 as human activities resumed [38, 153]. These patterns not only highlight the influence of human activities on urban AMNP levels, but also offer insights into dominant source types. Notably, the sharp decline in AMNP concentrations during lockdowns, despite the persistence of indoor activities such as laundry, suggests that outdoor emission sources related to public mobility, commercial operations, and waste handling may play a more critical role in shaping AMNP pollution.

Moreover, urban vegetation plays a crucial role in capturing AMNPs. Leaf characteristics such as hydrophobicity, stomatal density, and surface roughness influence the retention of MNP, introducing uncertainties in the assessment of urban MNP pollution [188–194]. Recent studies have explored the potential of biomonitors such as foliage samples, mangrove plants, lichens, moss bags, and pine needles, for evaluating MNP pollution in urban environments [192, 195–198]. However, MNPs tend to be uniformly deposited on vegetation leaves within the same urban area, regardless of land use type [199]. Consequently, MNP concentrations on leaves can provide a general estimate of AMNP exposure but may not accurately reflect variations across different regions within a city [199]. Furthermore, MNP accumulation on leaves varies with their height above the ground, emphasising the importance of leaf position in MNP capture [199].

### 2.1.2 Remote Regions

AMNPs in remote regions primarily derive from long-range atmospheric transport, exhibiting an inverse correlation between deposition rates and proximity to major pollution sources (e.g. urban areas) [32, 48, 52]. Deposition measurements illustrate this gradient: remote sites near urban areas, such as Bernadouze, France (365 MP/day/m<sup>2</sup>) [200] and Guangxi, China (98.85 MP/day/m<sup>2</sup>) [115], exhibit fluxes roughly two orders of magnitude higher than those at more isolated locations like Larsen Glacier (3.44 MP/day/m<sup>2</sup>) [143] and Inexpressible Island (2.13 MP/day/m<sup>2</sup>), Antarctica [143].

Moreover, localized human activities can enhance MNP deposition in remote regions. For instance, in the Badain Jaran Desert of China, the deposition rate in tourist areas (6 MP/kg) is about five times that in non-tourist areas (1.1 MP/kg) [52]. Similarly, at ET Teide on Tenerife, accessible and climbing areas accumulate 167 to 188 MP/L, compared to 51 MP/L in pristine areas [201]. High-altitude remote environments also show evident signs of MNP contamination. Cloud water collected at Mount Fuji in Japan (1252–1300 m above sea level (a.s.l.)) and Mount Tai in China (1545 m a.s.l.) contains MPs with 13.9 MP/L [46] and 463 MP/L [47], respectively. Air samples from the Pic du Midi Observatory (2877 m a.s.l.) reveal deposition rates of 0.23 MP/m<sup>3</sup> [45], while snow samples from the Sonnblick Observatory in Austria (3106 m a.s.l.) contain NPs at an average concentration of 46 ng/mL [202]. Soils from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (average altitude 4500 m a.s.l.) exhibit MNP levels ranging from 53.2 to 64.8 MP/kg [50]. These findings collectively indicate that MNPs are present in the free troposphere, thereby providing a potential pathway for their atmospheric long-range transport.

### 2.1.3 Regions over the Ocean

Marine air samples generally exhibit lower AMNP concentrations than terrestrial environments [44]. Reported concentrations range from 0.004 MP/m<sup>3</sup> to 1.37 MP/m<sup>3</sup> across various regions, including the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, South China Sea, Bohai Sea, Yellow Sea, and East China Sea (Figure 2) [150, 167, 169, 170, 203–205]. The variation in MNP concentrations over marine regions is influenced by oceanic and atmospheric processes, as well as proximity to pollution sources. Remote ocean areas, such as the open Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, tend to have lower concentrations, ranging from 0.004 to 0.079 MP/m<sup>3</sup> [167, 169, 203]. In contrast, coastal regions and areas near shipping routes, such as the South China Sea, Bohai Sea, and East China Sea, show elevated concentrations, reaching up to 0.2 MP/m<sup>3</sup> [204]. Moreover, AMNPs in marine environments tend to be smaller than those in terrestrial regions, with most particles measuring less than 2 μm and primarily appearing as fibres [150, 168, 170, 204]. This size distribution may enhance long-range transport, as smaller particles and fibre-like morphologies are more susceptible to atmospheric dispersion over extended distances.

## 2.2 Sources of AMNPs

The sources of AMNPs are inferred primarily based on their observed shapes and materials, which are influenced by their origins, transport, degradation processes, and atmospheric residence time [114, 206]. For example, fibrous MNPs are typically derived from textile industries, carpets, and laundry activities [38, 151, 207–209]; fragments result from the weathering and breaking of large plastic items [30, 210]; films are produced from the degradation of plastic bags, packaging materials, and agricultural films [211–213]; and spherical MNPs originate from products containing MNPs, such as facial scrubs and toothpaste [214, 215]. Freshly emitted MNPs typically feature sharply defined edges, but with prolonged atmospheric exposure, these edges gradually become smoother [216].

Since Allen et al. (2019) employed back-trajectory modelling for tracing the sources of MNPs, LPDMs have become the commonly used tools for identifying the origins of AMNPs [30, 45, 186, 217–219]. Among these, the FLEXPART model [83–85] and the HYSPLIT model [86, 87] are notable for studies on AMNPs [63, 103, 169, 203]. These models simulate pollutant dispersion by calculating the trajectories of virtual particles influenced by meteorological factors (such as turbulent diffusion and precipitation) and physical processes (such as gravitational settling and chemical losses) [84]. LPDMs operate in two main modes: in forward mode, particles are emitted from specific sources, and their concentration distributions are calculated over a latitude-longitude-altitude grid [84]. This approach is commonly used to study aerosol dispersion following events such as volcanic eruptions or wildfires [220–222]; In contrast, backward simulations use the Source-Receptor Relationship (SRR) to trace the pathways of pollutants from their observation or reception point (“receptor”) back to their emission source (“source”) [223, 224]. Receptors can represent the average concentration of an atmospheric substance in a grid cell over a specific time interval, a deposition value, or specific observations at measurement stations [224]. Sources can be defined as point, area, or volume emissions during a given time. More detailed principles can be found in Seibert and Frank (2004) [224].

In the atmospheric lifecycle of MNPs, the generation and emission of AMNPs originate from terrestrial and marine environments. LPDMs have highlighted critical interactions between the ocean and the atmosphere: the ocean acts as a persistent source of atmospheric MPs, while atmospheric transport conveys terrestrial MPs to marine environments [167, 203, 205]. Field and laboratory studies have further illuminated the dynamics of the ocean-to-atmosphere exchange of MNPs [43, 167, 181, 225–227]. Similar to sea salt aerosols, MNPs are emitted into the atmosphere through processes such as the erosion and entrainment of beach sand, wave action, and the bursting of sea spray bubbles [43, 44, 181, 225]. Precipitation also contributes to the air-sea exchange of MNPs: wet deposition carries AMNPs into the ocean, while raindrops impacting the ocean surface generate spray [225].

Terrestrial environments are the main sources of AMNP emissions, with contributions from road traffic, soil, and various human activities. Soil functions as both a transport medium and a temporary reservoir in the MNP cycle, accumulating MNPs through atmospheric deposition, rainfall-runoff, plastic waste burial, and agricultural activities such as composting, irrigation, and the use of plastic-based greenhouse materials [8, 33, 118, 228, 229]. Estimates indicate that MNP concentrations in soils are 4–23 times higher than those in the ocean [22, 42]. MNP content in soils varies with land use and management practices, with agricultural soils treated with plastic mulch or compost exhibiting higher concentrations than control soils without plastic exposure [230]. In wind-transported sediments, MNP concentrations are higher than in the original soil, suggesting that MNPs, due to their small size and low density, are more easily carried by wind than heavier soil particles like sand [29, 33]. The influence of MNP content variation in soil and properties, such as shape, on resuspension and wind transport is not fully understood. While MNP emissions from agricultural soils have been roughly estimated at 0.08–1.48 mg/m<sup>2</sup>/min [44] or 6.91–20.27 mg/kg [42] of

wind-eroded soil, understanding the mechanisms and achieving accurate quantification remains challenging.

Road traffic contributes to MNP emissions, primarily from tire and road wear. Emission levels are affected by various factors including engine power, vehicle weight, load, tire material, position, age, road conditions, and weather [12, 231, 232]. Global per capita emissions are estimated to be 0.2–0.55 kg per year [95], while in the United States, the figure reaches about 4.6 kg per year, with the emitted particles mainly consisting of rubber and polymers [231]. In Austria, per capita emissions are around 2.4 kg per year, with 6% of particles falling within the 0.1–10  $\mu\text{m}$  size range [232]. Among total particulate emissions, non-exhaust sources, such as tire, brake, and road wear, contribute approximately 9% [232]. Due to analytical limitations, tire and brake wear particles are often measured separately and excluded from AMNP analyses (e.g.  $\text{MP}/\text{m}^3$  or  $\text{MP}/\text{m}^2/\text{day}$ ). This exclusion may lead to an underestimation of the total MNP burden and limit a comprehensive understanding of traffic-related emissions [44, 233].

Urban and metropolitan areas are primary sources of AMNPs due to various anthropogenic activities, including household emissions (e.g., fibres from clothing and textiles), industrial processes (e.g., plastic manufacturing), construction activities (e.g., use of paints and plastic materials), and waste management practices [24, 115, 234–236]. Wright et al., (2020) used the HYSPLIT model to trace MP deposition in central London, identifying local emissions as the dominant source [161]. Furthermore, several studies indicate that MNP deposition in urban areas shows weaker correlations with meteorological variables (wind speed, wind direction, relative humidity, and precipitation) compared to remote regions, reinforcing the conclusion that cities are major contributors to AMNPs [30, 146, 161, 203]. Despite the increasing availability of observational data on urban AMNPs, these data often do not distinguish between contributions from local emissions, long-range transport, and atmospheric loss from urban areas [44, 152, 159, 237, 238]. These uncertainties, along with the limited understanding of MNP fate and emission mechanisms, make it challenging to accurately estimate MNP emission rates in urban atmospheres.

### 2.3 Long Range Transport of AMNPs and the Governing Factors

Upon entering the atmosphere, MNPs undergo complex transport and ageing processes. Their small size allows them to stay suspended for days or weeks, enabling regional and long-range transport driven by local wind fields and atmospheric circulation [42–44]. Atmospheric transport plays a key role in redistributing MNPs across different regions, including remote areas where no direct MNP sources exist [8, 42, 45, 49, 51, 145, 178]. In addition, atmospheric transport facilitates the bidirectional exchange of MNPs between terrestrial and marine environments [42–44, 205]. Through atmospheric transport, MNPs are carried from urban, industrial, and agricultural sources to ocean surfaces. Conversely, marine-derived MNPs enter the atmosphere via sea spray, wave action, and evaporation, undergoing further atmospheric transport to inland regions [43, 63, 150, 168, 203].

During atmospheric residence, AMNPs undergo chemical and physical ageing processes, such as photooxidation, thermal degradation, and mechanical abrasion, which alter their properties and interactions with environmental factors [6–8]. They are eventually removed from the atmosphere through various deposition mechanisms, including dry deposition, wet deposition, and gravitational settling [166, 186, 239]. Dry deposition occurs in the absence of precipitation, driven by turbulence and particle diffusion, with deposition rates influenced by surface roughness and meteorological conditions [240, 241]. Wet deposition involves scavenging by raindrops, snow, or fog, efficiently removing AMNPs from the atmosphere and depositing them on terrestrial or marine surfaces [241]. AMNPs with hygroscopic properties or partially soluble components may activate into cloud droplets under humid conditions and be removed via in-cloud scavenging [58]. However, their behaviour in cloud microphysical processes remains poorly understood and requires further investigation. Additionally, gravitational settling contributes to the removal of larger MNPs, with its efficiency influenced by particle morphology, size, and related physical characteristics. Overall, the fate and lifetime of AMNPs are governed by a combination of physicochemical properties, such as size, shape, and surface composition, and meteorological factors, including wind speed, humidity, and precipitation. These factors collectively determine their transport, transformation, and removal pathways in the atmosphere.

### 2.3.1 Effects of Particle Properties on Atmospheric Transport

MNP shape influences the transport and deposition behaviour. Unlike spherical particles, non-spherical particles, such as fibres, fragments, and films, exhibit distinct aerodynamic properties, including differences in inertia and rotational dynamics [242–246]. These variations affect their settling velocity, atmospheric residence time, and transport distance [247–250]. For instance, fall column experiments by Presto et al. (2023) demonstrate that fibres have the slowest settling velocity, followed by films and fragments, while spheres, owing to their symmetrical shape and higher drag efficiency, settle the fastest [249]. Field observations further support the long-range transport capability of fibrous MNPs. Fibres have been predominantly detected in remote and high-altitude regions with minimal or no local emission sources, such as the French Pyrenees [45], the Ecuadorian Andes [178], and the Southern Alps of New Zealand [218], the Tibetan Plateau [251], the Italian Alps [145], protected area of USA [49], and Antarctic snow [252]. These observations indicate that fibrous MNPs can remain suspended for extended periods under turbulent atmospheric conditions and resist gravitational settling to travel thousands of kilometres. Numerical simulations further support these findings. Xiao et al. (2023) demonstrated that fibres travel farther than spheres with the same equivalent spherical diameter ( $D_{eq}$ ), with flat fibres travelling even farther [247]. Tatsil et al. (2023) incorporated shape-dependent drag coefficients into the FLEXPART model, showing that fibres travel farther than spheres, with smaller fibers being more likely to reach the stratosphere [248]. Using HYSPLIT, Ward et al. (2024) confirmed that fibres settle the slowest, followed by films, cylinders, and spheres, with spheres settling the fastest [250].

In addition to shape, the size and density of MNPs also influence their long-range transport behaviour. Smaller and lower-density particles experience weaker gravitational forces, making them more responsive to turbulence and uplift [200, 210, 253]. Their lower settling velocities allow them to remain suspended for longer durations, facilitating long-distance transport through atmospheric circulation. NPs, due to their colloidal properties, are affected by Brownian motion and turbulent diffusion, further extending their atmospheric residence time and transport range [200, 202, 254]. As a result, NPs exhibit a greater potential for long-range transport compared to MPs. Additionally, Ward et al. (2024) [250] reported that for particles with an  $D_{eq}$  smaller than  $6 \mu\text{m}$ , the effect of shape on settling velocity becomes negligible. These interdependent characteristics contribute to the complexity of the MNP transport behaviour, highlighting the need for further studies to better understand their atmospheric dynamics.

### 2.3.2 Meteorological Influences on Atmospheric Transport

Meteorological conditions influence the transport and distribution of MNPs in the atmosphere. Wind is the primary driver of MNP movement, determining transport distances, suspension durations, and spatial distribution patterns [29]. Strong winds can mobilise particles from terrestrial or marine sources, shaping their distribution. Coastal winds, for example, can carry marine-derived MNPs inland, while high-altitude airflows facilitate long-range or even global transport [45, 219, 255]. The relationship between wind speed and MNP deposition remains controversial. Some studies suggest higher wind speeds enhance dry deposition by increasing particle flux to surfaces [30, 137, 203, 256, 257]. Others argue that strong winds dilute AMNP concentrations and intensify turbulence, leading to particle resuspension and reducing deposition efficiency [136, 258]. Atmospheric stability also influences deposition dynamics. Under stable conditions, weaker turbulence allows particles to accumulate near the surface, increasing dry deposition flux [257, 259]. Similarly, the impact of wind direction is inconsistent across environments. Studies in offshore and open-sea regions have found no clear correlation between MP deposition flux and wind direction [169, 203]. However, in urban areas, AMNP abundance has been shown to strongly correlate with wind direction, indicating localised environmental influences [146, 165, 258].

Precipitation plays a crucial role in wet deposition, serving as a major pathway for the removal of AMNPs. As precipitation occurs, MNPs are scavenged by raindrops and snowflakes, ultimately settling onto the surface [30, 58, 59, 78, 253, 260]. Larger MNPs tend to settle early in a rainfall event due to direct impaction [239, 261], while smaller AMNPs may undergo aggregation or hygroscopic growth before being scavenged [58, 262]. Observational data suggest that the frequency and intensity of rainfall events are more critical in determining MNP deposition than the total precipitation volume [30, 38, 137, 152, 239, 253, 256, 263–265]. Rainfall following prolonged dry periods effectively reduces MP concentrations in the atmosphere [265, 266]. During consecutive rainfall events, the washout effect and suppression of MP resuspension maintain low MP levels over the following days [239, 265, 266]. However, when AMNP concentrations are low, precipitation has a limited influence on deposition rates, as fewer particles are available for wet scavenging [30, 38, 137, 152]. In addition, the presence of AMNPs

detected in cloud water samples suggests their potential to serve as CCN [46, 47]. These MPs are predominantly composed of particles bearing hydrophilic functional groups such as carboxyl and/or hydroxyl groups [46]. Mao et al. conducted experiments using a condensation particle counter combined with in situ aerosol techniques to measure the hygroscopicity of three types of NPs (PET, PVC, and LDPE), with the derived single-parameter hygroscopicity  $\kappa$  ranging from 0.17 to 0.26 [267].

Temperature and humidity regulate MNP deposition by influencing hygroscopicity, surface interactions, and settling velocity [257, 268, 269]. Under high humidity conditions, MNPs may absorb moisture and grow in size, which accelerates their deposition [256, 270, 271]. At higher altitudes, high humidity may trigger CCN activation, facilitating the removal of MNPs [58]. Besides, high humidity may promote the formation of water films on surfaces such as soil, vegetation, and urban structures, which enhances particle capture efficiency while suppressing resuspension [184, 272]. Temperature, on the other hand, is the key factor in the activation of INPs, as lower temperatures generally enhance ice nucleation efficiency. While CCN activation is primarily governed by particle hygroscopicity and ambient supersaturation, temperature may influence it indirectly by modifying saturation vapour pressure and aerosol phase state. AMNPs have the potential to act as CCN and INPs, with temperature variations potentially modulating this activation potential [58, 59, 78, 79].

Climate change is likely to exacerbate the transport and deposition of MNPs, influencing the global flux and concentrations of plastic pollution [133, 273]. For example, Arctic sea ice serves as a major sink for MPs (38–234 MP/m<sup>3</sup>), but with global warming accelerating ice melt, these plastics are being released into the marine environment [274, 275]. Additionally, climate change has led to an increase in extreme weather events [276], such as typhoons, hurricanes, and dust storms, which can enhance the long-range transport of MNPs and alter their deposition patterns in various environments [219, 255]. During Typhoon Sinlaku (2020), the MNP deposition rate in the South China Sea peaked at 2014 MP/m<sup>2</sup>/d [255]. Similarly, Hurricane Larry over Newfoundland, Canada, extended the transport range of MNPs and increased local deposition by 500% [219]. In addition, post-typhoon events have been observed to elevate MP concentrations in seawater and sediments, with a 40% increase reported in Sanggou Bay, China [277]. Furthermore, dust storms also play a crucial role in enhancing long-range MNP transport. In Shiraz, Iran, MNPs during dust storms exhibited clear weathering characteristics, indicating that dust storms not only act as transport mechanisms but may also alter the surface properties and environmental behaviour of MNPs [278].

### 2.3.3 AMNPs Ageing Processes

MNPs undergo various ageing processes before and after entering the atmosphere, including hydrolysis, photooxidation, photodegradation, biodegradation, and mechanical stress [279–282]. UV radiation plays a key role in ageing by breaking polymer chains, reducing mechanical strength, roughening surfaces, and creating microcracks [279, 283]. It can also produce small organic molecules or release additives like plasticisers [284–286]. Combined with oxygen, UV radiation introduces oxygen-containing functional groups (e.g., carbonyl, hydroxyl) on plastic surfaces, altering

their hydrophilicity, polarity, and reactivity [281, 286–291]. Larger particles exhibit more pronounced ageing effects, though further experimental studies are needed [292]. Temperature fluctuations in the atmosphere, such as diurnal or seasonal variations, accelerate thermal ageing, causing surface brittleness and fragmentation [6, 7, 293]. Furthermore, wind abrasion and particle collisions in high-wind environments increase surface area, enhancing exposure to environmental factors [278].

The biodegradation of MNPs is inefficient and primarily relevant in marine and terrestrial environments, where plastic lifespans extend from decades to centuries. These timescales far exceed the atmospheric residence time of MNPs, making biodegradation less relevant in the atmospheric context. Research on biodegradation in atmospheric conditions remains limited and has yet to attract substantial attention [294, 295]. However, the mechanisms and processes of MNP biodegradation have been well-documented in previous reviews [280, 296–300].

### 3 Emission Flux of AMNPs

Quantifying MNP emissions into the environment is essential for assessing their environmental impact and developing effective mitigation strategies. Regionally, Wang et al., (2019) [234] developed an MP emissions inventory for mainland China by integrating human activity data with emission factors across different provinces. Van Sebille et al., (2015) compiled a global inventory of small floating plastic debris [301], while Boucher and Friot (2017) estimated plastic inputs into the oceans through multiple pathways, including wind transport, wastewater discharge, and road runoff, by calculating plastic usage, MP loss rates, and transfer ratios to marine environments [302]. Kaandorp et al. (2023) quantified global ocean plastic concentrations, ranging from 0.1 to 1600 mm, and examined their vertical distributions at depths below and above 5 m [303]. More recently, Cottom et al. (2024) [304] applied machine learning techniques (quantile regression random forests), in combination with material flow analysis (MFA) and global/local activity data, to estimate MP pollution emissions across 50,702 regions, producing a global inventory of plastic pollution. These studies have improved our understanding of plastic pollution via aquatic and terrestrial pathways. However, global emissions of MNPs through the atmospheric pathway remain poorly quantified due to sparse spatiotemporal observations and the limited understanding of relevant emission processes.

#### 3.1 Methods

The estimation of AMNP emission fluxes relies on quantifying emission sources based on characteristic data and assumed emission factors. The emission flux  $E$  for a specific source can be simply expressed as:

$$E = k \times X, \tag{1}$$

where  $k$  is the emission factor, representing the fraction of MNPs released into the atmosphere from a given source, and  $X$  denotes one or multiple activity-related parameters associated with the emission sources, which may be combined depending on the source characteristics. Details of  $X$  are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1** AMNP Emission Calculation Basis and References for Various Source Categories

| Source Category                              | Emission Calculation Basis  | Reference                         |
|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| Marine                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Microplastic concentration in the upper ocean</li> <li>• Sea spray aerosols</li> </ul>   | [90, 92, 93, 138–141]<br>[91, 94] |
| Agricultural Soil                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dust generation by agricultural soil</li> <li>• Global farmland and pasture dataset (developed by combining agricultural inventory data with satellite-based land cover data)</li> <li>• Agricultural land cover data</li> </ul> | [90]<br>[91]<br>[92]              |
| Traffic road                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tire (braking) wear particle (TWP and BWP) emission</li> <li>• NO emissions from traffic sources</li> <li>• Dust emissions from traffic sources</li> </ul>   | [90, 305]<br>[92]<br>[91]         |
| Human activities                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Population density dataset</li> </ul>  | [90–92]                           |
| Micro and nanoplastic resuspended/Dust       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dust emission</li> </ul>   | [90, 91, 142]                     |
| Mismanage micro and nanoplastic waste (MMPW) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total MMPW production globally</li> </ul>  | [92, 306]                         |

The emission factor  $k$  could be determined through modelling, observations, and experiments. A common approach is forward modelling, where models simulate MNP emissions and atmospheric transport based on an initial estimate of  $k$  [90, 92]. The simulated MNP deposition and concentrations are then compared with observational data, and  $k$  is iteratively altered until the model output aligns with observations. An alternative approach is inverse modelling, which uses observational data to constrain MNP emissions. This method first employs FLEXPART in backward mode to establish source-receptor relationships, identifying potential emission sources based on observed MNP deposition and concentrations [91]. Then, the variational Bayesian methodology is applied to estimate the posterior distribution of emissions by minimising the Kullback-Leibler divergence between the approximated and true posterior, incorporating prior knowledge and regularisation to ensure physical consistency while reducing uncertainties [91]. Experimental parameterisation involves direct measurements of MNP emissions in laboratory or field settings, quantifying emissions from specific sources such as ocean spray or soil dust [138, 139, 142].

### 3.2 MNP Emission Flux Estimates

The estimation of AMNP emission fluxes, particularly from the atmosphere-ocean interface and terrestrial sources, involves considerable uncertainties. These uncertainties mainly arise from various in-model assumptions, limited observational data, and an incomplete understanding of emission mechanisms.

**Table 2** Ocean Emission Flux Estimates for MNPs. This table summarises annual ocean emission fluxes (in tons) obtained from various approaches, including forward and inverse modelling (e.g., FLEXPART, GEOS-Chem, WRF-MP) and experimental parameterisations, across different spatial scales and particle size ranges. Each estimate is supported by the corresponding reference.

| Method                                     | Scale   | Size                  | Ocean Emission Flux  | Reference |
|--|---|-----------------------|--|-----------|
| FLEXPART (Forward Modelling) <sup>1</sup>  | Global  | 0.3–70 $\mu\text{m}$  | 8.6 million tons annually  | [90]      |
| WRF-MP <sup>1</sup>                        | Asia, the Pacific, and adjacent areas of the Indian Ocean | 10–5000 $\mu\text{m}$ | 0.06 million tons annually   | [93]      |
| FLEXPART (Inverse Modelling) <sup>2</sup>  | Global  | 5–250 $\mu\text{m}$   | 8.9 million tons annually  | [91]      |
| GEOS-Chem (Forward Modelling) <sup>1</sup> | Global  | 0.3–70 $\mu\text{m}$  | 0.17 million tons annually   | [92]      |
| FLEXPART <sup>1</sup>                      | Global  | 1–60 $\mu\text{m}$    | 1231 tons annually   | [141]     |
| MOZART-4                                   | Global  | 0–70 $\mu\text{m}$    | 800 tons annually  | [307]     |
| Experimental Parameterization <sup>2</sup> | Global  | 0.3–70 $\mu\text{m}$  | 773 tons annually  | [94]      |
| Experimental Parameterization <sup>1</sup> | Global  | 10–280 $\mu\text{m}$  | 0.02–0.74 million tons annually  | [138]     |
| Experimental Parameterization <sup>1</sup> | Global  | <10 $\mu\text{m}$     | 0.72–4.13 tons annually  | [139]     |
| Experimental Parameterization <sup>1</sup> | Global  | <100 $\mu\text{m}$    | <100 $\mu\text{m}$ MNPs: 1 million tons annually;<br><10 nm NPs: 0.3 tons annually | [140]     |

<sup>1</sup>Calculation basic: MNP concentration in the upper ocean

<sup>2</sup>Calculation basic: Emission inventory of sea spray aerosol

### 3.2.1 Atmosphere-Ocean Interfacial MNP Emission Flux

There is ongoing debate regarding the estimation of atmosphere-ocean MNP emission fluxes, with reported values spanning several orders of magnitude (Table 2). Some studies report extremely high fluxes. For instance, Evangelou et al., (2022) estimated an annual atmosphere-ocean emission flux of 8.9 Mt for MNPs in the 5–250  $\mu\text{m}$  range [91]. Similarly, Brahney et al. (2021) used the CESM model to estimate that the air-marine MNP flux for particles smaller than 70  $\mu\text{m}$  is around 8.6 Mt/year [90]. In contrast, Fu et al. (2023) applied the NJU-MP model and reported a significantly lower annual flux of 0.17 Mt for the same size range [92], while Yang et al. (2025) employed the MOZART-4 model and estimated an even lower flux of only 800 t/year [307]. For comparable size ranges, Bucci et al. (2024) estimated a global air-marine MNP emission flux of only 1231 t/year using the FLEXPART model [141], which is lower than the regional estimate for Asia by Long et al. (2022), who reported an annual emission flux of 60,000 t [93].

The experimental parameterisation of atmosphere-ocean MNP exchange is primarily based on the enrichment factor (EF) of MNPs in sea spray aerosols (SSA), measured in laboratory studies [140]. Yang et al. (2022) applied EF values associated with varying MP concentrations and sizes across different ocean surfaces to estimate a global

air-marine flux of 773 t/year for MNPs smaller than 70  $\mu\text{m}$  [94]. Shaw et al. (2023) considered the relationships between EF, bubble rise height, and bubble radius, estimating a global air-marine flux of 20,000 to 740,000 t/year for MNPs in the 10–280  $\mu\text{m}$  size range [138]. Harb et al. incorporated foam (whitecap) area into EF calculations and estimated that the global flux of MNPs smaller than 10  $\mu\text{m}$  ranges from 0.72 to 4.13 t/year [139]. Yang et al. (2024) applied a well-established particulate transfer model at the air-marine interface, providing an upper bound estimate for global MNP emissions [140]. They suggested that for MNPs smaller than 100  $\mu\text{m}$ , the upper bound could be as high as 1 million tonnes per year, while for those smaller than 10 nm, the estimated upper limit is only 0.3 t/year [140].

### 3.2.2 Air-Terrestrial MNP Emission Flux

Estimating terrestrial MNP emissions is more challenging than atmosphere-marine emissions due to the complexity of sources, including roadways, agricultural soils, resuspended particles, and human activities. The diversity of these sources prevents the use of a single factor for accurate estimation.

Studies have refined estimates of specific terrestrial sources. Evangelou et al. (2020) estimated that tire wear particles (TWP) contribute 2.907 Mt/year of MNP emissions annually, while brake wear particles (BWP) contribute 175,000 t/year [305]. Brahney et al. (2021) estimated global road-based emissions at 100,000 t/year [90], while Evangelou et al. (2022) reported a higher estimate of around 280,000 t/year (around 40% of total terrestrial MNP emission) [91]. Fu et al. (2023) further increased this estimate to 1.15 million tonnes per year using NO<sub>x</sub> emissions as a proxy for transportation-related MNP emissions (around 70% of total terrestrial MNP emission) [92].

For soil-based emissions, Yang et al. (2024) estimated an annual flux of 48,000 t for sub-100  $\mu\text{m}$  MNPs [142], which aligns with Fu et al. (2023), who reported 38,000 t/year (around 70% of total terrestrial MNP emission) [92]. Brahney et al. (2021) provided a higher estimate of 70,000 t/year based on the CESM model (around 41% of total terrestrial MNP emission) [90], while Evangelou et al. (2022) estimated soil-based MNP emissions at 280,000 t/year using observational data (around 45% of total terrestrial MNP emission) [91].

MNP emissions from resuspension are relatively minor. Evangelou et al. (2022) estimated that resuspension accounts for approximately 100,000 t/year globally, representing only 1.4% of total terrestrial MNP emissions [91]. Yang et al. estimated the total flux of AMNP emissions from soil to the atmosphere as 48,000 t/year for particles within the 0–250  $\mu\text{m}$  size range, which is relatively lower; for particles within the 0–70  $\mu\text{m}$  range, the estimated flux was 22,000 t/year. In contrast, Fu et al. (2023) based on the same 0–70  $\mu\text{m}$  size range, reported a significantly lower global resuspension emission of only 110 t/year, accounting for less than 1% of the total [92].

The dominance of terrestrial versus marine MNP emissions remains a topic of debate. Brahney et al. (2021) estimated marine emissions to be much higher (8.6 Mt/year) compared to terrestrial emissions (0.17 Mt/year) [90]. Similarly, Evangelou et al. (2022) used the FLEXPART model and concluded that marine sources contribute 93% (8.9 Mt/year) of total MNP emissions, while terrestrial sources account for only 7% (0.07 Mt/year) [91]. In contrast, Fu et al. (2023) suggested that marine

and terrestrial emissions are comparable [92]. Their GEOS-Chem model estimated annual marine emissions at 170,000 t/year (52.6%) and terrestrial emissions at 154,000 t/year (47.4%) [92]. Furthermore, Long et al. (2022) estimated that terrestrial emissions (310,000 t/year) to be substantially higher than marine emissions (60,000 t/year) in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions [93].

### 3.3 Uncertainty Analysis of AMNP Emission Flux Estimates

Quantifying atmospheric plastic fluxes remains highly uncertain, particularly for atmosphere-marine MNP fluxes, which range from 773 tons to 8.9 Mt annually [91, 94]. This variability primarily stems from differences in observations, emission source data, and assumptions in model simulations and parameterisations.

#### 3.3.1 Uncertainties in Observational Data

Reliable constraint of AMNP emission estimates requires observational data with adequate spatiotemporal coverage and representative sampling. For example, Brahney et al. (2021) and Evangeliou et al. (2022) used CESM and FLEXPART, respectively, to estimate global oceanic MNP emissions based on data from remote sites in the western U.S., yielding high values of 8–9 Mt/year, with ocean sources accounting for over 90% of total emissions [90, 91]. However, these estimates rely heavily on observational data from areas with minimal local terrestrial emissions. Without sufficient constraint from urban, coastal, or industrial source regions, the models tend to attribute long-range transported particles to marine or background sources, potentially overestimating oceanic contributions while underestimating distant land-based sources.

In contrast, when broader and more representative observation networks are used, estimates of ocean-sourced AMNP and MNP emissions are substantially lower. Fu et al. (2023), using GEOS-Chem constrained by global datasets compiled by Allen et al., estimated oceanic sources to account for 53% of total emissions, with an annual flux of 0.17 Mt [44, 92]. Yang et al. (2025) further modelled an ocean-minimal scenario, finding it better reproduced global MNP patterns, with ocean contributions below 0.01% of total emissions [307].

In recent years, observations of AMNPs have increased across different regions worldwide. However, the lack of standardised sampling and analytical methods complicates cross-study comparisons. Although various sampling techniques are assumed to accurately represent environmental or medium-specific conditions, their efficiency and associated uncertainties remain largely unquantified [44, 81, 103]. These uncertainties primarily stem from differences in particle size classifications, particle characteristics (e.g., shape, polymer type, ageing), sampling protocols (e.g., methods, heights, durations, and site conditions), and detection and quantification limits (LOD/LOQ). [44, 48, 137, 146, 148, 169, 170, 173, 217]. For instance, passive samplers, such as funnel-equipped bottles [160, 164, 165, 170, 173], standard glass collection jars [308], rain gauges [137, 161], NILU bulk collectors [30, 175], “Brahney Buckets” [49, 309], stainless steel buckets [152, 238], glass Petri dishes [155], and Savitzky-Golay filters [310], exhibit variability in capture efficiency, sample retention, and differ in susceptibility to resuspension or sample loss. Furthermore, none of these variability and susceptibility

have been adequately quantified. Likewise, active samplers are affected by collector size, pump power, and operating conditions, leading to inconsistent efficiencies which challenges intercomparison among studies [32, 39, 179, 311]. Sampling duration further influences results, as shorter durations tend to capture transient MNP events, yielding inflated particle counts [218]. Analytical methods contribute additional uncertainty. While  $\mu$ Raman spectroscopy and Nile red fluorescence microscopy produce comparable MNP counts, their error ranges remain unquantified, limiting the cross-study reliability [44]. A detailed discussion of variations in both sampling strategies and analytical methodologies can be found in several recent reviews [96, 110, 119, 171, 179].

### 3.3.2 Limitations of Emission Source Data

The accuracy and completeness of foundational data used for AMNP emission estimates remain problematic. Atmosphere-ocean MNP emission estimates often rely on surface ocean MNP concentration data [90, 92, 93, 138–141]. However, due to limited observational coverage, datasets rely on simulations or parameterisation methods to fill gaps, resulting in high heterogeneity across studies [90, 92, 93, 138–141]. Although global databases such as the National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) (<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/b296879cc1984fda833a8acc93e31476>) (last accessed: 2024/12/28) compile observational data on marine MP concentrations, limited spatial coverage and inconsistent sampling protocols across studies hinder data comparability. This discrepancy introduces biases, resulting in large uncertainties in global atmosphere-ocean MNP emission flux estimates. Additionally, complex ocean-atmosphere interactions, including wind-wave dynamics, further increase the complexity of emission estimates at regional and global scales [43, 44, 181, 225].

For terrestrial MNP emissions, such as those from tire and brake wear, spectroscopic analysis faces challenges due to wavelength absorption and weak vibrational signals from black particles [95, 233]. Tire and brake wear emissions are often quantified separately, and their contributions are frequently overlooked in general AMNP observations [44]. Notably, Saladin et al. (2024) pointed out that many secondary sources report  $PM_{10}$  emission factors for tire wear (mean: 6.5 mg/vkm) that are significantly higher than those provided in the original primary literature (mean 1.12.7 mg/vkm) [312]. This discrepancy likely stems from misinterpretation or incorrect citation of the original data, leading not only to systematic overestimation of tire wear emissions but also contributing to greater uncertainty in the overall flux estimates of this category of terrestrial MNP emissions. Furthermore, estimating human activity-related MNP emissions solely based on population density is insufficient. Factors such as economic development, waste management policies, recycling efficiency, and industrial emissions play crucial roles in determining MNP emission intensity [124, 187, 313, 314]. Regions with advanced waste management systems and high recycling rates may have lower MNP emissions despite similar population densities [315], whereas high-production or high-consumption areas face elevated emission risks [187]. These uncertainties highlight the need for more spatiotemporally comprehensive datasets to improve terrestrial MNP emission estimates.

Both experimental and modelling approaches have inherent uncertainties. Experimental studies rely on EF values measured in laboratory settings, which may not

fully capture the complexity of real-world oceanic conditions or global-scale variations. Meanwhile, numerical models are highly sensitive to assumptions, parameterisation choices, and the quality of input data. The experimental parameterisation of atmosphere-ocean MNP exchange is primarily based on the EF of MNPs in SSA, measured in laboratory studies

### 3.3.3 Uncertainties in Emission Mechanisms and Modelling Assumptions

Current methods for estimating atmospheric MNP fluxes have notable limitations. Many experimental studies have parameterised soil and marine MNP emissions using the EF of MNPs in dust and SSA, but these approaches may not fully capture the complexity of real-world conditions or global-scale variations [94, 138, 139, 142]. Numerical modelling approaches primarily depend on selecting characteristic data for emission sources and the quality of observational data used for validation. As discussed in Section 3.3.1 and Section 3.3.2, the limited representativeness of characteristic data, along with the comparability issues and spatiotemporal gaps in observational datasets, introduce substantial uncertainties in model results.

In addition, structural differences among transport models also contribute to variability in flux estimates. LPDMs (e.g., FLEXPART and HYSPLIT) trace particle-level trajectories and are well-suited for source-receptor analysis, but are sensitive to initial emission parameters. Eulerian models (e.g., GEOS-Chem, CESM-CAM5) compute grid-based, volume-averaged concentrations and fluxes, making them better suited for large-scale mass balance assessments. Nonetheless, their accuracy depends heavily on the parameterisation of key processes such as deposition, resuspension, and on spatiotemporal resolution. Consequently, even when using identical emission inventories, these models may yield substantially different estimates of total flux and spatial distribution.

Research on MNP emission mechanisms is still developing, with knowledge gaps regarding both marine and terrestrial sources. Marine MNP emissions are driven by processes such as bubble bursting and wave action, which involve complex dynamics, including bubble formation, ascent, rupture, and aerosolisation [44, 181, 225]. However, existing models struggle to accurately capture the intricate interactions between multiple factors, such as wind speed, wave activity and temperature, all of which influence the efficiency and variability of MNP emissions.

Regarding terrestrial MNP emissions, different soil media influence MNP release rates. For instance, deserts and roads generally exhibit higher MNP emission rates compared to farmlands and vegetated areas [142]. This difference may be attributed to the stabilising effect of vegetation, which reduces wind erosion and particle suspension. The shape of MNP also plays a critical role in their susceptibility to wind entrainment. Fiber-shaped particles, with their larger surface area and aerodynamic properties, are more easily transported by wind than spherical particles [33]. Soil moisture is another key factor affecting MNP emissions. Under low soil moisture (1–5%), the hydrophobic nature of MNPs increases their likelihood of wind transport compared to aggregated soil particles [142]. However, these influencing factors, including soil type, particle shape, and moisture conditions, are rarely systematically considered in current

research. As a result, large uncertainties remain in the quantitative characterisation of soil-driven MNP emissions.

Beyond emissions, knowledge gaps remain in understanding the transport and ageing processes of MNPs in the atmosphere. The mechanisms of MNP wet deposition and its experimental validation remain incomplete. In atmospheric flux simulations, wet deposition is often modelled using fixed scavenging rates, such as high (0.5), medium (0.05), and low (0.001) rates [305]. While MNPs are generally considered hydrophobic, their surface properties may change due to environmental exposure, including corona effects, photodegradation, weathering, or plasticiser leaching [58, 79, 281, 286–291]. These transformations could enable MNPs to act as CCN or INP [58, 59, 77, 79]. Studies have already detected MNPs in cloud water samples [46, 47], but further research is needed to clarify the atmospheric ageing processes of MNPs and their specific impacts on atmospheric dynamics and cloud microphysics.

Additionally, current models often assume spherical particles and do not fully account for the distinct properties of MNPs, such as their surface charge, high heterogeneity, and potential colloidal behaviour [90, 92, 93, 142, 305, 306]. These properties may influence MNP behaviour in the atmosphere, including transport, re-entrainment, and deposition processes. To improve the accuracy of MNP emission, transport, and deposition simulations, systematic laboratory studies and field observations are necessary to refine parameterisations and reduce model uncertainties.

## 4 Future Strategies and Outlook

Understanding the environmental behaviour of MNPs requires an integrated approach combining observations, modelling, and data-driven analysis. This section discusses key future strategies to advance AMNP research, focusing on three critical areas: (1) improving observation and sampling campaigns through standardized protocols and global monitoring networks, (2) enhancing numerical modelling to refine MNP transport, deposition, and ageing processes, and (3) leveraging AI to improve the efficiency and accuracy of MNP research, including automated observation, data integration, source attribution, trajectory modelling, and multimodal data-driven predictive modelling. These efforts will provide a more detailed understanding of MNP sources, transport pathways, and environmental impacts, ultimately supporting environmental policies and pollution mitigation strategies.

### 4.1 Observation and Sampling Campaigns

#### 4.1.1 Standardisation of AMNP Sampling and Data Reporting

Atmospheric MNP observations are crucial for understanding their distribution, deposition processes, emission mechanisms, and transport dynamics. However, the standardisation of sampling and analytical methods for AMNPs remains insufficient [111]. While existing studies have proposed sampling and detection protocols for MNPs in seafood, marine and aquatic environments, these protocols have yet to be systematically adapted or applied for AMNP research [316–324].

Variability in sampling methodologies, analytical workflows and field conditions across studies presents one of the major obstacles to standardising AMNP sampling and analysis. Furthermore, MNP concentrations in the atmosphere are low that even trace contamination—from sampling equipment, laboratory air, reagents or handling—can obscure the true signal, distort results and undermine data comparability and reliability. Although comprehensive standardisation remains challenging, standardising key elements can improve data comparability and reliability. First, research reports should follow a uniform structure, including clear LOD/LOQ, detailed sampling and analytical procedures, sample preparation methods, quality assurance and control (QA/QC) measures, contamination control records, and blank control correction procedures [105, 324–329]. Standardising these elements will help ensure consistency across studies, enabling more reliable comparisons and facilitating integrative analyses of AMNP data.

Second, standardised QA/QC protocols are essential for ensuring data reliability. Measures such as characterisation and assessment of laboratory and field blanks, performing matrix spiked recovery tests, and the use of positive and negative controls can help identify contamination sources and experimental errors, improving the overall robustness of results [111, 210, 326, 328]. Similarly, sample preparation processes, including cleaning, digestion, preconcentration, and separation, should adhere to uniform guidelines to minimise human error and optimise consistency [82]. For example, the type and concentration of separation liquids, as well as the specific reagents and digestion durations, should be explicitly defined [82, 325, 326, 330]. Additionally, analytical techniques for MNP detection and quantification should adopt standardised parameters. Techniques such as Raman spectroscopy, FTIR spectroscopy, and other high-resolution methods should have clearly defined measurement conditions, such as laser wavelength, spectral resolution, and data processing protocols, to improve the accuracy of the results and ensure comparability across studies [319, 325, 331, 332]. These standardisation efforts not only improve data quality but also provide support for advanced analysis using machine learning and other computational tools.

Third, the choice of monitoring metrics directly influences the interpretation and comparability of AMNP data. Currently, most active and passive sampling studies primarily report particle number concentrations (Shown as Support Information). However, relying solely on particle counts fails to capture the high variability in particle size, shape, and polymer component. For instance, at the same mass, the number concentration of NPs can differ by several orders of magnitude from that of MPs. In addition, particle fragmentation or aggregation during sampling and processing further destabilises number-based measurements, undermining cross-study comparability. In contrast, mass concentration is an inherently conserved parameter that allows direct summation across different size fractions, sampling batches, and analytical procedures, minimising the risk of loss or double-counting. Mass-based metrics also seamlessly link with deposition flux estimations, environmental fate modelling, and exposure risk assessments, serving as a unified “currency” across different research domains. Therefore, we recommend adopting mass concentration (e.g.,  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ ) as the primary reporting metric for AMNPs, supplemented by particle size, polymer composition, and morphological information.

Regarding particle size characterisation, a balance must be struck between measurement simplicity, data accuracy, and scientific representativeness. We recommend consistently reporting the maximum Feret’s diameter [333] as a default size descriptor, given its ease of measurement, broad applicability, and ability to capture the maximum spatial extent of particles. However, a single size metric cannot fully represent the complexity of microplastic morphology. Thus, we advocate for the simultaneous collection and reporting of multiple size descriptors, such as area-equivalent diameter [334], Martin’s diameter [335], and geodesic lines [336], with data shared in an open-access format to enhance utility and comparability. For particle morphology, key characteristics can be described by adapting the four classical dimensions used in sediment research—irregularity, roundness, sphericity, and form—supplemented by elongation, to better reflect the physical properties and environmental behaviour of AMNPs [336, 337]. Importantly, the choice of size and shape descriptors should remain flexible according to specific research objectives. For example, maximum size is critical for atmospheric deposition studies, elongation is more relevant in exposure risk assessments involving fibrous particles, and irregularity and sphericity are particularly informative for pollution source attribution. Thus, while promoting standardisation, researchers should be encouraged to adapt and extend descriptor selections based on the scientific questions addressed, ensuring both data comparability and problem-specific relevance.

#### 4.1.2 Expanding AMNP Monitoring Networks

Although AMNP observations have increased in recent years, existing datasets remain geographically concentrated and temporally sparse (Figure 2). Most studies have been conducted in Asia, North America, and Europe, while economically less developed regions, polar areas, and deep-sea environments remain underrepresented (Figure 2). This spatial unevenness hampers the development of a comprehensive understanding of AMNP distribution, transport dynamics, and environmental impacts. Expanding spatial coverage is therefore essential. Establishing new observation sites in currently under-monitored regions, particularly in the Global South, polar areas, and remote marine environments, would help fill critical data gaps. At the same time, building large-scale, standardised data platforms is crucial for organising, sharing, and harmonising AMNP datasets. Existing resources, such as the NCEI marine microplastic database <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/b296879cc1984fda833a8acc93e31476> (last accessed: 2024/12/28) and the Aeronet aerosol optical data platform <https://aeronet.gsfc.nasa.gov/> (last accessed: 2024/12/28), provide valuable reference models. A centralised database for AMNPs would facilitate broader access to data, enhance collaborative research between observation and modelling of MNP, and promote the application of big data analytics (e.g. machine learning) in MNP research.

In addition to spatial expansion, enhancing the temporal continuity of AMNP monitoring is equally important. Establishing a global, long-term observation network would allow researchers to track temporal trends, seasonal variations, and long-range transport patterns of AMNPs. This network should integrate fixed stations with mobile platforms, such as ships, drones, and floats, to ensure adequate spatial coverage. Observations at fixed stations require standardised sampling and detection protocols

to maintain data reliability and comparability. Notably, at least two stations within the Global Atmospheric Watch (GAW) program have initiated MNP monitoring, suggesting the feasibility of incorporating MNP observations into existing networks [44].

In regions without long-term observational coverage, periodic supplementary studies can help address the data gaps. For example, ships and floats can conduct regional and open-ocean sampling campaigns, while drones and aircraft can collect vertical profile data critical for understanding AMNP concentration gradients and atmospheric transport mechanisms. Drones, due to their flexibility and lower operational costs, are particularly suitable for short-term, high-frequency monitoring in the lower atmosphere [338, 339]. Aircraft, in contrast, can facilitate observations at higher altitudes and across broader spatial scales. In regions where establishing fixed stations is impractical, such as polar or mountainous areas, intermittent targeted studies can help compensate for observational gaps. In economically constrained areas, deploying mobile sampling vehicles and launching regional research projects can improve local monitoring efforts, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of MNP distribution and behaviour [340].

## 4.2 Model Simulations

Numerical models are widely used to simultaneously simulate emissions, deposition fluxes, and MNP transport, enabling source attribution. For example, Lagrangian trajectory models are often employed to trace potential sources of MNPs, quantify their contributions, and estimate deposition fluxes [91]. Similarly, the CESM model has been used to evaluate the impact of different sources, including roads, oceans, dust, and human activities, on the concentration and deposition of AMNPs [90]. However, these models inherently involve simplifications, leading to uncertainties in estimating MNP emission, concentration, and deposition. Future research should focus on addressing these uncertainties by improving the following aspects.

First, optimising model input data is crucial. In current simulations, MNPs are typically assumed to be insoluble spherical particles with a fixed density. However, the defined size ranges and distributions vary significantly across studies. Reported aerodynamic diameter ranges include 0.3–70  $\mu\text{m}$  [90, 94], 10–3000  $\mu\text{m}$  [91], 40–900  $\mu\text{m}$  [93], and 1–60  $\mu\text{m}$  [141]. Future studies should define size ranges and distributions based on specific source characteristics (e.g., marine versus terrestrial sources). Marine-sourced MNPs tend to be smaller due to processes such as bubble bursting at the ocean surface. In addition, particle shape, which influences aerodynamic behaviour, should be incorporated into models [247, 248, 250]. Larger particles (e.g.,  $>100 \mu\text{m}$ ) are typically fibrous due to their formation processes [150, 170, 203], whereas smaller particles are often fragmented [45, 149]. For particles smaller than 6  $\mu\text{m}$ , Ward et al. (2024) found that shape has a negligible impact on atmospheric transport [250]. Kooi et al. (2019) proposed a continuous probability distribution combining size, shape, and density, which serves as a useful reference for optimizing model inputs [341]. However, this method should be extended to account for smaller particles (nanometer range) and better represent variations across sources and morphological characteristics.

Regarding the chemical composition/solubility of MNPs, the impact of atmospheric ageing on the transport and wet deposition is not fully understood [90]. Approaches to modelling wet deposition vary across studies. Some assume that precipitation completely removes MNPs [90], while others use a first-order loss process based on rainfall parameters [93] or apply wet deposition mechanisms similar to those used for black carbon [92]. The potential removal of MNPs through cloud and ice formation is either omitted [90] or represented by simplified linear scavenging rates categorised as high (0.5), medium (0.05), and low (0.001) [305]. While these simplifications improve computational efficiency, they often overlook the impacts of MNP ageing and its physical and chemical properties on removal processes. Future research should focus on the interplay between the degree of MNP ageing and wet deposition efficiency, as well as the broader impact on the lifecycle of MNPs in the atmosphere, to improve the accuracy and physical representation of these processes in models.

Furthermore, vertical transport mechanisms require refinement. Observations indicate that MNPs are not only present in the boundary layer but also detected in cloud water and even the stratosphere, highlighting their potential for vertical transport [45–47, 50, 202]. However, current MNP simulations primarily focus on emissions, surface deposition, and concentration, with limited modelling of their distribution at different atmospheric heights. Bucci et al. (2024) simulated the atmospheric transport of marine-source MPs smaller than  $60\ \mu\text{m}$  on a global scale [141]. Using ERA5 reanalysis data, their results suggest that MPs can be transported into the free troposphere [141]. Similarly, Wang et al. (2023) collected cloud water samples at altitudes ranging from 1300 to 3776 m near Mount Fuji and detected MNPs with sizes between 7 and  $94\ \mu\text{m}$ , with concentrations ranging from  $0.67 \times 10^5$  to  $1.39 \times 10^5$  MP/m<sup>3</sup> [46]. HYSPLIT4 backward trajectory analysis indicated that these MNPs primarily originated from the ocean [46]. At the same time and location, Bucci et al. (2024)'s simulation yielded an average MNP concentration of  $2.6 \times 10^5$  MP/m<sup>3</sup> for particles smaller than  $60\ \mu\text{m}$  [141]. While these values are of the same order of magnitude, the discrepancy of up to fourfold suggests potential shortcomings in the current representation of vertical transport processes in models. More detailed models are required to adequately simulate and fully capture these processes.

Finally, aerosol dynamic models offer powerful tools for studying the atmospheric ageing processes of MNPs. Particle-resolved aerosol models [342], for instance, can simulate single-particle-level physical ageing processes, including condensation, evaporation, and surface property changes. These transformations may alter the aerodynamic behaviour and deposition pathways of MNPs. As research progresses, such models can also be extended to simulate chemical ageing processes, such as oxidation, degradation, and surface functionalisation, providing insights into how MNPs evolve in the atmosphere and interact with radiation and other pollutants. By integrating both physical and chemical ageing mechanisms into atmospheric models, future models can improve the accuracy of MNP lifecycle and deposition simulations, contributing to a better understanding of their environmental and climate impacts.

### 4.3 AI-enabled Research

The rapid development of AI has introduced new tools and perspectives for AMNP research. One of the primary advantages of AI in this field is its ability to improve the comparability of MNP observations and expand spatiotemporal coverage. Traditional MNP quantification and characterisation are labour-intensive and time-consuming, particularly when MNPs exist in complex environmental media or as mixtures of various types [343–345]. In recent years, machine learning (ML), natural language processing (NLP), and computer vision (CV) have been widely applied to spectral enhancement, automatic identification, classification, quantification, and spectral library expansion of MNPs [346–353]. Compared to traditional detection methods, ML can process large-scale data more efficiently [347]. ML models, trained and optimised on large datasets, can identify patterns and make objective predictions, reducing potential errors introduced by human interpretation [346]. Additionally, automated data analysis can extract deeper insights from datasets, revealing new features that might not be immediately apparent to human observers [346]. Despite these advantages, ML applications in this field still face challenges. The accuracy and reliability of models heavily depend on the quality and representativeness of the training data. Limited or unbalanced datasets can result in unpredictable, erroneous, or biased outputs. To enhance model robustness and generalization, future research should focus on expanding training datasets to encompass a wider range of MNP characteristics, including size, polymer type, colour, weathering extent, and interactions with biological substances.

In terms of observation techniques, autonomous drones and robots provide an effective means to expand the spatiotemporal coverage of MNP monitoring. These technologies enable large-scale and efficient MNP sampling, even in challenging environments such as deep oceans, high altitudes, mountainous regions, and deserts [354]. Currently, drones and unmanned surface vehicles have been applied to collect MP samples in terrestrial, marine, and surface water environments [355–358]. However, AMNP sampling remains relatively underexplored. Integrating ML with automated sampling systems in the future could enhance MNP observation coverage and data quality.

ML can integrate multi-source datasets to construct a reasonable MNP emission inventory and global distribution map. Similar studies have achieved success in the fields of air pollution and plastic pollution inventories. For example, ML has been successfully used to generate a long-term illumination dataset (1 km resolution) for walking aerial drones globally [359]. Furthermore, researchers such as Cottom et al. (2024) combined ML with MFA technology to establish a macro-scale plastic pollution inventory from local to global scales [304]. These approaches help improve the quality and coverage of initial datasets, thereby providing a reliable foundation for studying the atmospheric cycling of MNPs.

ML has also demonstrated potential in capturing the complex spatiotemporal dynamics of AMNPs. For source apportionment, methods such as principal component analysis (PCA) and clustering algorithms (e.g., k-means) have been used to infer potential sources based on the chemical composition and physical properties of MNPs [354, 360–362]. However, these methods primarily capture statistical variance, lacking interpretability and failing to incorporate real-world physical processes such as

long-range transport and the atmospheric removal mechanisms of MPs [354]. Moreover, ML has been applied to capture lagrangian trajectories in various environments including flame systems [363], turbulent flow [364–366], sediment transport in natural rivers [367], and granular gas [368]. In atmospheric research, ML applications have expanded, with some studies integrating it with LDPMs to improve model accuracy. For example, Brecht et al. (2023) replaced the interpolation method used in FLEXPART for enhancing input resolution with ML, reducing trajectory prediction errors by 49.5% [369]. Lucas et al. (2017) used ML to quantify the impact of WRF inputs on FLEXPART outputs and identified model parameters that best matched tracer observations [370]. Some studies have further explored using ML as a replacement for LDPMs in trajectory simulations. For instance, Liao et al. (2023) trained an ML model based on HYSPLIT simulations combined with topographic data to predict air quality [371]. Gunawardena et al. (2021) applied ML to FLEXPART data for pollutant deposition predictions [372], while Fillola et al. (2023) trained an emulator on NAME model simulations to track greenhouse gas (GHG) transport [373]. Compared to traditional Lagrangian particle tracking models, ML offers advantages in computational efficiency and resource consumption [372, 373]. It enables faster simulations with lower computational costs. Additionally, ML models can integrate multimodal datasets, such as satellite remote sensing and topographic information, providing more rapid and accurate predictions [371].

When studying the fate and transport of AMNPs, valuable insights can be drawn from research on aquatic environments. For instance, Qian et al. (2024) used an XGBoost model to predict the settling velocities of various MNPs based on their physical properties [374]. Li et al. (2024) employed artificial neural networks (ANNs) to simulate the aggregation and suspension of NPs in water and identified key influencing factors [375]. Mehmood et al. (2022) applied partial least squares (PLS) regression to predict changes in hydroxyl and carboxyl indices during the ageing of microplastics [376]. Those ML methods not only help in understanding the environmental behaviour of AMNPs but also provide data support for more precise numerical simulations.

Compared to traditional numerical methods, ML models can efficiently extract data features, capture nonlinear relationships, and reduce computational costs. Integrating ML with numerical models can effectively address the limitations of traditional approaches. For example, Shen et al. (2024) incorporated ML into the CESM model to optimise representations of black carbon (BC) mixing state and cloud condensation nuclei (CCN) activation [377]. Behrens et al. (2024) improved the simulation of convective processes (particularly in the planetary boundary layer) in CESM2 using ML and quantified uncertainties [378]. These studies demonstrate that AI techniques can enhance the accuracy of traditional climate and atmospheric models while improving their ability to simulate complex environmental processes.

For MNP atmospheric modelling, future research can further expand the applications of ML. For instance, graph neural networks (GNNs) could be employed to develop trajectory models for MNP transport, providing a more precise representation of their evolution under varying meteorological conditions. Furthermore, ML models can be designed to evaluate the impact of particle size, shape, and ageing processes on MNP transport pathways and to explore their deposition and resuspension behaviour

across different land surface types (e.g. urban areas, forests, oceans). Besides that, with the development of foundation models in aerosol research [379], satellite remote sensing [380–382], and meteorology and climate science (such as ClimateX [383], FengWu [384], PanGu [385], FuXi [386], GraphCast [387], FourCastNet [388], W-MAE [389], and CliMedBert [390]), their potential applications in AMNP research warrant further exploration. These foundation models can integrate multi-source data, including satellite remote sensing and meteorological observations, thereby enhancing the modelling of MNP transport and fate. In the future, leveraging such models could help overcome the limitations of traditional numerical simulations, enabling more efficient and accurate predictions, and providing scientific support for environmental policies and pollution control.

## 5 Conclusions

Examining the lifecycle of AMNPs is important in assessing their environmental risks, informing management strategies, and advancing research. This review article outlines the established knowledge and the gaps concerning AMNPs, with particular focus on the uncertainties involved in simulating their behaviour. Moreover, it explores the roles and future prospects of observational, modelling, and data-driven approaches in bridging the knowledge gap surrounding the atmospheric lifecycle of MNPs.

Overall, our analysis reveals that while progress has been made in understanding the sources, transport mechanisms, and deposition processes of AMNPs, substantial uncertainties remain in accurately quantifying the AMNP emission fluxes. Notably, the estimated global emissions from ocean sources range widely, from as little as 773 tons [94] to as much as 890 million tons annually [91]—and it remains unclear whether oceanic or terrestrial sources dominate. These uncertainties primarily arise from limited observational data, variability and inconsistency in sampling methodologies, and the oversimplification of AMNP lifecycle mechanisms in existing simulations.

To address these challenges, it is essential to establish a globally unified, standardised observation network, improve sampling protocols that ensure data comparability, and develop numerical models that accurately reflect MNP properties and advanced transport dynamics. In addition, integrating AI into the data analysis process will provide a broader perspective of the atmospheric cycle of MNPs. These strategies are interdependent, creating a synergy: First, high-quality and abundant observational data can help us uncover the behavioural characteristics of AMNPs, such as their spatiotemporal distribution and evolution, thereby providing a solid foundation for training AI models and validating the parameterisation of numerical simulations. Second, numerical models can simulate the dynamic behaviour of MNPs under various environmental conditions, compensating for the spatiotemporal gaps in observational data and offering robust support for AI model training. Third, AI technology not only enhances the efficiency of processing and analysing observational data but also improves data quality and simulation accuracy through data mining and pattern recognition; moreover, AI can integrate multi-source information, such as land use types, meteorological conditions, and particle ageing (including photochemical and biological ageing as well as physical fragmentation and abrasion), to further optimise numerical

model parameterisations. By adopting this integrated framework, we will not only gain deeper insights into the complex lifecycle dynamics of AMNPs and build a solid foundation for predicting future environmental risks but also drive the formulation and implementation of effective environmental policies and management strategies. Ultimately, this approach holds the promise of significantly reducing MNP pollution on a global scale, thereby improving public health and ecological quality and providing robust support for sustainable development goals.

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