

# How do climate change experiments alter plot-scale climate?

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**Data Accessibility** The MC3E database will be available at KNB (Ettinger & Wolkovich, 2018), along with all R code from the analyses included in this paper. (Currently, metadata are published there; the full database and R code are available to reviewers on github.)

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# Abstract

To understand and forecast biological responses to climate change, scientists frequently use field experiments that alter temperature and precipitation. Climate manipulations can manifest in complex ways, however, challenging interpretations of biological responses. We reviewed publications from active-warming experiments to compile a database of daily plot-scale climate data from 15 experiments that use forced air, infrared heaters, and soil cables to warm plots. We find that the common practices of analyzing primarily mean changes among treatments and analyzing treatments as categorical variables (e.g., warmed versus unwarmed) masks important variation in treatment effects over space and time. Our synthesis showed measured mean warming in plots with the same target warming can vary by 3°C or more among blocks. Furthermore, warming treatments produce non-temperature effects as well, such as soil drying. The implications of these complexities can have important biological consequences. We show one such consequence with a case study of plant phenology, in which accounting for non-temperature effects of warming triples the estimated sensitivity of budburst to warming. Based on our synthesis, we present recommendations for future analyses, experimental design, and data sharing that will improve the ability of climate change experiments to accurately identify and forecast species' responses.

# Introduction

Climate change is dramatically altering earth's biota, shifting the physiology, distribution, and abundance of organisms, with cascading community, ecosystem, and climate effects (Shukla & Mintz, 1982; Cox *et al.*, 2000; Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Parmesan, 2006; Field *et al.*, 2007; Sheldon *et al.*, 2011; Urban *et al.*, 2012). Much uncertainty exists about how particular individuals, populations, species, communities, and ecosystems will respond as warming becomes more extreme (Thuiller, 2004; Friedlingstein *et al.*, 2014). Predicting biological responses to current and future climate change—and their feedbacks to earth's climate and ecosystem services—is one of the most significant challenges facing ecologists today.

Two common approaches for understanding biological effects of climate change are observational studies, which correlate recorded biological patterns with measured trends in climate, and process-based modeling; yet these approaches are insufficient for several reasons. Observational studies and correlative models cannot disentangle the causal effects of warming from other factors that have also changed over time, such as succes-

sional stage or land use. In addition, models based on correlative data may fail to make useful predictions for future conditions that fall outside the range of historical variability (e.g., Pearson & Dawson, 2004; Hampe, 2004; Ibanez *et al.*, 2006; Swab *et al.*, 2012; Chuine *et al.*, 2016). Climate change will yield warmer temperatures than the previous 150 years, and possibly warmer than at any time in the last 2000 years (Ohlemüller *et al.*, 2006; Williams & Jackson, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2007; Stocker *et al.*, 2013). Process-based models begin to overcome these challenges through inclusion of explicit mechanistic relationships between climate and biological outcomes. However, they are limited by the processes they include (i.e., our understanding of mechanism), as well as by the data available to parameterize those processes (Moorcroft, 2006; Kearney & Porter, 2009).

Experimental data from field-based climate change experiments are crucially important to fill these knowledge gaps and determine mechanistic links between climate change and biological responses. Experiments can quantify biological responses to different levels of climate change, and can create the “no-analog” climate scenarios forecasted for the future, particularly when they employ active-warming methods, such as forced air heaters, soil warming cables, or infrared heaters (Shaver *et al.*, 2000; Williams *et al.*, 2007; Aronson & McNulty, 2009). In addition, active-warming can be combined with precipitation manipulations (e.g., snow removal, water additions or reductions), offering the ability to isolate effects of temperature and precipitation from other environmental changes (e.g., Price & Waser, 1998; Cleland *et al.*, 2006; Sherry *et al.*, 2007; Rollinson & Kaye, 2012). Compared with indoor growth-chamber experiments, field-based experiments offer the possibility of preserving important but unknown or unquantified feedbacks among biotic and abiotic components of the studied systems.

With climate change experiments, ecologists often aim to test hypotheses about how projected warming will affect species’ growth, survival, and future distributions (Dukes & Mooney, 1999; Hobbie *et al.*, 1999; Morin *et al.*, 2010; Pelini *et al.*, 2011; Chuine *et al.*, 2012; Reich *et al.*, 2015; Gruner *et al.*, 2017). Recent research suggests, however, that climate manipulations may not always alter plot-scale climate (hereafter, microclimate) in ways that are consistent with observed changes over time (Wolkovich *et al.*, 2012; Menke *et al.*, 2014; Polgar *et al.*, 2014; Andresen *et al.*, 2016). For extrapolation of experimental findings to the real world, we need detailed assessments of how active-warming experiments alter the microclimate conditions experienced by organisms, and the extent to which these conditions are similar to current field conditions or anticipated climate change.

Here, we investigate the complex ways that microclimate is altered by active-warming treatments, both directly and indirectly, across multiple studies. The qualitative challenges and opportunities of climate change experiments have been summarized previously (e.g., De Boeck *et al.*, 2015) and effects of these manipulations on some aspects of microclimate have been published for individual sites (e.g., Harte *et al.*, 1995; McDaniel *et al.*, 2014b; Pelini *et al.*, 2011). However, our quantitative meta-analysis allows us to examine trends across sites and warming designs, and make recommendations based on this information. Using plot-level daily microclimate data from 15 active-warming experiments (yielding 59 experiment years and 14,913 experiment days; Table S1), we show the direct and indirect ways that experimental manipulations alter microclimate. We use a case study of spring plant phenology to demonstrate how analyses that assume a constant warming effect and do not include non-temperature effects of warming treatments on biological responses lead to inaccurate quantification of plant sensitivity to temperature shifts. Finally, we synthesize our findings to make recommendations for future analysis and design of climate change experiments (Box 1).

## MicroClimate from Climate Change Experiments (MC3E) database

To investigate how climate change experiments alter microclimate, we first identified published, active-warming field experiments. We focused on *in situ* active-warming manipulations because recent analyses indicate that active-warming methods are the most controlled and consistent methods available for experimental warming (Kimball, 2005; Kimball *et al.*, 2008; Aronson & McNulty, 2009; Wolkovich *et al.*, 2012). We do not include passive-warming experiments because they have been analyzed extensively already and are known to have distinct issues, including reduction in wind, overheating, and great variation in the amount of warming depending on irradiance and snow depth (Marion *et al.*, 1997; Shaver *et al.*, 2000; Wolkovich *et al.*, 2012; Bokhorst *et al.*, 2013, see also Table S2).

We carried out a full literature review to identify potential active-warming field experiments to include in the database. We followed the methods and search terms of Wolkovich *et al.* (2012) for their Synthesis of Timings Observed in iNcrease Experiments (STONE) database (Wolkovich *et al.*, 2012), but restricted our focus to active-warming experiments. Further, because our goal was to tease out variation in microclimate (including temperature and soil moisture), we focused on warming studies with multiple levels of warming and/or precipitation treatments. These additional restrictions constrained the list to 11 new studies published after the STONE database, as well as six of the 37 studies in the STONE database. We contacted authors to

obtain daily microclimate and phenological data for these 17 studies and received data (or obtained publicly available data) for 10 of them, as well as datasets from five additional sites offered or suggested to us over the course of our literature review and data analysis. The daily temperature and soil moisture data from these 15 experiments comprise the MicroClimate from Climate Change Experiments (MC3E) database (Figures 1 and S1, Table S1), which is available at KNCB (Ettinger & Wolkovich, 2018).

## Complexities in interpreting experimental climate change

Climate change experiments often include detailed monitoring of climate variables at the plot-level, yielding large amounts of data, such as daily or hourly temperature and other climate variables, over the course of an experiment. Ecologists, however, are generally interested in the ecological responses (e.g., community dynamics, species' growth, abundance, or phenology), which are collected on much coarser timescales (e.g., weekly or annually). Not surprisingly, then, when analyzing ecological responses, authors typically provide detailed information on the observed biological responses, and report only the mean change in climate over the course of the experiment and whether it matched their target level of change (e.g., Price & Waser, 1998; Rollinson & Kaye, 2012; Clark *et al.*, 2014a,b). Several studies have conducted detailed, independent analyses of microclimate data from warming experiments (e.g., Harte *et al.*, 1995; Kimball, 2005; Kimball *et al.*, 2008; McDaniel *et al.*, 2014b; Pelini *et al.*, 2011). While these detailed analyses provide valuable case studies of experimental effects on microclimate data alone, they have generally not been incorporated into analyses of ecological responses.

In interpreting ecological responses to climate change manipulations, the focus has been primarily on mean shifts in microclimate, but the imposed manipulations result in much more complex shifts. The magnitude of change in these manipulations varies in time and space, and the presence of experimental equipment alone (with no heat added) often alters environmental conditions. These factors, discussed below, challenge our interpretation of how experimental warming studies forecast effects of climate change on organisms and ecosystems.

## Effects on local climate vary over time and space

Reporting only the mean temperature difference across the duration of the study masks potentially important temporal variation in temperature among treatments (compare Figure 2 to Figure S2). Using the MC3E database, we found that active-warming reduces the range of above-ground daily temperature by  $0.37^{\circ}\text{C}$  per  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  of target warming (Table S3, see also Table S1, which details the different methods used to measure and warm temperatures). Active-warming decreased above-ground daily temperature range by differentially affecting maximum and minimum temperatures: warming increased daily minima by  $0.81^{\circ}\text{C}$  per  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  of target warming, but only increased daily maxima by  $0.48^{\circ}\text{C}$  per  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  of target warming (Table S3). These effects varied by site (Table S3), but we found no clear patterns by warming type (e.g., infrared versus forced air). Soil daily temperature range was not affected by experimental warming, as warming altered minimum and maximum daily temperatures similarly (Table S4).

We observed strong seasonal and annual variations in the effects of experimental warming (Figures 1, 2, Table S5). Warming generally appears close to targets in winter and early spring, and farthest below targets in summer (day of year 150-200), though patterns differ among sites (Figure 1). The variation in warming effectiveness may be driven by interactions between warming treatments and daily, seasonal, and annual weather patterns, since the magnitude of warming can vary as weather conditions change. Both infrared heaters and soil cables fail to achieve target temperature increases during rainstorms (Peterjohn *et al.*, 1993; Hoeppepner & Dukes, 2012) and with windy conditions (Kimball, 2005; Kimball *et al.*, 2008). In addition, treatments are often applied inconsistently within or across years. Heat applications are frequently shut off during winter months, and some heating methods, even if left on throughout the year do not warm consistently (e.g., Clark *et al.*, 2014a,b; Hagedorn *et al.*, 2010).

Treatment effects also vary spatially, further complicating interpretation of climate change experiments. The MC3E database contains six studies that used blocked designs, allowing us to examine spatial variation in the amount of warming (i.e., the difference between treatment and control plots within a block). These studies include five infrared and one soil warming cable experiment. We found that the amount of observed warming frequently varied by more than  $1^{\circ}\text{C}$  (and up to  $3^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) among blocks (Figure 2, Table S6); this variation in warming is substantial, as it is equivalent to the target warming treatment for many studies. The differences in warming among blocks may be caused by fine-scale variation in vegetation, slope, aspect, soil type, or other factors that can alter wind or soil moisture, which in turn affect warming (Peterjohn *et al.*, 1993; Kimball,



2005; Kimball *et al.*, 2008; Hoepfner & Dukes, 2012; Rollinson & Kaye, 2015).

Of course, identical experimental treatments across space and time are not necessary, nor realistic, for robust analysis of experimental results and forecasting. Indeed, the spatial and temporal variation we report could improve and refine models, and—at least in some regions—may be consistent with contemporary patterns of climate change (Stocker *et al.*, 2013). Taking advantage of this variation, however, requires understanding and reporting it (e.g., Milcu *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, fine-scale spatial and temporal variations in warming treatments are rarely analyzed explicitly with ecological data, so the implications for interpretation of experimental findings are unclear.

## Experimental infrastructure alters local climate

Experimental structures themselves can alter temperature and other important biotic and abiotic variables in ways that are not generally examined in experimental climate change studies. The importance of controls that mimic a treatment procedure without actually applying the treatment is widely acknowledged in biology (e.g., Dayton, 1971; Spector, 2001; Johnson & Besselsen, 2002; Quinn & Keough, 2002). Though some experimental climate change studies include treatments with non-functional warming equipment as well as ambient controls, the magnitude and implications of structural effects on climate are rarely interpreted or analyzed.

To investigate the magnitude of infrastructure effects, we compared temperature and soil moisture data from five active-warming studies at two sites: Duke Forest and Harvard Forest (Farnsworth *et al.*, 1995; Clark *et al.*, 2014b; Marchin *et al.*, 2015; Pelini *et al.*, 2011), accounting for methodological differences among studies by including a random effect of study (see Supplemental Materials for details). These were the only studies in the MC3E database that monitored climate in two types of control plots: structural controls (i.e., ‘shams’ or ‘disturbance controls,’ which contained all the warming infrastructure, such as soil cables (n=1), forced air chambers (n=2), or both (n=2), but with no heat applied) and ambient controls with no infrastructure added. Other studies monitored environmental conditions in only structural controls (n=5) or ambient controls (n=4). We were unable to compare ambient and structural controls for experiments using infrared heating, because no studies in our database included both control types. (A separate analysis was suggestive that there may be infrastructure effects on microclimate for infrared studies in our database as well; see Supplemental Materials, especially Table S7).

We found that experimental structures altered above-ground and soil temperatures in opposing ways: above-ground temperatures were higher in the structural controls than in ambient controls, whereas soil temperatures were lower in structural controls compared with ambient controls (Figure 3a-d). This general pattern was consistent across different temperature models (mean, minimum, and maximum temperatures), although the magnitude varied among seasons, studies, and years (Figure 3a-d, Tables S8, S9, S11, S12). We also found that experimental infrastructure decreased soil moisture relative to ambient conditions across all seasons, studies, and years (Figure 3e, Tables S10, S13).

There are several possible reasons for the observed climatic differences between ambient and structural controls. Infrastructure materials may shade the plots, reduce airflow, reduce albedo relative to surroundings, or otherwise change the energy balance. Specifically, soil temperatures may be cooler in structural controls for forced air studies because the experimental structures block sunlight from hitting the ground surface, causing less radiative heating of the ground in structural controls compared to ambient controls. In addition, above-ground temperatures may be warmer in structural controls because the structures radiatively warm the air around them and block wind, inhibiting mixing with air outside of the plot. Structures may also interfere with precipitation hitting the ground, thereby reducing local soil moisture and snowpack, with its insulative properties. Finally, for some warming types (e.g., soil cables), structural controls experience increased soil disturbance compared with ambient controls; this may alter water flow and percolation, and introduce conductive material via the cables or posts.

To the extent that differences between ambient and structural controls have been reported in previous studies, our findings appear to be consistent. Clark *et al.* (2014b), whose study employed forced air and soil cables for warming, state that “control of the air temperature was less precise, in part due to air scooping on windy days.” Marchin *et al.* (2015), who used forced air warming, note that structural controls had mean spring air temperatures about 0.5°C or more above ambient temperatures. Peterjohn *et al.* (1994), who warmed soil with heating cables, reported cooler soil temperatures in structural controls than in ambient controls at shallow soil depths. Similarly, we found the greatest difference in soil temperature between structural and ambient controls in shallow soils (e.g., exp10, soil depth = 2cm). If addressed, the focus to date has been largely on these abiotic impacts of experimental structures, but structures may also alter herbivory and other biotic conditions (Kennedy, 1995; Moise & Henry, 2010; Wolkovich *et al.*, 2012; Hoeppner & Dukes, 2012).

Our analyses suggest that warming experiments that calculate focal response variables relative to ambient

controls (e.g., Price & Waser, 1998; Dunne *et al.*, 2003; Cleland *et al.*, 2006; Morin *et al.*, 2010; Marchin *et al.*, 2015) may not adequately account for the ways in which infrastructure affects microclimate. Results from studies reporting only structural controls (e.g., Sherry *et al.*, 2007; Hoeppepner & Dukes, 2012; Rollinson & Kaye, 2012), should be cautiously applied outside of an experimental context, as—without ambient controls—their inference is technically limited to the environment of the structural controls. Our results suggest that studies aiming to predict or forecast the effects of climate change on organisms and ecosystems would benefit from employing both structural and ambient controls so that they may separate infrastructural artifacts from the effects of experimental warming.

## Indirect and feedback effects of climate change manipulations

Climate change experiments often seek to manipulate temperature or precipitation separately as well as interactively, but manipulating either of these variables in isolation is notoriously difficult. Treatments involving precipitation additions typically reduce temperatures in climate change manipulations (Sherry *et al.*, 2007; Rollinson & Kaye, 2012; McDaniel *et al.*, 2014b). For example, McDaniel *et al.* (2014) observed that a 20% increase in precipitation reduced mean hourly temperatures by 0.3°C over the course of their two-year experiment.

In the MC3E database, there are four experiments that manipulated both temperature and precipitation, and provided daily above-ground temperature data (three of these also measured soil temperature). Across these studies, all of which used infrared heating, we found that increasing the amount of added precipitation reduced daily minimum and maximum above-ground temperatures, at rates of 0.01 and 0.02°C, respectively, and soil temperatures, at a rate of 0.01°C for both minimum and maximum temperature, per percent increase in added precipitation (Table S14). Thus, a 50% increase in precipitation would be expected to decrease temperature by 0.5°C. This is likely because increasing soil moisture (an effect of precipitation additions) typically shifts the surface energy balance to favor latent (i.e., evapotranspiration) over sensible energy fluxes, reducing heating of the air overlying the soils. Maintaining target warming levels is a challenge even for independent feedback systems, which vary wattage output using ongoing temperature measurements, particularly during seasons or years with wetter soils and higher evapotranspiration (Rich *et al.*, 2015).

In addition to its effects on temperature, experimental warming often increases vapor pressure deficit and

reduces soil water content (e.g., Harte *et al.*, 1995; Sherry *et al.*, 2007; Morin *et al.*, 2010; Pelini *et al.*, 2014; Templer *et al.*, 2016). Of the 15 experiments in the MC3E database, we examined the 12 that continuously measured and reported soil moisture. We included target warming, warming type, and their interaction as predictors, and accounted for other methodological differences among studies by including a random effect of study (see Supplemental Materials for details). We found that experimental warming reduced soil moisture across all warming types, with substantial variation among experiments (Figure 5, Table S15). The drying effect varied by warming type (ranging from -0.80% for infrared to -0.30% for forced air and soil warming per degree of target warming, Table S16). Soil moisture can be difficult to measure, with high spatial and temporal variation (Famiglietti *et al.*, 1999; Teuling & Troch, 2005), but these results highlight that soil moisture is unavoidably affected by changing temperatures in active-warming experiments.

Warming and precipitation treatments, and their indirect effects on soil moisture and other abiotic factors, can also alter the biotic environment, which may produce cascading effects. Many studies have found shifts from herbaceous to woody plant communities over time with experimental warming (e.g., Rollinson & Kaye, 2012; McDaniel *et al.*, 2014b,a; Harte *et al.*, 2015). These community shifts may affect resource levels, such as moisture, carbon, and nutrient levels in the soil (McDaniel *et al.*, 2014b,a; Harte *et al.*, 2015) and feedback to affect microclimate (Harte *et al.*, 2015).

The presence of these feedback effects is both a strength and a challenge of climate change experiments. They may represent important and ecologically realistic effects that might not have been apparent without the *in situ* field experiment. Alternatively, they may represent artifacts that are unlikely to occur outside of an experimental context. Quantifying, interpreting, and reporting these non-temperature effects in experiments is critical to distinguishing this and to understanding mechanisms underlying observed biological responses to climate change.

The widespread presence of indirect effects of climate manipulations highlights the importance of measuring environmental conditions at the plot-level, and using these measurements in analysis and interpretation of results. Many climate change experiments—including 10 of the 15 in the MC3E database—analyze warming and/or precipitation treatments as simple categorical predictors (e.g., as in a two-way ANOVA, Table S1). Our findings, however, demonstrate a clear need for alternative modelling approaches to fully understand the experimental results and to make mechanistic links between changes in climate and ecological responses. One straightforward alternative is to include the continuous climate data (e.g., plot-level temperatures) as

predictors of the focal response variable, such as phenological state or species density (e.g., Marchin *et al.*, 2015; Pelini *et al.*, 2014).

## Ecological implications

We have highlighted a suite of factors that complicate interpretation of climate change experiments. These indirect effects are similar to the “hidden treatments” described by Huston (1997) in biodiversity experiments, and are likely to have biological implications for many of the responses studied in warming experiments (e.g., Figure 5). Interpretation of experimental climate change effects on biological responses may be misleading because the intended climate treatments (i.e., categorical comparisons or target warming levels) are often used as explanatory variables in analyses (Table S1). The interpretation is likely to be altered by using fine-scale, measured climate as explanatory variables. For example, biological responses may be muted (Figure 5b) or exaggerated (Figure 5c) when direct and indirect effects of climate manipulations interact.

To investigate the ecological implications of non-target abiotic responses to climate warming, we conducted a simple case study in plant phenology. We used the MC3E database to test if estimates of the temperature sensitivity of phenology vary when calculated using target warming versus plot-level climate variables. We fit two separate mixed-effects models, that differed in their explanatory variables: one used target warming and one used measured climate. For both models, the response variable was budburst day of year, and we used random effects to account for non-independence due to study (e.g., important methodological differences such as warming type and feedback control that may have affected treatments) and year (e.g., weather variability among years that may have altered treatments) (see Supplemental Materials for details).

We found that phenological temperature sensitivity estimates from the two modeling approaches varied three-fold. The target warming model estimated temperature sensitivity of budburst to be -1.91 days/°C (95% CI -2.17,-1.86; Table S17, solid black line in Figure 6), whereas the measured climate model estimated temperature sensitivity of budburst to be -6.00 days/°C (95% CI:-6.74,-5.26; Table S17). Further, all measured climate models with both temperature and moisture had improved model fit compared to the target warming model (Table S18). The best-fit model included mean daily minimum above-ground temperature, mean winter soil moisture, and their interaction as explanatory variables, suggesting that these variables are important drivers of budburst timing (Tables S17, S18). In addition, the measured climate model estimated a significant effect

of soil moisture on budburst of -1.51 days/% VWC (95% CI: -1.76,-1.26; Table S17, Figure 6). This negative effect is expected, if reducing moisture delays budburst (Table S17, Figure 6), and is consistent with previous work showing that budburst requires water uptake (Essiamah & Eschrich, 1986).

The increase in estimated temperature sensitivity with measured (rather than target) temperature has two major causes. First, target warming generally exceeds the measured plot-level temperatures (Figure 2), producing a muted effect of temperature in models using target warming. Second, experimental warming's dual effects of decreasing soil moisture and increasing temperature impact budburst in contrasting ways. Decreasing soil moisture has a delaying effect on budburst phenology, opposing the advancing effect of rising temperatures (Figure 5b); thus the effect of temperature is underestimated when moisture is not included in the model. This example shows how the common method of using target warming alone, or even measured temperature alone as done in previous analyses of the particular experiments included here (exp01,exp01,exp03,exp04,exp10, Clark *et al.*, 2014a,b; Polgar *et al.*, 2014; Marchin *et al.*, 2015), to understand biological responses may yield inaccurate estimates of temperature sensitivity in warming experiments. In this case, the underestimation may be substantial enough to account for previously observed discrepancies between observational and experimental phenological responses to warming (Wolkovich *et al.*, 2012; Polgar *et al.*, 2014), though further investigation is required.

Accounting for both direct and indirect effects of warming is critical for accurate interpretation of the consequences of climate change (Kharouba *et al.*, 2015). Of particular importance is the extent to which abiotic and biotic effects are realistic forecasts of future shifts that are likely to occur with climate change, or due to artifacts that are unlikely to occur outside of experimental systems (Moise & Henry, 2010; Diamond *et al.*, 2013). For many important climatic and ecological metrics, experimental findings of abiotic and biotic effects appear to be consistent with observations. Altered above-ground daily temperature range (i.e., temperature minima changing more than maxima, Table S3) with experimental warming is consistent with observed changes in many places, at least for some time periods. Minimum temperatures increased more rapidly than maximum temperatures from 1950-1980, reducing above-ground daily temperature range (Thorne *et al.*, 2016; Vose *et al.*, 2005). In addition, shifts from non-woody to woody vegetation, coupled with declines in soil carbon, are two effects of warming, observed in both experimentally warmed plots over the short-term and ambient controls over decades of climate warming at a sub-alpine meadow site (Harte *et al.*, 2015). The acclimation response of leaf respiration to temperature (Aspinwall *et al.*, 2016; Reich *et al.*, 2016) and responses of soil respiration to warming (Carey *et al.*, 2016) also appear to be consistent across experiments and observations.

These cases suggest that many responses observed in climate change experiments may be accurate harbingers of future biological responses to climate change.

In contrast, some responses documented in climate change experiments may not be in line with future climate change, and thus need explicit analyses and cautious interpretation. For example, soil drying in conjunction with future warming is forecasted in some regions, such as the southwestern United States, mainly because of reductions in precipitation and increased evaporative demand with warmer air (Dai, 2013; Seager *et al.*, 2013). The northeastern United States, on the other hand, has been trending wetter over time (Shuman & Burrell, 2017), even though temperatures have warmed. Future changes in soil moisture are uncertain, and likely to vary by region, season, and even soil depth (Seager *et al.*, 2014; Berg *et al.*, 2017). Thus, it is not safe to assume that the soil drying observed in warming experiments is necessarily likely to occur with future warming. The uncertainty associated with forecasting changes to soil moisture make replicating future water availability regimes in climate change experiments especially challenging, and, in our view, make its careful study all the more important. The altered light, wind, and herbivory patterns documented under experimental infrastructure (Kennedy, 1995; Moise & Henry, 2010; Wolkovich *et al.*, 2012; Hoepfner & Dukes, 2012; Clark *et al.*, 2014b) represent other non-temperature effects that may be potential experimental artifacts and are worth quantifying in future analyses to provide improved estimates of temperature sensitivity.

An additional challenge in relating experiments to observations is that experimental findings may not scale up in space and time. Short-term responses to climate change frequently differ from long-term responses (Woodward, 1992; Elmendorf *et al.*, 2012; Andresen *et al.*, 2016; Reich *et al.*, 2018). This may be due, in part, because many experiments are designed to test shifts in the mean state, though patterns of expected climate change are likely to be more complex for many variables. For example, many climate models project complex shifts in precipitation: more intense extreme precipitation events (e.g., heavy downpours), more dry days (i.e., less total precipitation events), or both (Polade *et al.*, 2014). Relatedly, the length and design of most experiments (typically less than 5 years) are unlikely to robustly capture dynamics forced by important modes of natural climate variability (e.g., El Niño and La Niña events Holmgren *et al.*, 2001). In addition, the small spatial scale of experiments may result in responses that are unlikely to be observed at larger scales (Woodward, 1992; Menke *et al.*, 2014). Experimental plots range in area from 1.5 to 36 square meters (Table S1), which may be too small to encapsulate, for example, the rooting zones of perennial plants (Canadell *et al.*, 1996), or foraging ranges, even for small species such as ants (Menke *et al.*, 2014). One approach to overcome these challenges is to conduct larger, longer experiments (Woodward, 1992), though this frequently is not

logistically possible and does not easily address how to capture potential major shifts in climate variability.

## Conclusions

As climate change continues across the globe, ecologists are challenged to not only document impacts, but also make quantitative, robust predictions. Our ability to meet this challenge requires a nuanced mechanistic understanding of how climate directly and indirectly alters biological processes. Climate change experiments, which have been underway for nearly four decades (e.g., Tamaki *et al.*, 1981; Carlson & Bazzaz, 1982; Melillo *et al.*, 2017), provide invaluable information about biological responses to climate change. Yet the full range of changes in environmental conditions imposed by these experiments is rarely presented. We have compiled the first database of microclimate data from multiple warming experiments and shown how time, space, experimental artifacts, and indirect effects of treatments may complicate simple interpretations of these experimental results. We hope this work provides a foundation for gaining the most knowledge and utility from existing experiments via robust analyses, for designing new experiments (see Box 1), and for improved understanding of biological responses to a changing world.

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## Box 1: Recommendations for future climate change experiments

1. *Collect and analyze plot-level climate data.* This includes analyzing and interpreting minimum and maximum values, as well as variance and critical thresholds (e.g., the number and duration of freeze-thaw events and accumulated chilling hours, McDaniel *et al.*, 2014b; Vasseur *et al.*, 2014). We suggest saving



the raw data from data loggers (often collected at hourly or higher resolution) to allow quantification of variance (and other summaries) at different temporal resolutions. In assessing which frequency of measurements is most appropriate for analyses (e.g., hourly, twice daily), it is critical to consider the chronobiology of the event and organisms of interest. For ants, this might mean that temperatures be monitored every minute (Helm & Shavit, 2017); for bacteria, even more frequently.

2. *Analyze measured climate variables rather than targets.* There can be substantial variation in the effects of warming and precipitation treatments among plots and across time (Figure 2). Analyzing measured climate will allow much more in-depth understanding of the drivers and biological effects of variation in temperature and moisture.

3. *Publish high quality, usable data and metadata.* Given that climate manipulations are logistically challenging and expensive (Aronson & McNulty, 2009), and that they often produce a large volume of fine-scale climate data, good curation and data sharing will ensure wider use and deeper understanding of these valuable data. When studying biological implications of a global challenge as large as climate change, progress will come from designing and reporting experiments in ways that facilitate an eventual global data set.

4. *Include both structural and ambient controls* and collect, use, and report microclimate and biological data within them. Fewer than half of the studies in our MC3E database reported microclimate data from these two control types (6 out of 15 studies); however, all experiments that did include both control types showed significant effects of infrastructure (Figure 3).

5. *Design relevant manipulations* by consulting observational records and forecasts, including seasonal and annual variation in projected warming. When it is not possible or desirable to match anticipated changes in climate, studies should report how imposed treatments compare to projected changes and past observations (e.g., Hoover *et al.*, 2014; Zhu *et al.*, 2016). In addition, if continuous treatments are not applied throughout the study, we recommend reporting the seasonality and timing of treatments and monitoring the climate throughout the year.

6. *Maximize the duration of climate change experiments* by running some experiments for as long as possible, since the magnitude of climate change treatments can vary considerably among years (Figure 2). In addition, long-term responses of individuals and populations can differ from transient responses (Saleska *et al.*, 2002; Franklin, 1989; Giasson *et al.*, 2013; Harte *et al.*, 2015). We were able to acquire

data extending for  $\geq 5$  years for only one study in the MC3E database (exp01), restricting our ability to investigate the effect of study length on experimental climate change.

7. *Conduct syntheses across studies.* As more detailed data are published from experimental climate change studies in divergent ecosystems and warming types, meta-analyses will advance our understanding of the ways that warming affects microclimate and biotic interactions. For example, it would be useful to compare microclimate data among studies using infrared warming applied with constant voltage versus infrared warming that varies voltage based on measured temperatures.

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642 **Figures**

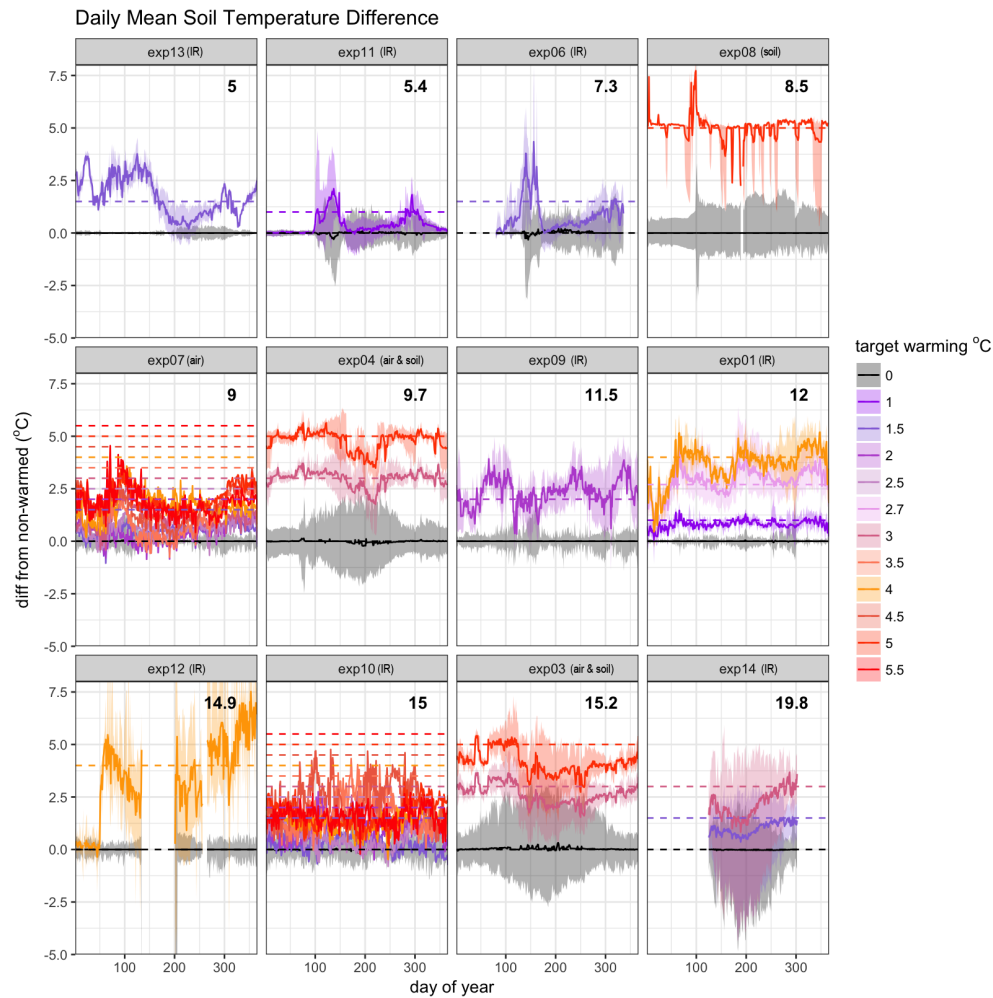


Figure 1: **Deviations in daily observed warming from mean control soil temperature for 12 study sites**, excluding data from plots that manipulated precipitation. We show soil, rather than above-ground, temperature, as this was the most frequently recorded temperature variable in the MC3E database. Solid lines show observed difference between warming treatment (colors) and control (black) plots, averaged across replicates and years; shading shows 95% confidence intervals. Dashed lines represent target warming levels. (Note that the following studies had no explicit target temperature: exp06, exp11, exp12; for these studies, we used their reported level of warming.) Two sites not shown here did not monitor soil temperature. Experimental sites are ordered by low to high mean annual soil temperature (shown in the upper right corner of each panel). The heating type is listed in parentheses next to the site number (IR= infrared, soil= soil cables, air= forced air).

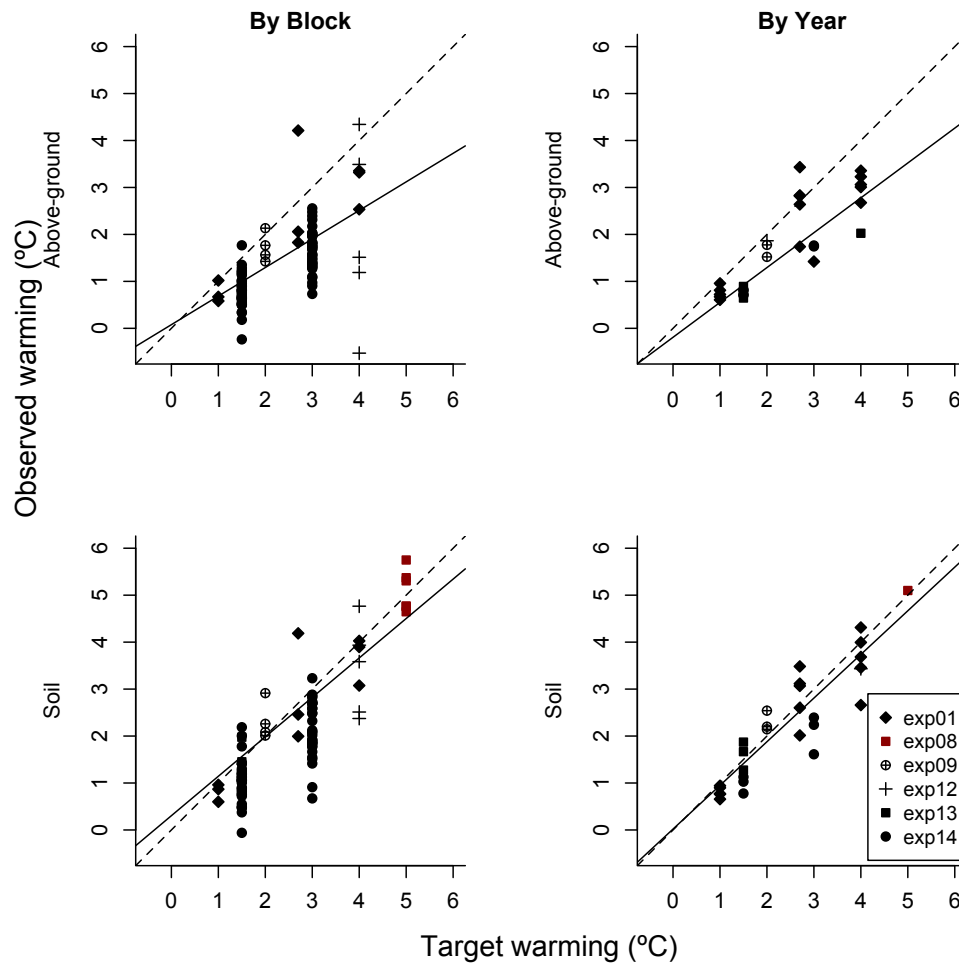


Figure 2: **Observed warming over space and time, for above-ground and soil temperatures**, excluding data from plots that manipulated precipitation. Above-ground temperature includes air, canopy, and surface temperature. Points represent the difference between treatment and control plots by block (i.e., one data point per block) and by year (i.e., one data point per year). The solid line is the fitted relationship between observed and target warming and the dashed line shows when observed warming is exactly equal to target warming (1:1). Black symbols represent studies using infrared; red represents soil warming cables (only exp08). Note that the following studies had no explicit target temperature: exp06, exp11, exp12; for these studies, we used their reported level of warming. See Supplemental Materials (especially Tables S5 and S6) for details.

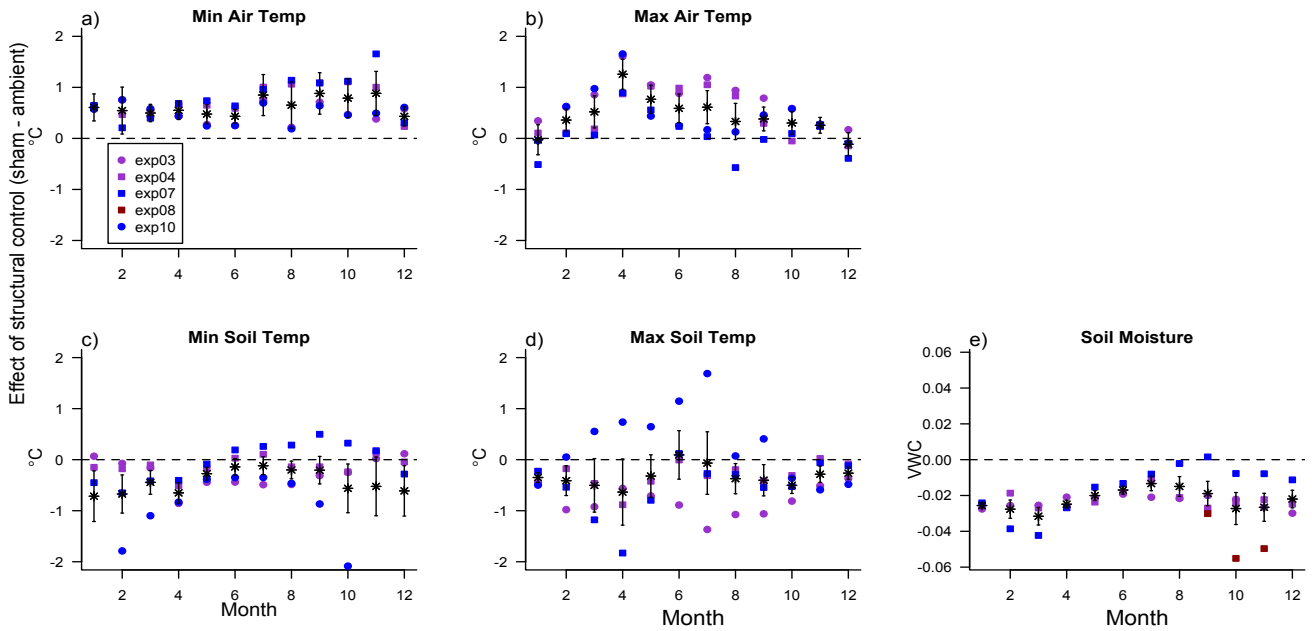


Figure 3: **Deviations in measured abiotic variables by month in structural controls compared to ambient controls** (i.e., with no control chambers or warming infrastructure in place). Above-ground temperatures (which include includes air, canopy, and surface temperatures) were higher (a,b), whereas soil temperature (c,d) and soil moisture (e) were lower in structural controls compared with ambient controls. We show overall (fixed) effects in black from monthly mixed-effects models; site-level random effects are shown by squares (for the three studies conducted at Harvard Forest in Massachusetts, USA) and circles (the two studies conducted at Duke Forest in North Carolina, USA). Colors vary by heating type: red represents soil warming cables, blue represents forced air; purple represents combined soil warming cables and forced air heating. See Supplemental Materials for details (Tables S8-S13).

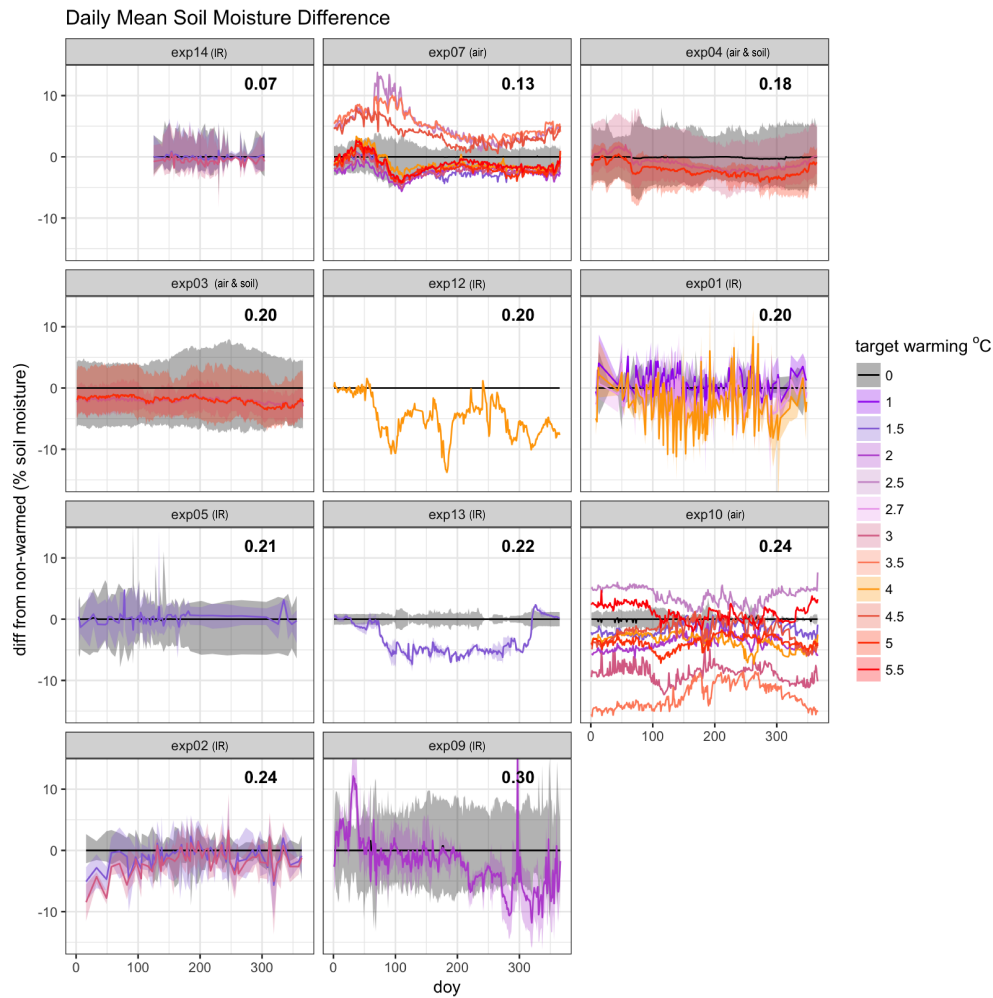


Figure 4: **Deviations in daily observed soil moisture**, shown for the 11 study sites that continuously monitored soil moisture, excluding data from plots that manipulated precipitation. Black lines represent control plots, and colored lines represent warming treatments with various target warming levels (or reported warming, if there was no explicit target temperature). The number of temperature treatment levels vary from one (e.g., exp08, exp11) to nine (exp07 and exp10, which used an unreplicated regression design). Experimental sites are ordered by low to high mean annual soil moisture (shown in the upper right corner of each plot). All experiments measured soil moisture in volumetric water content, as a percentage of the soil volume in the sample, scaled from 0 to 100; the absolute difference between treatment and control plots is shown.



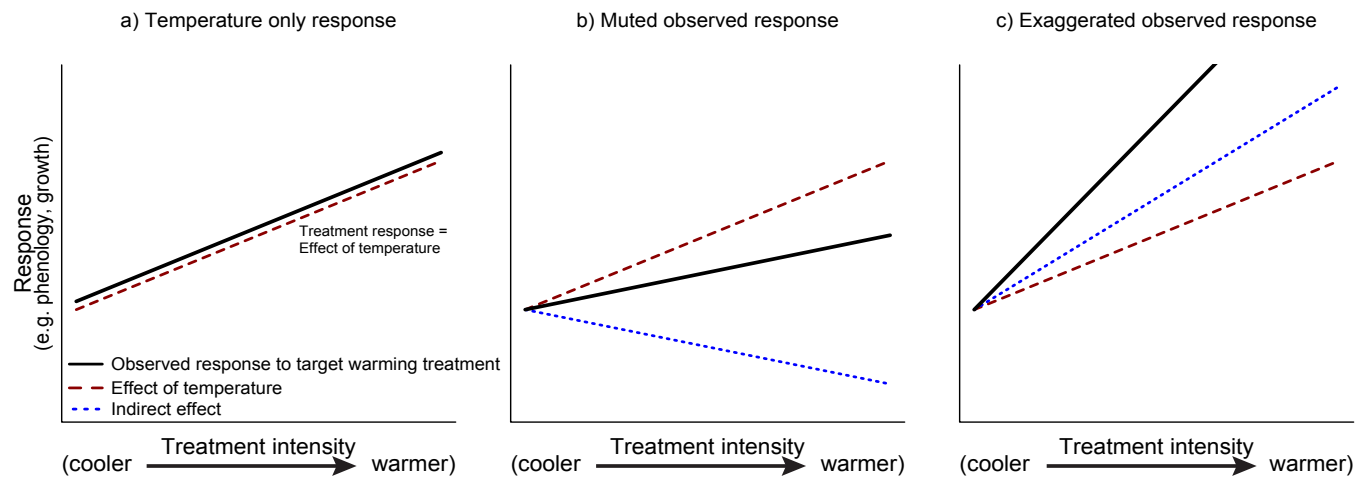


Figure 5: **Theoretical biological responses to experimental warming and their interpretation.** Direct responses to temperature alone (a) can be easily understood. Complications arise when biological responses are a mix of the direct temperature and indirect non-temperature effects of experimental warming. Then experimental warming may cause biological responses to be muted (b) or exaggerated (c). Quantifying, interpreting, and reporting these non-temperature effects in experiments is critical, and their presence is both a strength and a challenge of climate change experiments. They may represent ecologically realistic effects that might not have been predicted without the *in situ* field experiment. Alternatively, they may represent artifacts that are unlikely to occur outside of an experimental context. Slopes of these example lines assume a linear response with additive direct and indirect effects. The relationship between these effects could be more complex (e.g., nonlinear; antagonistic, multiplicative, or otherwise interactive).

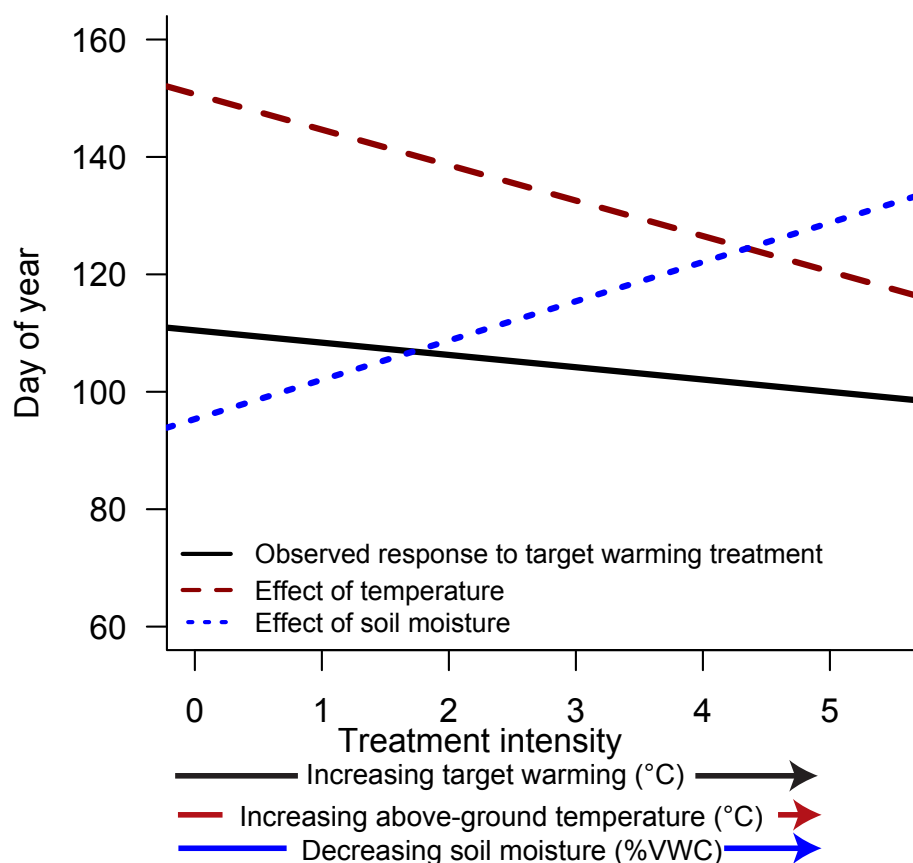


Figure 6: **Observed response of budburst day of year to experimental climate change** is an example of a muted response: the observed response to increasing treatment intensity (i.e., the coefficient of a model fit with only target [or reported, if there was no explicit target] temperature as the explanatory variable, black line; units for x-axis are  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  of target warming) suggests a weaker temperature sensitivity than the effect of temperature in a more biologically accurate (and better-fitting) model that includes both measured above-ground temperature (dashed red line, for which x-axis units are  $^{\circ}\text{C}$  of measured temperature) and soil moisture (dotted blue line, for which x-axis units are % VWC, decreasing from left to right in conjunction with warming intensity), as well as their interaction. Analysis includes all studies that monitored budburst and measured soil moisture and above-ground temperature (exp01,exp03,exp04,exp07,exp10); structural control data were used for this analysis (ambient controls were excluded from those studies that contained both). See Supplemental Materials, especially Tables S17 & S18, for additional details.