Ecosystem and community resistance to five years of drought and deluge in the Sagebrush Steppe

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Abstract

Summarize it here

Introduction

Start it here

Methods

Study Area

We conducted our precipitation manipulation experiment at the United States Sheep Experimental Station (USSES) near Dubois, Idaho (44.2° N, 112.1° W), 1500 m above sea level. The vegetation is typical of high elevation sagebrush steppe. The plant community is dominated by the shrub *Artemesia tripartita* and three perennial bunchgrasses, *Pseudoroegneria spicata*, *Poa secunda*, and *Hesperostipa comata*. During the period of our experiment, average mean annual precipitation was xxx mm and mean monthly temperature ranged from -x°C in January to x°C in July.

Precipitation Experiment

Between 1926 and 1932, range scientists at the USSES established 26 permanent 1 m^2 quadrats to track vegetation change over time. In 2007, we (well, one of us [P. Adler]) relocated 14 of the original quadrats, six of which were inside a large, permanent livestock exclosure. We use these six plots as control plots that have recieved no treatment, just ambient precipitation. In spring 2011, we (well, two of us [A. Kleinhesselink and P. Adler]) established 16 new 1 m^2 plots. We avoided areas on steep hill slopes, areas with greater than 20% cover of bare rock, and areas with greater than 10% cover of the shrubs *Purshia tridentata* and/or *Amelanchier utahensis*. We established the new plots in pairs and randomly assigned each plot in a pair to receive a "drought" or "irrigation" treatment.

Drought and irrigation treatments were designed to decrease and increase the amount of ambient precipitation by 50%, respectively. To achieve this, we used a system of rain-out shelters and automatic irrigation (Gherardi & Sala 2013). The rain-out shelters consisted of transparent acrylic shingles 1-1.5 m above the ground that covered an area of 2.5×2 m. The shingles intercepted approximately 50% of incoming rainfall, which was channeled into 75 liter containers. Captured rainfall was then pumped out of the containers and sprayed on to the adjacent irrigation plot via two suspended sprinklers. Pumping was triggered by float switches once water levels reached about 20 liters. We disconnected the irrigation pumps each fall and reconnected them, often with difficulty, each spring. The rain-out shelters remained in place throughout the year.

To make sure the treatments were having the desired effects, we monitored soil moisture in four of the drought-irrigation pairs using Decagon Devices (Pulman, Washington) 5TM and EC-5 soil moisture sensors. We installed four sensors in each plot, two at 5 cm soil depth and two at 25 cm soil depth. We also installed four sensors in areas nearby the four selected plot pairs to measure ambient soil moisture at the same depths. Soil moisture measurements were automatically logged every four hours. We coupled this temporally intensive soil moisture sampling with spatially extensive readings taken at six points within all 16 plots and associated ambient measurement areas. These snapshot data were collected on 06/06/2012, 04/29/2015, 05/07/2015, 06/09/2015, and

05/10/2016 using a handheld EC-5 sensor.

Data Collection

Aboveground Net Primary Productivity We estimated aboveground net primary productivity (ANPP) using a radiometer to relate ground reflectance to plant biomass (see Byrne et al. 2011 for a review). We recorded ground reflectance at four wavelengths, two associated with red reflectance (xxx and xxx) and two associated with near-infrared reflectance (xxx and xxx). At each plot in each year, we took four readings of ground reflectances at the above wavelengths. We also took readings in ten calibration plots adjacent to the experimental site, in which we harvested all aboveground biomass, dried it to a constant weight at 60°C, and weighed it to estimate ANPP.

For each plot and year, we averaged the four readings for each wavelength and then calculated NDVI using the MODIS and AVHRR algorithms. To convert NDVI to ANPP we regressed NDVI against the dry biomass weight from the ten calibration plots. We fit regressions to MODIS-based NDVI and AVHRR-based NDVI for each year and retained the regression with the better fit. Using the best regression equation for each year, we predicted ANPP.

Species Composition Species composition data came from annual census maps for each plot made using a pantograph (Hill 1920). The maps record the spatial location and size of each individual plant. Using those annual maps, we aggregated over individuals to calculate total basal cover for each species in each plot.

Data Analysis

ANPP and Ecosystem Stability We used ANOVA with treatment, year, and treatment×year terms to test the effects of the treatments on ANPP over the course of the five year experiment. To test for within-year differences of ANPP among treatments, we fit ANOVAs independently for each

year with treatment terms only. We used the `lm()` function in `R` (v3.3.2, R Core Team 2016) to fit the models, and the `anova()` function to extract sums-of-squares tables.

We calculated ecosystem stability as the temporal mean of ANPP divided by its temporal standarad deviation $\left(\overline{\text{ANPP}}/\sigma(\text{ANPP})\right)$. Ecosystem stability was calculated for each plot. We compared ecosystem stability among treatments using ANOVA (same `R` functions as above).

Species Synchrony and Species Composition We calculated the synchrony of species fluctuations through time using basal area cover data and individual density data. For both data types we calculated the synchrony metric described by Loreau & de Mazancourt (2008), which ranges from 0 (perfect ascynchrony) to 1 (perfect synchrony). Before calculating synchrony, we averaged cover and density over plots within treatments for each species. We used the `synchrony()` function in the `R` package `codyn` (Hallett et al. 2016) to calculate species synchrony.

To see if community composition differed among treatments through time, we used non-dimensional multivariate scaling (NMDS) based on Bray-Curtis distances. For each year of the experiment, we first calculated Bray-Curtis distances among all plots, and then extracted those distances for use in the NMDS. We plotted the first two axes of NMDS scores to see if community composition overlapped, or not, among treatments in each year. We used functions in the `R` package `vegan` (Oksanen 2016) to calculate Bray-Curtis distances and the run the NMDS analysis.

Results

Discussion

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