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Poplar Afforestation Effects on Grassland Structure and Composition in the Flooding Pampas

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Abstract

Tree establishment can have multiple effects on the production and biodiversity of rangelands. In mixed (C3–C4) grasslands, winter deciduous trees could favor cold-season species in the understory, improving forage availability in the most critical time of the year. Yet, they could also promote local extinctions and invasions, risking native biodiversity. We evaluate the effect of poplar planting on the structure, composition, and diversity of native grasslands in the Flooding Pampas of Argentina using a network of 9 pairs of adjacent nonafforested and afforested stands (age: 23–25 years, density: 625–1 111 plants ha⁻¹) located in different topographic positions. Phytosociological surveys, basal cover measurements, and tree volume were performed at all stands. Live plant cover was 42% lower under poplars ($P < 0.05$). Litter cover followed an opposite trend leaving bare soil proportions unchanged with afforestation. Afforested stands had a higher proportion of C3 species compared with nonafforested ones. Little evidence of local extinctions or invasions with afforestation was found. Poplar understories had significantly higher nonnative species cover but similar numbers and lower species diversity (Shannon–Weaver index) yet similar species richness when compared with their nonafforested counterparts. Beyond the diversification of ranch outputs, deciduous tree plantations in the Flooding Pampas can offer a good forage source in their understory that complements nonafforested natural grasslands in quality and seasonality.

Resumen

El establecimiento de árboles puede tener múltiples efectos sobre la producción y la biodiversidad de pastizales. En praderas mixtas (C3–C4), los árboles deciduos podrían favorecer a las especies invernales del estrato herbáceo, mejorando la disponibilidad de forraje en el período más crítico del año. Sin embargo, los árboles también podrían promover extinciones e invasiones locales, amenazando la biodiversidad del sistema. Evaluamos los efectos de la forestación con álamos sobre la estructura, composición y diversidad florística de pastizales naturales en la Pampa Inundable de Argentina utilizando una red de nueve sitios apareados integrados por stands adyacentes de pastizal no forestado y forestado (edad: 23–25 años, densidad: 625–1 111 plantas ha⁻¹) ubicados en diferentes posiciones topográficas. Se llevaron a cabo censos fitosociológicos, medidas de cobertura basal, y del volumen de árboles en todos los sitios. La cobertura de plantas vivas fue 42% menor bajo los álamos ($P < 0.05$). La cobertura de broza mostró una tendencia opuesta, manteniendo la proporción de suelo desnudo sin cambios tras la forestación. Los stands forestados tuvieron una mayor proporción de especies C3 comparados con los no forestados. Se encontraron pocos indicios de extinciones o invasiones locales asociados a la forestación. Las comunidades herbáceas bajo álamos tuvieron significativamente mayor cobertura de especies no nativas pero igual riqueza de las mismas comparadas con las situaciones no forestadas. La diversidad total de especies vegetales fue menor (índice de Shannon–Weaver) en los stands forestados pero la riqueza fue similar en ambas situaciones. Más allá de la diversificación de la producción, las plantaciones de especies forestales deciduas en la Pampa Inundable pueden albergar una buena fuente de forraje en su sotobosque, capaz de complementar a la de los pastizales naturales no forestados en calidad y estacionalidad.

Key Words: Argentina, C3/C4 species, cottonwood, *Populus deltoides*, silvopastoral systems, temperate grassland

INTRODUCTION

In silvopastoral systems, pastures, domestic herbivores, and tree crops are combined to enhance production per unit of area and promote the diversification of ranch outputs and risks (Von Maydell 1985; Pearson and Ison 1997). The complementary use

of resources between herbaceous and woody plant components in these systems is a key aspect of their success and can be favored through the selection of trees and grasses with decoupled phenologies (Ong and Leakey 1999; Rouspard et al. 1999). We suggest that this temporal decoupling may develop spontaneously when mixed temperate grasslands are afforested with winter-deciduous trees. A higher temporal overlap and competition between trees and warm season grasses could indirectly favor the cold season components of the grasslands, leading to their dominance in the herbaceous canopy. To evaluate this hypothesis we characterize the structural and floristic changes taking place in native grasslands of the Flooding Pampa that have been afforested with poplars.

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