**Whole-plant growth and leaf-level nitrogen responses to soil nitrogen addition are inversely correlated in grasslands**

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**Abstract**

Terrestrial carbon and nitrogen cycles are closely coupled. As such, the land surface components of Earth System Models are now beginning to include explicit nitrogen cycles and this has been shown to alter carbon cycling dynamics and, thus, climate feedbacks. An assumption embedded within these models is that there is a positive correlations between soil nitrogen, leaf nitrogen per leaf area (*N*area), and photosynthetic capacity. This assumption results in greater simulated leaf assimilation capacity in areas with more soil nitrogen. While these relationships have some empirical support, other studies have shown that *N*area and photosynthetic capacity are primarily determined by climate and that soil nitrogen availability, instead, leads to increased tissue development and/or storage. Here, we reconcile these differences by comparing theory to data from a globally distributed experimental nitrogen addition network (Nutrient Network). We show that, across the network, soil nitrogen addition increases both *N*area and aboveground plant biomass. However, we find that soil nitrogen addition is a poor predictor of *N*area, which can be well modeled from leaf mass per leaf area and climate alone. Additionally, we find that the positive *N*area response to soil nitrogen is strongest when plants increase allocation to leaf mass per area, but not aboveground biomass in responses to soil nitrogen addition. These results reconcile discrepancies between past studies and shows that *N*area is the product of both soil nitrogen availability as well as whole-plant nitrogen demand. That is, in cases where plants use added soil nitrogen to grow new tissues, *N*area is primarily the product of climate and leaf structure. Whereas, a positive relationship between soil and leaf nitrogen is observed when added nitrogen is not used for growth. These dynamics will be important to include in the next generation of ESMs.

**Introduction**

Globally, carbon and nitrogen cycles are closely coupled. This coupling has a strong influence on carbon fluxes between the atmosphere and the Earth’s surface (Thornton *et al.*, 2007). For instance, land plants rely on nitrogen to build photosynthetic enzymes (Evans, 1989). Thus, nitrogen is an important regulator of carbon fluxes into terrestrial ecosystems, as indicated by Earth System Models (ESMs) that simulate reduced plant carbon assimilation when nitrogen constraints are considered (Thornton *et al.*, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2015; Wieder *et al.*, 2015). Given ongoing addition of nitrogen to terrestrial ecosystems (Vitousek *et al.*, 1997; Galloway *et al.*, 2004, 2008), it is critical to understand how this will manifest itself in terrestrial ecosystems to reliably predict the rate and magnitude of future climate change.

ESMs typically assume a positive relationship between soil nitrogen availability, leaf nitrogen on an area basis (*N*area), and photosynthetic capacity. The positive correlation between *N*area and photosynthetic capacity is commonly observed (Evans, 1989; Kattge *et al.*, 2009; Walker *et al.*, 2014) and is thought to be the result of the fact that photosynthetic enzymes are typically nitrogen-rich (Evans & Seemann, 1989; Evans & Clarke, 2019). However, the positive correlation between soil nitrogen availability and *N*area is not as straightforward. This is because plant nitrogen allocation is dynamic over time and space (Onoda *et al.*, 2017) and is likely the product of both soil nitrogen availability and tissue or organ-specific plant nitrogen demand (Paillassa *et al.*, 2020), which itself is environmentally dependent (Perkowski et al., in review).

A few recent studies have highlighted the significantly positive relationship between soil nitrogen availability and *N*area (Firn *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2020; Liang *et al.*, 2020). These studies generally reason that this positive correlation stems from the fact that leaf photosynthesis is limited by nitrogen available to build nitrogen-rich proteins such as Ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate (Rubisco) that are involved in carboxylation. This generally follows previous conclusions from leaf-level analyses (Kattge *et al.*, 2009; Walker *et al.*, 2014). However, analyses on Rubisco carboxylation suggest that leaves are not carboxylation-limited and are instead well set up to maximize the utilization of available light in a given environment (Smith *et al.*, 2019; Peng *et al.*, 2020; Smith & Keenan, 2020). So, an increase in leaf nitrogen to build Rubisco under nitrogen addition would be a wasteful process in the sense that the extra Rubsico would not increase photosynthesis unless it was accompanied by a similar increase in light energy. Nonetheless, a plant may choose to extra available nitrogen to build Rubisco as a means to maintain similar rates of photosynthesis at a lower stomatal conductance, effectively reducing nutrient use efficiency to increase water use efficiency (Wright *et al.*, 2003). Global studies have found empirical support for this response in some contexts (Prentice *et al.*, 2014; Paillassa *et al.*, 2020).

Other studies have highlighted the importance of nitrogen demand for predicting *N*area (Dong *et al.*, 2017; Onoda *et al.*, 2017). Variations in demand is typically tied to variations in aboveground climatic conditions (Smith & Keenan, 2020). Both ecophysiological theory and data (Dong *et al.*, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2019) suggest that plant demand for nitrogen to build photosynthetic proteins decreases with temperature (Ali *et al.*, 2015; Dong *et al.*, 2017; Rogers *et al.*, 2017; Hinojo-Hinojo *et al.*, 2018; Smith & Dukes, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2019; Paillassa *et al.*, 2020; Smith & Keenan, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2020) and increases with light availability (Niinemets *et al.*, 2015; Dong *et al.*, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2019; Paillassa *et al.*, 2020). In fact, previous data on Rubisco carboxylation capacity (Smith *et al.*, 2019; Paillassa *et al.*, 2020) and leaf nitrogen (Dong *et al.*, 2017; Firn *et al.*, 2019; Paillassa *et al.*, 2020) suggest that this climate-driven changes in demand may be as, or even more important than soil nitrogen availability.

Plant ecophysiological theory (Wright *et al.*, 2003; Franklin *et al.*, 2020; Paillassa *et al.*, 2020) provides a framework for reconciling the impact of soil nitrogen availability and plant nitrogen demand on *N*area. This theory suggests that the response of *N*area to a change in nitrogen availability (*N*availability) is dependent on the whole plant nitrogen demand to build new structures (*N*demand). Thus, an increase in *N*supply would increase *N*area as a means to increase water use efficiency only when there is a low *N*demand (Figure 1 grey dashed line). If *N*demand is high, we would expect no change in *N*area because all of the N would be allocated to building new structures (Figure 1 black solid line). Different environmental contexts (e.g., canopy openness) may dictate variation in *N*demand and the resulting *N*availability -*N*area relationship.

Here, we use leaf-level and biomass data from a globally distributed grassland nutrient addition experiment, Nutrient Network (NutNet; Lind 2016), alongside ecophysiological theory to better understand the response of *N*area to nitrogen addition. Our aims were to (1) quantify and separate the impact of soil nitrogen, leaf traits, and climate on *N*area and (2) separate the impacts of nitrogen demand and nitrogen availability on *N*area. We hypothesized that soil nitrogen availability, leaf traits, and climate would have significant separate impacts on *N*area, but that the effect of soil nitrogen availability would be relatively weak due to the alternative ways in which plants can allocate available nitrogen. Following from this, we expected that *N*area responses would be weaker than leaf area index (LAI) responses because the optimal strategy for increasing productivity in grasslands would be to increase LAI rather than increase water use efficiency. Finally, we hypothesized that the *N*area response to soil nitrogen availability would be greatest in species that did not show a large increase in biomass, as these species likely were not exhibiting a concomitant increase in nitrogen demand.

**Figure 1.**

Diagram

Description automatically generated

**Figure 1.** Hypothesized relationship between nitrogen (N) availability (*N*availability; x-axis) and leaf nitrogen per leaf area (*N*area; y-axis) under two different nitrogen demand scenarios. In the first scenario (black solid line), nitrogen demand to build new structures (*N*demand) is high. Thus, a change in *N*availability is not reflected in changes in leaf *N*area. In the second scenario (dashed grey line), *N*demand is low. Thus, a change in *N*availability is relected in a change in *N*area. Combined, this leads to the hypothesis that the *N*availability -*N*area relationship should be negatively correlated with the *N*availability -*N*demand relationship.

**Methods**

*Nutrient Network Description*

The Nutrient Network (NutNet; Lind, 2016) is a network of >100 replicated nutrient addition experiments in grasslands worldwide. Each site in the network has followed a similar nutrient addition protocol, factorially adding nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium plus a mix of macro- and micronutrients (K+µ). At each site, the experiment is set up as a randomized split-plot design with 3 replicate blocks each containing 10 5m x 5m plots. N, P, and K were added as urea, triple super phosphate, and potassium sulphate, respectively, at each site annually at a rate of 10 g m-2 yr-1. The macro- and micronutrient mix (i.e., iron, sulfur, magnesium, manganese, copper, zinc, boron, molybdenum, and calcium) was added to all K plots once. The oldest sites in the network began adding nutrients in 2008.

*Datasets*

To test our hypotheses, we utilized two datasets from the NutNet: (1) a leaf trait dataset (Firn *et al.*, 2019) and (2) the NutNet core dataset (Lind, 2016). The leaf trait dataset consisted of leaf elemental, isotopic, and morphological variables. Samples were collected from up to five randomly selected individuals per plot, typically 3-4 years after nutrient addition at each site (see Firn et al., 2019). For our analyses, we selected samples that contained each of nitrogen concentration (*N*mass; g g-1), leaf mass per area (*M*area; m2 g-1), and δ13C (‰). *N*mass was converted to *N*area (g m-2) using *M*area:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *N*area = *N*mass / *M*area | (1) |

We calculated the ratio of intercellular to extracellular CO2 concentration (χ; Pa Pa-1) from δ13C following Farquhar *et al.* (1989) as:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ∆13C = δ13Cair - δ13C / 1 + δ13C | (2) |

where ∆13C (‰) is the leaf discrimination relative to air (δ13Cair; ‰), assumed to be -8 ‰. For leaves of C3 species, ∆13C was converted to χ as:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| χ = ∆13C - a / bC3 - a | (3) |

where a and b were assumed to be 4.4‰ and 27‰, respectively (Farquhar et al., 1989). For leaves of C4 species, ∆13C was converted to χ as:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| χ = ∆13C - a / bC4 - a | (4) |

where

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| bC4 = c + dφ | (5) |

where c and d were assumed to be -5.7‰ and 30‰, respectively (Farquhar *et al.*, 1989). The bundle sheath leakiness term (φ) was assumed to be 0.4. For use in our analyses, we selected individuals with χ values between 0.2 and 0.95. This resulted in 2048 individuals from 195 species at 22 sites (Figure 2).

The second NutNet dataset used was the NutNet “core” dataset. This dataset consisted of data collected similarly at each NutNet site, typically on a yearly basis. From this data, we selected plot level biomass of living tissue at measured at the same sites in the same years as the leaf trait data. Aboveground biomass (AGB; g) was sampled by hand within 0.2 m2 (two 10cm x 100cm) strips in each plot and was dried before being weighed.

*Climate Data*

The latitude and longitude of each site were used to extract mean annual growing season temperature (*T*g; °C) and incoming PAR (*I*g; µmol m2 s1) for each site from monthly, 1901–2015, 0.5° resolution data provided by the Climatic Research Unit (CRU TS3.24.01) (Harris *et al.*, 2014). Growing season was operationally defined as months with mean temperatures greater than 0°C.

*Analyses*

To assess the drivers of *N*area and their relative importance, we followed an analysis protocol similar to that described by Dong *et al.* (2017). First, we fit a linear mixed effects model with *N*area as the dependent variable and soil treatment variables (soil N treatment, soil P treatment, soil K+µ treatment, and their respective interactions), climate (*T*g and *I*g), leaf traits (χ and *M*area), and species characteristics (photosynthetic pathway and whether the plant has the known capacity to biologically fix nitrogen) as fixed effects. Soil treatment and species characteristics were categorical fixed effects and climate and leaf traits were continuous fixed effects in the model. Species identity, species identity by site, and species identity by site by block were included as categorical random intercept terms. *N*area was natural log transformed to meet normality assumptions. Predictors *I*g, and *M*area were also natural log transformed.

We also analyzed the drivers of *N*area from a more predictive perspective, again following the approach by Dong *et al.* (2017). To do this, we first calculated a prediction of the nitrogen used for photosynthesis (*N*photo) as:

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| --- | --- |
| *N*photo = *N*Rubisco + *N*bioenergetics | (6) |

for C3 plants and

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *N*photo = *N*Rubisco + *N*bioenergetics + *N*PEP | (7) |

for C4 plants. To do this, we first calculated predicted optimal rates of photosynthetic processes following Smith *et al.* (2019) as modified in Smith & Keenan (2020) for C3 plants and an analogous model for C4 plants by Scott & Smith (in review). Specifically, these models used measured χ and climate variables to calculate predicted optimal maximum rates of Rubisco carboxylation (*V*cmax,25; µmol m-2 s-1), photosynthetic electron transport (*J*max,25; µmol m-2 s-1), and phosphoenolpyruvate (PEP) carboxylation (*V*pmax,25; µmol m-2 s-1; C4 plants only), all standardized to 25°C. Then, we calculated the predicted amount of nitrogen in Rubisco (*N*Rubisco)based on the model and parameterizations of Harrison *et al.* (2009):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *N*Rubisco = *V*cmax,25*M*r*M*n[*N*r] / *k*cat,r*n*r | (8) |

where *M*r is the molecular mass of Rubisco, 0.55 g Rubisco (μmol Rubisco)−1; [*N*r] is the nitrogen concentration of Rubisco, 0.0144 mol N (g Rubisco)−1; *M*n is the molecular mass of nitrogen, 14 g N (mol N)−1; *k*cat is the catalytic turnover at 25°C, 3,500,000 μmol CO2 (mol Rubisco sites \* seconds)−1; and *n*r is the catalytic sites per mol Rubisco, 8 mol sites (mol Rubisco)−1. We used *J*max,25 to estimate nitrogen in bioenergetics (*N*bioenergetics) following the approach by Niinemets and Tenhunen (1997):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *N*bioenergetics = *J*max,25*N*cyt / *j*mc | (9) |

where *N*cyt is the nitrogen investment in bioenergetics (0.124 g N (μmol cytochrome f)-1) and *j*mc is the activity of electron transport at 25°C (156 μmol electrons (μmol cytochrome f \* seconds)−1 (Niinemets & Tenhunen, 1997). *N*PEP was calculated in a similar manner to *N*Rubisco, but with PEP-specific constants:

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| --- | --- |
| *N*PEP = *V*pmax,25*M*p*M*n[*N*p] / *k*cat,p*n*p | (10) |

where *M*p is the molecular mass of PEP, 0.41 g PEP (μmol PEP)−1; [*N*p] is the nitrogen concentration of PEP, assumed to be similar to Rubisco (Sage & Pearcy, 1987), 0.0144 mol N (g PEP)−1; *k*cat is the catalytic turnover at 25°C, 5,440,000 μmol CO2 (mol Rubisco sites \* seconds)−1(Boyd *et al.*, 2015); and *n*r is the catalytic sites per mol PEP, assumed to be 2 mol sites (mol PEP)−1. We also calculated the nitrogen in structural tissue (*N*structure) using *M*area following the empirical approach described in Dong *et al.* (2017):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *N*structure = 10-2.67*M*area0.99 | (11) |

We then fit a second linear mixed effects model with *N*area as the dependent variable and soil treatment variables (soil N treatment, soil P treatment, soil K+µ treatment, and their respective interactions), predicted nitrogen components (*N*photo and *N*structure), and species characteristics (photosynthetic pathway and whether the plant has the known capacity to biologically fix nitrogen) as fixed effects. Soil treatment and species characteristics were categorical fixed effects and predicted nitrogen components were continuous fixed effects in the model. Species identity, species identity by site, and species identity by site by block were included as categorical random intercept terms. *N*area was natural log transformed to meet normality assumptions.

To examine the response of AGB to the soil treatments, we fit a third and fourth linear mixed effects models with AGB as the dependent variable. In both models, soil treatment variables (soil N treatment, soil P treatment, soil K+µ treatment, and their respective interactions) were included as independent categorical variables. Site and site by block were included as categorical random intercept terms. In both cases, dependent variables were natural log transformed to meet normality assumptions.

In a final analysis, we explored the effect of soil nitrogen supply in relation to community nitrogen demand on *N*area. To do this, we calculated treatment type average *N*area, χ, *M*area, and AGB values for all plots at all sites. Within a site and P by K+µ treatment, we calculated the percent change in in *N*area (∆*N*area; %), χ (∆χ; %), *M*area (∆*M*area; %), and AGB (∆AGB; %) from the added soil N plots to the ambient soil N plots. We used mean absolute deviation (MAD; Leys et al., 2013) to remove instances where any ∆ values were 3 times higher than the MAD. We then fit a linear mixed effects model with ∆*N*area as the dependent variable and ∆AGB, ∆χ, ∆*M*area, and their interactions were included as independent variables. Soil treatment variables (soil P treatment, soil K+µ treatment, and their respective interactions) were also included as independent variables. Species identity, species identity by site, and species identity by site by block were included as categorical random intercept terms.

Throughout, all models were fit using the “lmer” package (Bates *et al.*, 2015) in R version 3.5.3 (R Core Team, 2019). We used Wald’s χ2 tests to test the statistical significance of each fixed effect term in the models using the “car” package (Fox & Weisberg, 2011) in R. Post hoc analyses were done using the “emmeans” package (Lenth, 2018) in R. For the first two models, relative importance of each variable was calculated as the R2 partitioned by averaging over orders (Lindeman *et al.*, 1979) using the “calc.relimp” function in the “relaimpo” package (Grömping, 2006) in R.

**Results**

* Do these based on each question
  + Does soil N impact leaf Narea?
  + How does the impact of soil N on leaf Narea compare to other drivers, such as climate and LMA?
  + How does the leaf Narea response to soil N compare to the AGB response to soil N?
  + Does the impact of soil N on leaf Narea vary with leaf N demand, as indexed through the AGB response?

**Drivers of *N*area and their relative importance**

Leaf nitrogen on an area basis (*N*area) was 12.7% greater in the nitrogen added than the no nitrogen added plots (*p* < 0.001; Table 1).There was an interaction between soil N treatment and soil P treatment (*p* < 0.001; Table 1), but post-hoc Tukey’s tests confirmed that soil N positively impacted *N*area in both the ambient (15.1% increase) and added P (10.2% increase) treatments (*p* <0.001 in both cases). Despite the statistically significant impact of soil nitrogen treatments, χ (6%), *M*area (53%), and climate (*T*g = 7%, *I*g = 20%) had higher relative importance in the model than soil treatments (<2% combined; Table 1 and Figure 2B). The *N*area-*M*area correlation was not surprising given equation 1. The directionality of the slopes of the χ (negative), *T*g (negative), and *I*g (positive) slopes (Table 1) followed from theoretical expectations. Note that despite its importance a variable in in the model, the slope of the *N*area-*I*g was not significantly different from 0 (Table 1). Our analysis also found that species capable of symbiotic associations with nitrogen fixing bacteria had 44.7% higher *N*area than species without such associations (*p* < 0. 001; Table 1). We also found that C3 plants had 30% higher *N*area than C4 plants (*p* < 0. 001; Table 1). Both nitrogen fixation capacity (5.4%) and photosynthesis type (3.7%) were more important predictors in our model than the soil treatments (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Regression coefficients and relative importance for linear mixed effects model with *N*area as the dependent variable and soil treatment variables, climate, leaf traits, and species characteristics as fixed effects.\*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **df** | **Slope** | ***p*** | **Relative Importance** |
| Soil N | 1 | - | **< 0.001** | 1.00% |
| Soil P | 1 | - | 0.726 | 0.12% |
| Soil K+µ | 1 | - | 0.489 | 0.12% |
| χ | 1 | -0.278 ± 0.121 | **0.021** | 5.39% |
| *T*g | 1 | -0.028 ± 0.013 | **0.030** | 4.69% |
| ln *I*g | 1 | -0.115 ± 0.286 | 0.684 | 19.38% |
| ln *D*g | 1 | -0.033 ± 0.086 | 0.696 | 2.36% |
| Elevation | 1 | 0.0001 ± 0.0001 | 0.327 | 2.93% |
| ln *M*area | 1 | 0.936 ± 0.009 | **< 0.001** | 53.03% |
| N fixer | 1 | - | **< 0.001** | 5.04% |
| Photosynthetic pathway (C3/C4) | 1 | - | **< 0.001** | 3.68% |
| Soil N x Soil P | 1 | - | **0.003** | 0.13% |
| Soil N x Soil K+µ | 1 | - | 0.578 | 0.15% |
| Soil P x Soil K+µ | 1 | - | 0.767 | 0.05% |
| Soil N x Soil P x Soil K+µ | 1 | - | 0.898 | 0.07% |

\* P-values < 0.05 are bolded and < 0.1 are italicized. Sample size is 1,812. Key: χ = ratio of intercellular to extracellular CO2 concentration, *D*g = vapor pressure deficit, *I*g = photosynthetically active radiation, *M*area = leaf mass per leaf area, *T*g = temperature.

**Figure 2.**

Diagram

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**Figure 2.** (A) *N*area under ambient soil N and added soil N treatments. (B) Treemap of relative importance for linear mixed effects model with *N*area as the dependent variable and soil treatment variables, climate, leaf traits, and species characteristics as fixed effects (Table 1).

**Impacts of nitrogen demand and nitrogen availability on *N*area**

The predicted leaf N components, *N*photo and *N*structure, had significant, positive effects on *N*area (Table 2 and Figure 3) and a high relative importance in the model (23% and 38%, respectively; Table 2 and Figure 4). The *N*photo effect is reflects the aboveground climate impact on *N*area, while the *N*structure effects reflects the impact of *M*area. As in the first model, soil N (*p* < 0.001), N fixation (*p*  < 0.001), photosynthetic pathway (*p* < 0.001), and the interaction between soil N and soil P (*p*  < 0.05; Table 2) had significant effects on *N*area. The combined relative importance of the soil treatments was 16.8% (Table 2 and Figure 4). The relative importance of photosynthetic pathway and N fixation was 7% and 4%, respectively (1%; Table 2 and Figure 4).

**Table 2.** Regression coefficients and relative importance for linear mixed effects model with *N*area as the dependent variable and soil treatment variables, predicted nitrogen components, and species characteristics as fixed effects.\*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **df** | **Slope** | ***p*** | **Relative Importance** |
| ln *N*photo | 1 | 0.520 ± 0.091 | **< 0.001** | 23.25% |
| ln *N*structure | 1 | 0.952 ± 0.009 | **< 0.001** | 37.10% |
| Soil N | 1 | - | **< 0.001** | 5.23% |
| Soil P | 1 | - | 0.719 | 3.82% |
| Soil K+µ | 1 | - | 0.506 | 3.53% |
| N fixer | 1 | - | **< 0.001** | 4.42% |
| Photosynthetic pathway (C3/C4) | 1 | - | **< 0.001** | 8.93% |
| Soil N x Soil P | 1 | - | *0.003* | 1.28% |
| Soil N x Soil K+µ | 1 | - | 0.596 | 1.19% |
| Soil P x Soil K+µ | 1 | - | 0.803 | 1.11% |
| Soil N x Soil P x Soil K+µ | 1 | - | 0.981 | 0.60% |

\* P-values < 0.05 are bolded and < 0.1 are italicized. Sample size is 1,812. Key: *N*photo = leaf N used for photosynthesis, *N*structure = leaf N in structural tissue.

**Chart, scatter chart

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**Figure 3.** (A) Relationship between *N*area and *N*structure (*p* < 0.001; Table 2) under ambient and added soil N treatments. (B) Relationship between *N*area and *N*photo (*p* < 0.001; Table 2) under ambient and added soil N treatments.

**Table

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**Figure 4.** Treemap of relative importance for linear mixed effects model with *N*area as the dependent variable and soil treatment variables, predicted nitrogen components, and species characteristics as fixed effects. Boxes are sized proportionally to the relative importance of each variable in the model (Table 2).

**Response of aboveground biomass to the soil treatments**

AGB was significantly impacted by all three soil amendment treatments separately (soil N: *p* < 0.001, soil P: *p* < 0.001, and soil K+µ: *p* = 0.098) as well as the interaction between soil N and soil K+µ (*p* = 0.019; Table 3 and Figure 5A). On average, added soil N increased AGB by 4.1%, but post-hoc Tukey’s test revealed that this stimulation was only significant in added K+µ plots, where added soil N increased AGB by 5.5% (Figure 5).

**Table 3.** Results for linear mixed effects model with aboveground biomass (AGB; g) as the dependent variable and soil treatment variables as independent categorical variables.\*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **df** | **χ2** | ***p*** |
| Soil N | 1 | 49.657 | **< 0.001** |
| Soil P | 1 | 37.955 | **< 0.001** |
| Soil K+µ | 1 | 2.739 | *0.098* |
| Soil N x Soil P | 1 | 0.010 | 0.919 |
| Soil N x Soil K+µ | 1 | 5.532 | **0.019** |
| Soil P x Soil K+µ | 1 | 0.378 | 0.538 |
| Soil N x Soil P x Soil K+µ | 1 | 0.087 | 0.767 |

\* P-values < 0.05 are bolded and < 0.1 are italicized. Sample size is 763. Key: df = degrees of freedom.

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**Figure 5.** (A) Aboveground biomass (AGB) under ambient soil N and added soil N in each soil P x soil K+µ treatment. Lettering…

**Effect of soil nitrogen supply in relation to community nitrogen demand on *N*area**

There was a significant interaction between the response of *M*area to added soil N (∆*M*area; %) and the response of AGB to added soil N (∆AGB; %) on the response of *N*area to added soil N (∆*N*area; %) (*p* = 0.035; Table 5). This interaction indicated that the slope of the relationship between ∆*N*area and ∆AGB decreased as ∆*M*area increased, such that the slope was indistinguishable from 0 at low ∆*M*area, but became significantly negative at high ∆*M*area (Table 6 and Figure 6). Our post-hoc tests indicated that negative ∆*N*area-∆AGB slopes were at least marginally (*p* <0.1) negative at ∆*M*area values greater than or equal to zero. ∆*N*area also increased with increasing ∆*M*area (*p* < 0.001; Table 5 and Figure 6). Together, these responses revealed that the soil N had the greatest stimulation on *N*area when plants increased allocation to *M*area, but did not increase AGB (Figure 6).

∆*N*area was significantly impacted by soil P (*p* = 0.005), where ∆*N*area was greater in ambient P (16.7%) than the added P (7.0%) plots, confirming results from the first model presented above.

**Table 5.** Anova results for the linear mixed effects model with ∆*N*area as the dependent variable and ∆AGB, ∆χ, and ∆*M*area as independent variables.\*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **df** | **χ2** | ***p*** |
| ∆AGB | 1 | 1.900 | 0.168 |
| Soil P | 1 | 7.957 | **0.005** |
| Soil K+µ | 1 | 0.191 | 0.662 |
| C3/C4 | 1 | 0.175 | 0.676 |
| N fixer | 1 | 2.036 | 0.154 |
| ∆LMA | 1 | 92.327 | **< 0.001** |
| ∆χ | 1 | 0.572 | 0.450 |
| Soil P x Soil K+µ | 1 | 0.515 | 0.473 |
| ∆AGB x ∆LMA | 1 | 4.423 | **0.035** |
| ∆AGB x ∆χ | 1 | 0.094 | 0.759 |
| ∆LMA x ∆χ | 1 | 1.196 | 0.274 |
| ∆AGB x ∆LMA x ∆χ | 1 | 2.539 | 0.111 |

\* P-values < 0.05 are bolded and < 0.1 are italicized. Sample size is 310. Key: χ = ratio of intercellular to extracellular CO2 concentration, *M*area = leaf mass per leaf area.

**Table 6.** Results from Tukey’s HSD test for comparisons of means and slopes of the ∆*N*arealinear mixed effects model.\*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Slope** | **Intercept** | ***p*** |
| ∆*M*area = -25 | 0.003 ± 0.023 | -5.5 ± 6.02 | 0.913 |
| ∆*M*area = 0 | -0.027 ± 0.016 | 17.2 ± 5.69 | *0.091* |
| ∆*M*area = 25 | -0.056 ± 0.028 | 39.9 ± 6.29 | **0.048** |

\* P-values < 0.05 are bolded and < 0.1 are italicized.

**Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated**

Figure 6. Relationship between ∆*N*area and ∆AGB at high LMA (*p* = 0.048; red line), medium LMA (*p* = 0.091; purple line), and low LMA (*p* = 0.913; blue line; Table 6). Solid lines represent a significant relationship and dashed lines represent a non-significant relationship.

**Discussion**