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Pathways of Grazing Effects on Soil Organic Carbon and Nitrogen

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Abstract

Grazing modifies the structure and function of ecosystems, affecting soil organic carbon (SOC) storage. Although grazing effects on some ecosystem attributes have been thoroughly reviewed, current literature on grazing effects on SOC needs to be synthesized. Our objective was to synthesize the effects of grazing on SOC stocks in grasslands, establishing the major mechanistic pathways involved. Additionally, and because of its importance for carbon (C) biogeochemistry, we discuss the controls of soil organic nitrogen (N) stocks. We reviewed articles analyzing grazing effects on soil organic matter (SOM) stocks by comparing grazed vs. ungrazed sites, including 67 paired comparisons. SOC increased, decreased, or remained unchanged under contrasting grazing conditions across temperature and precipitation gradients, which suggests that grazing influences the factors that control SOC accumulation in a complex way. However, our review also revealed some general patterns such as 1) root contents (a primary control of SOC formation) were higher in grazed than in their ungrazed counterparts at the driest and wettest sites, but were lower at sites with intermediate precipitation (~400 mm to 850 mm); 2) SOM C:N ratios frequently increased under grazing conditions, which suggests potential N limitations for SOM formation under grazing; and 3) bulk density either increased or did not change in grazed sites. Nearly all sites located in the intermediate precipitation range showed decreases or no changes in SOC. We grouped previously proposed mechanisms of grazing control over SOC into three major pathways that can operate simultaneously: 1) changes in net primary production (*NPP pathway*), 2) changes in nitrogen stocks (*nitrogen pathway*), and 3) changes in organic matter decomposition (*decomposition pathway*). The relative importance of the three pathways may generate variable responses of SOC to grazing. Our conceptual model suggests that rangeland productivity and soil carbon sequestration can be simultaneously increased by management practices aimed at increasing N retention at the landscape level.

Resumen

El pastoreo modifica la estructura y el funcionamiento de los ecosistemas, alterando las reservas de C orgánico del suelo (COS). A pesar de que existen revisiones de los efectos del pastoreo sobre la productividad primaria o los cambios en la composición de especies, no se dispone de una síntesis detallada de los efectos del pastoreo sobre el COS. A su vez, discutiremos los controles de las reservas de nitrógeno orgánico del suelo, debido a su importancia en la regulación del ciclo del C. El objetivo de este trabajo fue sintetizar los efectos del pastoreo sobre el COS y analizar los mecanismos a través de los cuales opera. Realizamos una revisión de los artículos que evalúan, mediante comparaciones de sitios pastoreados y no pastoreados, los efectos del pastoreo sobre el COS, incluyendo 67 comparaciones pareadas. La revisión bibliográfica mostró que: 1) el C en las raíces y otros órganos subterráneos fue mayor en zonas pastoreadas que en las no pastoreadas en sitios secos y húmedos, pero menor en sitios con precipitaciones intermedias; 2) el pastoreo aumentó la relación C:N del suelo, sugiriendo limitaciones de N para la formación de materia orgánica del suelo; y 3) la densidad aparente del suelo fue mayor o igual en los sitios pastoreados, respecto a los no pastoreados. Los efectos del pastoreo sobre el COS operarían a través de tres vías: 1) por medio de cambios en la productividad primaria neta, 2) a través de alteraciones en los stocks de NOS, o 3) aumentando la descomposición del COS. El pastoreo afectaría el COS a través de los tres mecanismos simultáneamente, y la respuesta del COS al pastoreo dependerá de la importancia relativa de cada uno. Finalmente, el modelo conceptual propuesto sugiere que la productividad de la biomasa y la cantidad de carbono almacenado en el suelo podrían aumentarse simultáneamente mediante manejos que apunten a incrementar la retención de N a escala de paisaje.

Key Words: belowground production, C:N, herbivores, nitrogen, reactive nitrogen, roots, soil organic carbon

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