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Early Decomposition of Ashe Juniper (*Juniperus ashei*) Wood in Open and Shaded Habitat

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Abstract

Grasslands of the Edwards Plateau of central Texas have been extensively altered through woody species encroachment, particularly as a result of increasing abundance of the invasive native shrub, Ashe juniper (*Juniperus ashei*). Over the last several decades there has been widespread mechanical removal of the species. The wood is often left in place to decompose, either mulched or not. Where the wood is left to decompose might have some bearing on its rate of decomposition. This study was conducted to determine the rates of Ashe juniper wood decomposition as a function of open vs. shaded habitat and the potential effect of wood decomposition on nutrient inputs into this system. Wood decomposition in this arid ecosystem might be expected to occur more rapidly in shaded habitat where the moisture and temperature regimes would be more favorable for wood-decomposing fungi. On the other hand, during times of low rainfall we might expect wood to decompose more rapidly when exposed to high levels of ultraviolet radiation. In our experiment, we found no difference between open and shaded treatments. Wood biomass loss occurred rapidly over the first 3–4 mo of the study and slowed for the remaining 2 yr. Wood carbon (C) increased only slightly (7.3%), but nitrogen (N) increased significantly (176%). As a consequence of changes in wood nitrogen, C:N decreased through time. Results of this study suggest that the wood decomposition process in open and shaded habitats in this arid ecosystem during a time of low rainfall do not differ. Our findings also suggest that land managers aiming to establish native species following felling of Ashe juniper should do so in the first year when nutrient release from decomposing wood is the highest.

Resumen

Los pastizales del Edwards Plateau del centro de Texas han sido extensamente alterados a través de la invasión de especies leñosas, particularmente como resultado del incremento en abundancia de un arbusto nativo invasor, el *Juniperus ashei*. En el transcurso de las últimas décadas la remoción mecánica de esta especie ha sido generalizada. La madera es frecuentemente dejada en el lugar para su descomposición ya sea intacta o en forma de mulching. El sitio en el que se deja la madera podría influenciar la tasa de descomposición. Este estudio determinó las tasas de descomposición de la madera de *J. ashei* en función de hábitats abiertos o sombreados y el efecto de la descomposición sobre los aportes de nutrientes al sistema. En este ecosistema árido, es de esperar que la descomposición de la madera ocurra más rápido en lugares sombreados en los que los regímenes de humedad y temperatura serían más favorables para los hongos que descomponen la madera. Por otra parte, durante periodos de baja precipitación es de esperar que la madera se descomponga a tasas más altas cuando se la expone a niveles altos de radiación UV. En nuestro experimento, no se encontraron diferencias entre sitios abiertos y sombreados. La pérdida de biomasa de madera ocurrió rápidamente durante los primeros tres a cuatro meses del estudio, y decreció durante los dos años restantes. El carbono (C) en la madera solo aumentó levemente (7.3%) mientras que el nitrógeno (N) aumentó significativamente (176%). Como consecuencia de los cambios en el nitrógeno de la madera, la relación C:N decreció a través del tiempo. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que en este ecosistema árido el proceso de descomposición de la madera en hábitats abiertos y sombreados durante periodos de baja precipitación no es diferente. Nuestros resultados también sugieren que quienes manejen los pastizales con el objetivo de establecer especies nativas luego de la remoción de *J. ashei* deberían hacerlo durante el primer año cuando la liberación de nutrientes de la madera en descomposición es máxima.

Key Words: Edwards Plateau, nutrient cycling, woody encroachment

INTRODUCTION

Anthropogenic disturbance has driven woody species encroachment of arid and semiarid grassland ecosystems (Van Auken 2000), resulting in more recalcitrant, lower nutrient cycling ecosystems, with higher biomass in aboveground lignified

material (Boddy and Watkinson 1995). Grasslands of the Edwards Plateau of central Texas in the United States have been highly modified due to encroachment of the native *Juniperus ashei* J. Buchholz (Ashe juniper or “Cedar”; Cupressaceae; Van Auken et al. 1980). Ashe juniper is a dioecious, evergreen shrub frequently found throughout the Edwards Plateau in monotypic woodlands known as “cedar breaks” (Riskind and Diamond 1988). Wildlife biologists highlight the importance of conserving some mature Ashe juniper as nesting habitat for the endangered golden-cheeked warbler (J. Neal, Biologist, City of San Antonio Natural Areas, personal communication, March 2008). Nonetheless, the

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