*In preparation for submission at Global Change Biology*

**Global response patterns of plant functional traits to combined nitrogen and phosphorus addition are governed by additive interactions**

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**Keywords**

nutrient addition, plant functional ecology, photosynthetic capacity, meta-analysis, carbon cycle

**Abstract**

The availability of nutrients such as nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) play an important role in shaping plant ecophysiological responses to global change. While nitrogen availability has been asserted as a key driver of plant responses to global change, the role of phosphorus – both individually and in combination with nitrogen – remains less understood. This is due to a lack of broad data syntheses that precludes the development of a mechanistic framework. To address this knowledge gap, we compiled global leaf and whole-plant trait data from full-factorial nitrogen and phosphorus addition experiments across the globe and conducted a meta-analysis. We used this approach to quantify the individual and interactive effects of nitrogen and phosphorus on net photosynthesis, photosynthetic capacity, leaf nutrient content, plant biomass accumulation, and biomass partitioning. Across experiments, nitrogen addition generally increased leaf nitrogen content on both a mass- and area-basis but did not change leaf phosphorus content, leading to an increase in the leaf nitrogen-to-phosphorus ratio. In contrast, phosphorus addition increased leaf phosphorus on a mass- and area-basis but did not change leaf nitrogen content, leading to a decrease in the leaf nitrogen-to-phosphorus ratio. We found no evidence that nitrogen or phosphorus addition influenced net photosynthesis apparent photosynthetic capacity, or photosynthetic nitrogen and phosphorus use effiicencies. Nitrogen and phosphorus addition each increased aboveground biomass and did not alter belowground biomass, leading to a reduction in the root mass fraction and root-to-shoot ratio. An analysis of interaction effect sizes indicated that the combined effects of nitrogen and phosphorus addition on leaf and whole-plant traits were primarily driven by additive interactions, indicating that these responses were generally the result of independent effects of each nutrient addition. These findings show that nitrogen and phosphorus availability additively impact leaf chemistry and biomass but have no effect on leaf-level photosynthesis. In fact, null photosynthetic responses to nutrient additions are supportive of previous work showing that investment in photosynthesis is more strongly regulated by climatic factors that alter demand for soil resources (e.g., CO2, temperature) than by changes in nutrient availability.

**Introduction**

[introduction, eutrophication and global change]

[N addition effects on leaf and whole-plant traits]

[P addition effects on leaf and whole-plant traits]

[Combined N and P effects on leaf and whole-plant traits, including knowledge gaps]

[study objectives]

Here, we conducted a global meta-analysis using [XX] observations from [XX] journal articles, including data compiled from an existing database of plant functional trait responses to nitrogen and phosphorus addition. Our objectives were two-fold. First, we sought to quantify the effects of N, P, and N+P addition on net photosynthesis, photosynthetic capacity, leaf nutrient content and partitioning, resource use efficiencies, plant growth, and biomass partitioning. Second, we quantified the interaction effect size of each trait to understand whether the effects of N+P addition were the product of additive, synergistic, or antagonistic individual effects of N and P addition. We used this approach to test the following hypotheses:

1. Nitrogen and phosphorus addition will increase leaf nitrogen content and leaf phosphorus content, respectively. This will lead to an increase in the leaf N:P ratio with nitrogen addition and a decrease in the leaf N:P ratio with phosphorus addition. The effects of nitrogen and phosphorus addition on leaf nitrogen and phosphorus content are expected to be amplified in regions where demand for building and maintaining photosynthetic enzymes is high (e.g., high aridity, low temperature, high light availability; (Cheaib *et al.*, 2025), or in species with high demand for building and maintaining photosynthetic enzymes (e.g., N2-fixers, AM-association species).
2. Nitrogen and phosphorus addition will not influence photosynthetic parameters unless the availability of these resources is insufficient to satisfy demand to build and maintain photosynthetic enzymes. In nitrogen-limited systems, nitrogen addition is expected to increase the maximum rate of Rubisco carboxylation. In phosphorus-limited systems, phosphorus addition is expected to increase the maximum rate of electron transport for RuBP regeneration.
3. Nitrogen and phosphorus addition will increase total biomass through stronger increases in aboveground biomass than belowground biomass, which will decrease the root-to-shoot ratio and root mass fraction.
4. The combined effects of nitrogen and phosphorus addition on leaf and whole-plant traits will be the sum of the corresponding individual effects of nitrogen and phosphorus addition. In other words, the combined effects of nitrogen and phosphorus addition will be the product of additive responses, not synergistic or antagonistic.

**Materials and Methods**

*Data compilation*

Initial data for the meta-analysis were collected using citations listed in the Manipulation Experiments Synthesis Initiative (MESI) database (Van Sundert *et al.*, 2023). We selected manipulation experiments that added N and P in a full-factorial design to ensure that any comparisons made between N, P, and N+P addition responses were from the same subset of experiments. All data for manuscripts included in the MESI database that fit these criteria were downloaded or extracted using a plot digitizer to ensure that all relevant traits were included in the meta-analysis and undergo a round of quality control to avoid any data entry issues that may arise when using large ecological datasets (Augustine *et al.*, 2024). To supplement studies included in the MESI database, studies that reported data from Nutrient Network experiments were also included in the meta-analysis, including only measurements collected from control, N, P, and N+P addition plots. Each site in each paper that reported data from Nutrient Network experiments was treated as an independent experiment, following that the Nutrient Network is a globally distributed experiment where independent sites share the same nutrient addition and experimental design scheme (Borer *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, we added leaf nutrient data from Firn et al. (2019), biomass partitioning data from Cleland et al. (2019), and photosynthetic data from Hersch-Green et al. (2024).

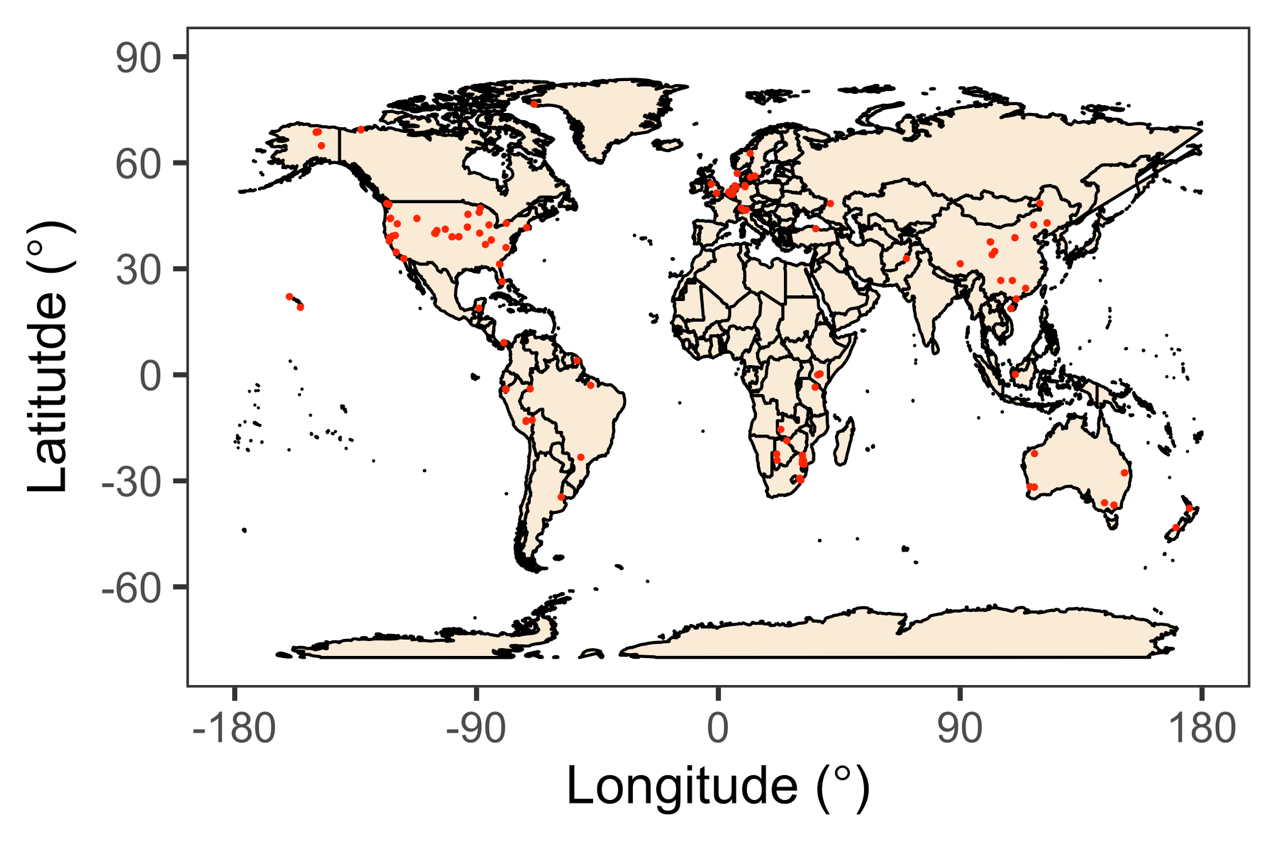
To further supplement MESI and Nutrient Network datasets, we added additional manipulation experiments using journal articles published on or before March 2025. We selected manipulation experiments where N and P were added in a full-factorial design. From this, we selected experiments that measured traits related to leaf photosynthesis (e.g., net photosynthesis photosynthetic capacity, stomatal conductance), leaf nutrient content (e.g., mass- or area-based leaf nitrogen content, mass- or area-based leaf phosphorus content), biomass (e.g., above-ground or belowground biomass), biomass partitioning (e.g., root:shoot ratio), or nutrient partitioning of the biomass (e.g., aboveground nitrogen biomass, aboveground phosphorus biomass). Finally, we selected experiments that included explicit explanations of treatment replication schemes to accurately calculate summary statistics. We first searched for studies that followed these guidelines using citations included in the MESI and Nutrient Network papers. To supplement these studies, we also created a search query in Web of Science using similar search terms as in (Liang *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, our query mined for the following topics: (nitrogen AND phosphorus) AND (fertiliz\* OR addition) AND (effect\* OR respon\* OR affect\* OR impact\* OR increas\* OR decreas\* OR alter\* OR deposition OR enrich\*) AND (leaf nitrogen\* OR leaf phosphorus\* OR \*use efficiency OR biomass OR mass fraction OR root:shoot OR LMA OR SLA OR chlorophyll OR photosynthesis OR Vcmax OR Jmax) NOT (animal\* OR medic\* OR chemist\*).

*Data extraction*

For experiments that reported results at the species-level, one mean value ± standard deviation per trait per species per nutrient fertilization treatment per experimental site was considered one observation. Observations for different species from the same study were considered to be independent and allowed us to determine the effects of species identity traits (e.g., mycorrhizal type, photosynthetic pathway, growth form) on plant responses to nutrient treatments. For experiments that reported results at the treatment level, one mean value ± standard deviation per trait per nutrient fertilization treatment per experimental site was considered one observation. Additional analyses are included in the *Supplement* to isolate the effects of species- versus treatment-level responses.

Observations were integrated into a compiled dataset through multiple pathways. First, summary statistics (mean, standard deviation, replication scheme) were calculated directly from published datasets from studies that adopted open data practices (n = XX studies). Where possible, summary statistics were extracted from tables included in the main text or supplemental information if studies did not explicitly provide data. If studies did not include their data or provide summary statistics in tables, we digitized plots using information about treatment and sample replication information. Plots were digitized in R (version 4.4.2) using the ‘metadigitise’ package (Pick *et al.*, 2019). Studies that did not include clear descriptions about the replication scheme were not included in the dataset. Overall, this data extraction procedure rendered 4680 observations (1560 observations each for N, P, and N+P treatments) from 85 studies. Of these studies, 78 were field manipulation experiments, 6 were greenhouse manipulation experiments, and 1 was a growth chamber experiment. Of the field manipulation experiments, 166 independent sites were represented, spanning a broad global gradient and diverse array of biome types (Table S1; Fig. 1; Fig. S1). The dataset also includes 170 species from 54 families, representing diverse growth forms, growth durations, nutrient acquisition strategy, and photosynthetic pathway.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1**

*Moderator variables*

All field experiments reported site latitude and longitude coordinates. Using these coordinates, we extracted monthly climate data spanning 1901-2024 using the Climatic Research Unit Time Series gridded data product at a 0.5° resolution (CRU TS v4.09; (Harris *et al.*, 2020). Data were extracted from the grid cell containing each site using the “extract” function in the “raster” R package (Hijmans, 2010). Specifically, we extracted data for monthly average temperature (°C), total monthly precipitation (mm month-1), and total monthly potential evapotranspiration (cm month-1). Mean annual temperature, precipitation, and potential evapotranspiration were calculated for each site by first calculating the mean temperature, total precipitation, and total potential evapotranspiration for each year separately, then calculating the average of these climatic variables across the 1901-2024 period. We used mean annual precipitation and mean annual potential evapotranspiration to calculate the mean annual aridity index (AI, unitless). Low AI values indicate more arid sites. Site climate data are reported in Table XX.

Species identity traits were included for all measurements that were collected at the species level. Specifically, we included information about species family, growth form (tree/shrub, graminoid, forb), growth duration (annual, perennial), photosynthetic pathway (C3, C4), N2-fixation ability (N2-fixer or non-fixer), and mycorrhizal type (AM, EcM, dual AM-EcM, facultative AM, ErM, and non-mycorrhizal). N2-fixation ability was determined based on whether species were in the *Fabaceae* family. Mycorrhizal type was assigned from the FungalRoot database using the genus of each species (Soudzilovskaia *et al.*, 2020).

*Determination and analysis of individual and interaction effect sizes*

We followed an established framework for assessing individual and interactive effects of multiple treatments in meta-analysis (Yue *et al.*, 2017). First, we used the natural logarithm of the response ratio (ln RR) to determine the individual effects of N, P, and N+P addition on leaf and whole-plant traits. For each observation *i* (i.e., trait per species per site per experiment), we calculated the natural logarithm of the response ratio (ln RR) as:

(1)

Where is the mean value of a treatment (i.e., N, P, or N+P addition) and is the mean value of the control treatment for each observation. We determined the weighted log-response ratio () across observations as:

(2)

Where ln RRi is the log-response ratio of observation *i* given in (1), *w*i is the weight of each log-response ratio, and *k* is the total number of observations. *w*i was calculated as the inverse of the variance (*v*i) of observation *i* (that is, *w*i = 1 / *v*i). *v*i was calculated as:

(3)

Where *s*t and *s*c are the standard deviations of the treatment and control groups, respectively, and *n*t and *n*c are the sample sizes of the treatment and control groups.

Next, we used Hedge’s *d* to determine the interactive effect of N and P addition on leaf and whole-plant traits (Yue *et al.*, 2017; Ding *et al.*, 2025). For each observation *i*, the interactive effect size of N and P addition (dNPi) was calculated as:

(4)

Where ,,, and refer to the mean of the N, P, N+P, and control treatments, respectively, for each observation *i*. *s*int\_i refers to the pooled standard deviation across treatments, calculated as:

(5)

Where *N*ci, *N*ni, *N*pi, and *N*npi refer to the sample sizes of control, N, P, and N+P treatments, respectively. *S*ci, *S*ni, *S*pi, and *S*npi refer to the sample sizes of control, N, P, and N+P treatments, respectively, for each observation. In (6), *J*int\_i refers to a correction term for small sample size bias, calculated as:

(6)

We determined the weighted interaction effect size () of each trait across experiments as:

(7)

Where *d*NPi is the interaction effect size of observation *i* given in (6), *w*dnpi is the associated weight of each interaction effect size, and *k* represents the total number of observations. *w*dnpi was calculated as the inverse of the variance (*vd*NPi) of observation *i* (that is, *w*dnpi = 1 / *vd*NPi). *vd*NPi was calculated as:

(8)

*Data analysis*

We constructed a series of mixed-effects meta-regression models to understand the individual and interactive effects of N and P addition on leaf and whole-plant traits. Three separate models were created for each trait to assess the individual effects of N, P, and N+P addition using log-response ratios and their associated variances. We created a fourth model for each trait to assess the interactive effect of N and P addition using *d*NPi values and their associated variances and weights. In all cases, we built mixed-effects meta-regression models using the ‘rma.mv’ function in the ‘metafor’ R package (Viechtbauer, 2010), manually specifying the weights of each observation as explained above and fitting each model using restricted maximum likelihood estimation. All models included climatic moderator variables (MAT, MAP, AI) and species identity moderator variables (growth form, growth duration, photosynthetic pathway, N2-fixation ability, mycorrhizal status) as fixed effects.

Interactions between N and P addition on leaf and whole-plant traits were classified into three categories: additive, synergistic, and antagonistic. Following Yue et al. (2017), null interaction effects (i.e. the 95% confidence intervals overlapped with zero) were classified as additive effects, where the combined effect of N and P addition had similar effects as the sum of the individual effects of N and P addition. An interaction was classified as synergistic (i.e. the combined effect of N and P addition was stronger than predicted through individual effects) if positive individual effects of N and P addition correspond with a significant positive interaction effect, if negative individual effects of N and P addition correspond with a significant negative interaction effect, or if mixed sign individual effects (e.g., one positive and one negative effect) correspond with a significant negative interaction effect. An interaction was classified as antagonistic (that is, the combined effect of N and P addition was weaker than predicted through individual effects) if positive individual effects of N and P addition correspond with a significant negative interaction effect, if negative individual effects of N and P addition correspond with a significant positive interaction effect, or if mixed sign individual effects correspond with a significant positive interaction effect.

**Results**

*Leaf nutrient content*

Nitrogen addition significantly decreased *M*area and *P*mass, but increased *N*mass, *N*area, and leaf N:P (Table X; Fig. X) and did not influence *P*area (Table X; Fig. X). Phosphorus addition had no effect on *M*area, *N*mass, *N*area, but increased *P*mass and *P*area and decreased leaf N:P (Table X; Fig. X). The positive effect of phosphorus addition on leaf P content was associated with an increase the foliar inorganic and metabolic phosphorus pools, with no change in the nucleic acid or structural phosphorus pools (Table X; Fig. X). The addition of nitrogen and phosphorus together yielded a decrease in *M*area and leaf N:P and an increase in *N*mass, *N*area, *P*mass, *P*area, the foliar inorganic P pool, and the foliar metabolic P pool. Interaction effect sizes indicated that the combined effect of N and P addition resulted in additive interactions when both were added together for *M*area, *N*mass, *N*area, *P*mass, and *P*area, the foliar inorganic P pool, and the foliar metabolic P pool (Table X; Fig. X). However, leaf N:P exhibited a synergistic interaction, indicating a stronger negative effect of N and P addition in combination than would be predicted through the sum of the individual effects of N and P addition (Table X; Fig. X).

Climatic variables indicated that the leaf nutrient responses to N and P addition were modulated by factors that influenced demand for building and maintaining photosynthetic enzymes.

*Leaf photosynthetic traits*

Nitrogen addition did not significantly modify *A*sat, *V*cmax, *J*max, or photosynthetic nitrogen- and phosphorus-use efficiencies (Table X; Fig. X). Similarly, phosphorus addition did not significantly modify *A*sat, *V*cmax, or photosynthetic nitrogen- and phosphorus-use efficiencies, but did slightly increase *J*max (Table X; Fig. X). The addition of nitrogen and phosphorus together yielded an increase in *A*sat and *J*max, but no change in *V*cmax or photosynthetic nitrogen- and phosphorus-use efficiencies (Table X; Fig. X). Interaction effect sizes suggested that all photosynthetic responses to nitrogen and phosphorus addition were the product of additive interactions (Table X; Fig. X).

*Whole-plant traits*

Aboveground biomass, aboveground nitrogen standing stock, and aboveground phosphorus standing stock each increased with N addition, while root mass fraction and the root:shoot ratio each decreased (Table X; Fig. X). Total biomass and belowground biomass were both unaffected by nitrogen addition. Phosphorus addition increased total biomass, aboveground biomass, and aboveground phosphorus standing stock while decreasing the root:shoot ratio (Table X; Fig. X). Phosphorus addition had no effect on aboveground nitrogen standing stock, belowground biomass, or the root mass fraction (Table X; Fig. X). The addition of nitrogen and phosphorus together yielded an increase in total biomass, aboveground biomass, aboveground nitrogen and phosphorus standing stocks paired with a decrease in the root mass fraction and root:shoot ratio (Table X; Fig. X). There was no effect of nitrogen and phosphorus addition together on belowground biomass. Interaction effect sizes suggested that biomass responses to nitrogen and phosphorus addition together were largely the product of additive interaction. However, aboveground biomass exhibited a synergistic interaction, indicating a stronger positive effect of N and P addition in combination on aboveground biomass than would be predicted through the sum of the individual effects of N and P addition (Table X; Fig. X).

**Discussion**

Here, we conducted a global meta-analysis to determine the effects of N, P, and the combined effect of N and P on a series of plant functional traits ranging from leaf morphological and chemical traits to whole-plant biomass. We used this approach to understand general effects of N and P addition on plant functional traits and to determine whether these responses were the product of additive, synergistic, or antagonistic responses. In general, our results indicate that nitrogen and phosphorus addition played a stronger role in modifying leaf morphological and chemical traits and whole-plant traits than photosynthetic traits, consistent with patterns expected from eco-evolutionary optimality theory (Stocker *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, our results indicate that plant responses to N and P addition in combination were largely the response of additive interactions between N and P addition, supporting previous work noting that interactive effects of global change factors are often the product of additive interactions (Yue *et al.*, 2017; Ding *et al.*, 2025). In other words, plant responses to N and P addition in combination were no different than the sum of the individual effects of N and P addition. This was true for all traits with the exception of leaf N:P and aboveground biomass, which showed synergistic responses to N and P addition. Below, we explain and contextualize these patterns and use the responses observed here to suggest areas of future research to refine our understanding of interactions between nitrogen and phosphorus cycling.

*Plant responses to combined N and P addition are driven by additive interactions*

The majority of plant responses to N and P addition were driven by additive interactions. This was true regardless of whether plant functional traits were at the leaf or whole-plant level, with the exception of leaf N:P and aboveground biomass

*Leaf nutrient and biomass responses to N and P additions are stronger than photosynthetic responses*

In general, leaf nutrient and biomass responses to N and P additions were stronger in magnitude than photosynthetic responses. N addition had no role in shaping photosynthetic traits, while P addition weakly increased *J*max and had no effect on any other photosynthetic trait. Previous work has demonstrated that investment in photosynthetic enzymes is largely determined as a function of demand for soil resources, where demand to build and maintain photosynthetic enzymes determines nutrient allocation to photosynthetic enzymes (Smith *et al.*, 2019, 2024; Harrison *et al.*, 2021; Stocker *et al.*, 2025; Perkowski *et al.*, 2025).

*Future research needs and directions*

Unfortunately, we could not investigate the role of climate in modulating photosynthetic responses to nitrogen and phosphorus addition. This limitation was due to the limited number of full-factorial nitrogen and phosphorus experiments that are conducted in the field, representing a clear future area of needed research and key knowledge gap that remains in our understanding of how photosynthetic processes respond to nutrient additions. Previous work has shown that climatic factors which influence demand play a predictable and key role in determining leaf nitrogen allocation responses to nitrogen and phosphorus addition (Cheaib *et al.*, 2025). Our work supports these findings by showing that leaf nutrient allocation responses to nitrogen and phosphorus addition are at least partly dependent on climate and associated demands for soil resources. However, similar field analyses that scale these patterns to photosynthetic traits remain lacking. Quantifying these responses is particularly important, as recent work has highlighted that the fraction of leaf nutrients (nitrogen in this case) allocated to photosynthetic tissues decrease in response to increasing nitrogen availability and are dependent on climate-related demand for soil resources (Waring *et al.*, 2023; Cheaib *et al.*, 2025; Perkowski *et al.*, 2025). Without field experiments that quantify leaf photosynthetic responses to nutrient treatments, we are not able to comment on whether these responses scale with leaf nutrient allocation responses in ways that are predicted through eco-evolutionary optimality.

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