



Potential edaphic effects of buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*) invasion

Environmental Concerns

- Plant invasions lead to long-term declines in native plant diversity
 - Exotic plants may directly out-compete and displace natives, sometimes driving natives to extinction (Vitousek et al. 1997).

- Loss of biodiversity may lead to a decline in overall levels of ecosystem functioning
 - Invasive species may alter whole ecosystem regulation of energy, water, and nutrient cycling (Vitousek 1990).

- Contributions to the nitrogen cycle are species specific: each species has a particular rate of nitrogen uptake, nitrogen incorporation efficiency, and each has a unique composition of carbon, lignin, nitrogen, and other nutrients in its tissues
 - Exotic plant tissues, which decompose at different rates than native plant tissues, may alter the nitrogen cycle by changing the rate at which nitrogen is immobilized or mineralized

- Ecological impacts of buffelgrass invasion are unknown

- "Ecosystems are hypothesized to be sensitive to species composition as a result of a positive feedback in which higher soil nitrogen availability results in higher tissue quality, faster decomposition, and higher nitrogen availability and vice versa" (Knops et al. 2002:455)

- If changes in the composition of the soil microbial community alter the physiological capacity of the community, there may be ecosystem-level consequences (Waldron et al. 2000)

Scientific Approach

- Hypothesis: Buffelgrass establishment alters nutrient cycling in native soils to its own benefit.

I. Field Studies

- ARE THE PLANTS DIFFERENT?

On a monthly basis, root and shoot tissue from wild Buffelgrass and Tanglehead plants are being collected. Tissues are being analyzed for N, C, C:N, lignin, cellulose, and hemicellulose.

- DO THE PLANTS ROT AT DIFFERENT RATES? (FIG.1)

On a monthly basis bags containing root or shoot tissues from Buffelgrass or Tanglehead are being collected from three field sites. They are being analyzed for biomass loss, as well as changes in C:N, C:N, lignin, cellulose, and hemicellulose.

II. Greenhouse Studies

- IS BUFFELGRASS MORE PRODUCTIVE IN SOIL IT HAS PREVIOUSLY INHABITED?

Sites were located across the desert southwest where wild Buffelgrass and wild Tanglehead stands occurred in close proximity. Soil was dug under each and transported to the greenhouse. A classic transplant experiment was conducted in a controlled setting. Results are being analyzed.

- IS BUFFELGRASS MORE CAPABLE OF CAPITALIZING ON NUTRIENT FLUXES THAN ARE NATIVES? (FIG 2.)

A nutrient addition experiment (N, P, N+P) was conducted with buffelgrass and 3 natives. Results are being analyzed.

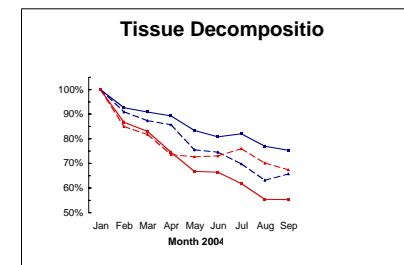


Figure 1. Differences in decomposition rates over time

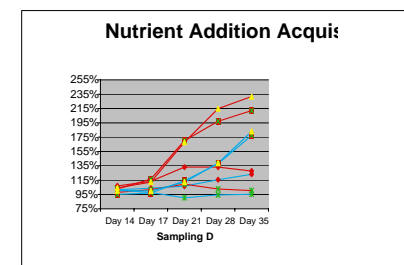


Figure 2: Differences in ability to capitalize on nutrients..

Impact

Land Management

- Over 1 million hectares are sown in buffelgrass. Land managers hope to maintain cattle on their lands in South Texas and Mexico. The ecological ramifications are unknown.

Basic Science

- This will add to our understanding of invasion biology, particularly in the understudied areas of potential soil alterations.