Effects of native and invasive Prosopis species on topsoil physiochemical properties in an arid riparian forest of Hormozgan Province, Iran Postprint

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Date: 2022-11-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Biological invasions can alter soil properties within their introduced range, leading to impacts on ecosystem services, ecosystem functions, and biodiversity. To better understand the impacts of biological invasions on soil, we compared topsoil physicochemical properties at sites with invasive alien tree species (Prosopis juliflora), native tree species (Prosopis cineraria, Acacia tortilis, and Acacia ehrenbergiana), and mixed tree species in Hormozgan Province, Iran in May 2018. In this study, we collected 40 soil samples at a depth of 10 cm under single tree species, including P. juliflora, P. cineraria, A. tortilis, and A. ehrenbergiana, as well as under mixed tree species. The results showed that organic matter, moisture, potassium, calcium, nitrogen, and magnesium in topsoil at sites with A. tortilis and A. ehrenbergiana growing in combination with P. cineraria were higher than that at sites where P. juliflora was present ($P<0.05$). Sodium at sites with A. tortilis and A. ehrenbergiana growing in combination with P. cineraria and P. juliflora was lower as compared to that at sites with just A. tortilis and A. ehrenbergiana. Electrical conductivity was lower at sites with A. tortilis and A. ehrenbergiana growing in combination with P. cineraria, and it was higher at sites with mixed Acacia and P. juliflora trees. Based on the generally more positive effect of native Acacia and P. cineraria on topsoil physicochemical properties as compared to P. juliflora, afforestation with native tree species is preferable for soil restoration. In addition, due to the negative effects of P. juliflora on soil properties, P. juliflora spread should be better managed.

Full Text

Preamble

Effects of Native and Invasive Prosopis Species on Topsoil Physicochemical Properties in an Arid Riparian Forest of Hormozgan

Province, Iran

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Abstract: Biological invasions can alter soil properties within their introduced range, leading to impacts on ecosystem services, ecosystem functions, and biodiversity. To better understand the impacts of biological invasions on soil, we compared topsoil physicochemical properties at sites with invasive alien tree species (*Prosopis juliflora*), native tree species (*Prosopis cineraria*, *Acacia tortilis*, and *Acacia ehrenbergiana*), and mixed tree species in Hormozgan Province, Iran in May 2018. In this study, we collected 40 soil samples at a depth of 10 cm under single tree species, including *P. juliflora*, *P. cineraria*, *A. tortilis*, and *A. ehrenbergiana*, as well as under mixed tree species. The results showed that organic matter, moisture, potassium, calcium, nitrogen, and magnesium in topsoil at sites with *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana* growing in combination with *P. cineraria* were higher than that at sites where *P. juliflora* was present ($P<0.05$). Sodium at sites with *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana* growing in combination with *P. cineraria* and *P. juliflora* was lower as compared to that at sites with just *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana*. Electrical conductivity was lower at sites with *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana* growing in combination with *P. cineraria*, and it was higher at sites with mixed *Acacia* and *P. juliflora* trees. Based on the generally more positive effect of native *Acacia* and *P. cineraria* on topsoil physicochemical properties as compared to *P. juliflora*, afforestation with native tree species is preferable for soil restoration. In addition, due to the negative effects of *P. juliflora* on soil properties, *P. juliflora* spread should be better managed.

Keywords: *Prosopis juliflora*; *Prosopis cineraria*; tree species; invasion; topsoil physicochemical properties; Iran

Citation: Maryam MOSLEHI JOUYBARI, Asgahr BIJANI, Hossien PARVARESH, Ross SHACKLETON, Akram AHMADI. 2022. Effects of native and invasive Prosopis species on topsoil physicochemical properties in an arid riparian forest of Hormozgan Province, Iran. *Journal of Arid Land*, 14(10): 1099–1108. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40333-022-0104-y

1 Introduction

Invasive alien species can negatively impact biodiversity, ecosystem services, and people's livelihoods and well-being [?, ?, ?, ?]. They can act as predators, competitors, parasites, and disease transmitters, alter local biotic and abiotic environments, and become major ecosystem engineers in their new habitats [?, ?, ?], which can destabilize local environmental systems [?, ?, ?]. A key impact of invasive alien plant species on local soil is that they can alter soil chemistry and composition through mechanisms such as allelopathy, which in turn can affect native plant growth and development [?, ?, ?]. To better manage biological invasions, there needs to be sufficient scientific evidence of the impacts of introduced species on their recipient ecosystems to guide and justify decision-making.

Trees from the genus *Prosopis* have been introduced to many regions around the world [?, ?], and subsequent invasions have had significant effects on humans, biodiversity, and local environments (including soil). With regard to soil, it is known that *Prosopis juliflora* has allelopathic effects and can impact adjacent plant communities [?, ?, ?]. Phenolic compounds and other substances such as tryptophan found in leaf and root extracts can induce these negative allelopathic effects. Allelopathic effects also influence cation exchange in soil [?, ?, ?]. *P. juliflora* can also affect soil chemistry in other ways. In fact, one of the motivating factors for introducing *P. juliflora* is that it can increase soil carbon and nitrogen content [?, ?] as well as other nutrients such as potassium and organic matter. However, *P. juliflora* invasions can also decrease calcium, magnesium, and sodium concentrations in soil [?, ?]. Furthermore, *P. juliflora* can alter soil microbial communities [?, ?]. These major changes in soil chemistry, properties, and biological communities may be one of the key factors influencing the prevalence of *P. juliflora* and its spread in desert areas where it has been introduced [?, ?].

In addition to impacts on soil, *Prosopis* invasions produce dense and impenetrable stands, affecting native biodiversity [?, ?, ?]. The invasions also drastically reduce the growth of palatable forage species, which has negative implications for pastoralists' livelihoods [?, ?, ?]. *P. juliflora* invasions can also impact numerous other ecosystem services, such as water supply [?, ?, ?].

P. juliflora was introduced to Iran and other parts of the Middle East, where it has become invasive and co-exists with the native *Prosopis cineraria* and other local tree species [?, ?, ?]. In Iran, *P. juliflora* was introduced to mitigate desertification and serve as a wood resource; despite its ecological role and some positive effects, it is now considered a threatening invasive tree in many ecosystems in the country [?, ?, ?]. Despite the well-known negative effects of

P. juliflora, the tree is still recommended for land restoration programs in Asia [**?**, **?**], and more evidence of the effects of this tree on local desert systems is needed to guide decision-making.

The Sahara-Sindian forests of Iran are a highly fragile ecosystem, and undesired changes can drastically alter vegetation succession paths after disturbances, with implications for local pastoralists. In particular, the introduction, utilization, and dissemination of *P. juliflora* pose a major threat to local arid forest systems. However, there is limited scientific evidence on the effects of *P. juliflora* invasions in Iran, and further information is needed to guide robust decision-making regarding the use and management of invasive trees and the selection of tree species for restoration in arid landscapes. Therefore, the aim of this study was to better understand the impacts of *P. juliflora* invasions on soil properties. To this end, we compared topsoil physicochemical properties at sites with invasive alien tree species (*P. juliflora*), native tree species (*P. cineraria*, *Acacia tortilis*, and *Acacia ehrenbergiana*), and mixed tree species in Hormozgan Province, Iran.

2.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in an arid riparian forest (26°31 34 N, 57°06 13 E) located 75 km southeast of Minab City, Hormozgan Province, Iran. The area covers 980 hm^2 and ranges between 0 to 100 m a.s.l. The annual average temperature is 28°C and the average annual precipitation is 226 mm. The study area has a sandy soil texture and extremely light soil. The flora of the study area is categorized as Sahara-Sindi, and common tree species include *A. tortilis* and *P. cineraria*, with *Acacia oerfota*, *Ziziphus spina-christi*, and *A. ehrenbergiana* being less common. Annual and perennial grasses, such as *Cymbopogon olivieri*, *Chrysopogon aucheri*, *Cenchrus ciliaris*, *Pennisetum divisum*, and *Taverniera* sp., dominate the lower stratum. The increasingly invasive *P. juliflora* is also becoming common in the area [**?**, **?**].

2.2 Site Selection

After scoping the area in May 2018, we selected a 5-hm^2 site that included all focal tree species for the study, including *P. juliflora*, *P. cineraria*, *A. tortilis*, and *A. ehrenbergiana*. Specifically, we chose five sites with a canopy diameter greater than 2 m for each of the four target tree species (with no other tree species nearby). In addition, sites with the combinations of *P. cineraria* and *A. tortilis*, *P. cineraria* and *A. ehrenbergiana*, *P. juliflora* and *A. tortilis*, and *P. juliflora* and *A. ehrenbergiana* (canopy diameter greater than 2 m) were also selected. The distance between sampling sites ranged from 14 to 59 m.

2.3 Soil Sampling

At the five sites, for each of the four individual tree species (*P. juliflora*, *P. cineraria*, *A. tortilis*, and *A. ehrenbergiana*), we collected four soil samples at a depth of 10 cm in four directions under the tree canopy, including north, east, south, and west (Fig. 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). The four samples were then mixed to obtain one composite soil sample from each individual site. A total of 20 samples were obtained from the sites with single tree species (Fig. 1a). For the sites with mixed tree species (i.e., *P. cineraria* growing in combination with *A. tortilis*, *P. cineraria* growing in combination with *A. ehrenbergiana*, *P. juliflora* growing in combination with *A. tortilis*, and *P. juliflora* growing in combination with *A. ehrenbergiana*), five sites were randomly selected for each pair [**?**, **?**], and samples were obtained at a depth of 10 cm in four directions (north, east, south, and west) where the two tree canopies overlapped (Fig. 1b). The four samples were mixed to obtain one composite soil sample for each sample site. A total of 20 samples were obtained from the sites with mixed tree species (Fig. 1b). Finally, 40 soil samples were used for analysis.

Fig. 1 The schematic images of the soil sampling method at the sites with single tree species (a) and the sites with mixed tree species (b). N, north; E, east; S, south; W, west.

2.4 Measurement of Soil Physicochemical Properties

The collected soil samples were sieved through a 2-mm mesh and transferred to the laboratory for measurement of soil physicochemical properties. Soil acidity, soil organic matter, electrical conductivity (EC), exchangeable cations (sodium, potassium, calcium, nitrogen, and magnesium), and soil moisture were analyzed. Soil acidity was determined using the potentiometric method. Soil solutions were prepared with soil and distilled water at a ratio of 1:20, and soil pH was measured 24 h later with a pH meter (HM30V, TOA Electronics Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) [**?**, **?**]. Soil organic matter content was determined using dry oxidation after burning the soil samples at 430°C. EC was determined on a saturation paste extract [**?**, **?**]. Exchangeable cations were calculated by ammonium acetate extraction method and quantified by an atomic absorption spectrophotometer (UNICAM 919, Unicam Ltd., Cambridge, UK) [**?**, **?**]. Soil moisture was calculated by measuring the difference between wet weight and dry weight (placed in an oven at 105°C for 24 h) [**?**, **?**].

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS 24.0 statistical software. One-way analysis of variance ($P<0.05$) was used to evaluate differences in topsoil physicochemical properties among individual tree species, including *P. cineraria*, *P. juliflora*, *A. tortilis*, and *A. ehrenbergiana*, and mixed tree species with combinations of these tree species. Duncan's multiple range test was used to compare group means ($P<0.05$). The normality of the data distribution and homogeneity of variance were evaluated by Shapiro-Wilk test and Levene's test, respectively.

3 Results

3.1 Effects of *Prosopis cineraria*, *Prosopis juliflora*, and *Acacia tortilis* as well as the Combinations of These Tree Species on Topsoil Physicochemical Properties

Soil organic matter, soil moisture, soil acidity, and EC differed significantly among sites with single tree species and those with *P. juliflora* growing in combination with *A. tortilis* (Table 1). Soil organic matter was higher at sites with only *A. tortilis* (1.36%) and *P. cineraria* (1.27%) and those with *P. cineraria* growing in combination with *A. tortilis* (1.46%), as compared to those with only *P. juliflora* (1.07%) and *P. juliflora* growing in combination with *A. tortilis* (1.03%). Similar to soil organic matter, soil moisture was highest at sites with *P. cineraria* growing in combination with *A. tortilis* (14.97%), followed by sites with single *P. cineraria* and *A. tortilis*; it was lower at sites with single *P. juliflora* and *P. juliflora* growing in combination with *A. tortilis* (6.50%). Similarly, sites with single *P. juliflora* had lower soil acidity than those with native tree species. EC showed a different trend from other soil physicochemical properties. It was highest at sites with only *P. juliflora* (2.23 S/cm), as opposed to sites with native tree species.

Table 1 Comparison of the effects of *Prosopis cineraria*, *Prosopis juliflora*, and *Acacia tortilis* as well as the combinations of these tree species on topsoil physicochemical properties

<table>
<tr><th>Topsoil physicochemical property</th><th><i>P. cineraria</i></th><th><i>P. juliflora</i></th><th><i>A. tortilis</i></th><th><i>P. cineraria</i> × <i>A. tortilis</i></th><th><i>P. juliflora</i> × <i>A. tortilis</i></th></tr>
<tr><td>Soil organic matter (%)</td><td colspan="5">1.27$±0.10ab|1.07±0.31b|1.36±0.12ab|1.46±0.35a|1.03±0.11b||Soilmoisture(±4.28a|8.26±2.4</td></tr>
</table>

Note: Different lowercase letters indicate significant differences among tree species (P<0.05). Mean±SD.

Exchangeable cations (sodium, potassium, calcium, and magnesium) at sites with *A. tortilis*, *P. cineraria*, and *P. juliflora* differed from those at sites with mixed tree species (Fig. 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]). Sodium (172.7 mg/L) and calcium (209.6 mg/L) concentrations were significantly higher at sites with only *P. juliflora* as compared to sites with mixed tree species (Fig. 2a and c). Calcium was significantly lower at sites with *P. juliflora* growing in combination with *A. tortilis* (144.2 mg/L), which was similar for potassium (211.7 mg/L) and magnesium (45.22 mg/L). Magnesium was highest at sites with only *A. tortilis* (86.96 mg/L) as well as at sites with *A. tortilis* growing in combination with *P. cineraria* (88.34 mg/L) (Fig. 2d). Nitrogen at sites with only invasive *P. juliflora* was significantly lower than that at sites with native tree species (Fig. 2e). Sites with *A. tortilis* growing in combination with *P. cineraria* had the highest nitrogen (0.71 g/kg).

Fig. 2 Effects of *Prosopis cineraria*, *Prosopis juliflora*, and *Acacia tortilis* as well as the combinations of these tree species on topsoil exchangeable cations. (a) sodium; (b) potassium; (c) calcium; (d) magnesium; (e) nitrogen. Different lowercase letters indicate significant differences among tree species (P<0.05). Bars are standard deviations.

3.2 Effects of *P. cineraria*, *P. juliflora*, and *Acacia ehrenbergiana* as well as the Combinations of These Tree Species on Topsoil Physicochemical Properties

There was no significant difference in soil organic matter among sites with different tree species (Table 2). Soil moisture was significantly higher at sites with only *P. cineraria* (13.52%) and at sites with *P. cineraria* growing in combination with *A. ehrenbergiana* (13.66%) as compared to sites with only *P. juliflora* (8.26%) and *P. juliflora* growing in combination with *A. ehrenbergiana* (8.03%). The highest soil acidity was observed at sites with only *A. ehrenbergiana* (7.60), which was significantly higher than that at sites with only *P. juliflora* (Table 2). The highest EC was observed at sites with only *P. juliflora* (2.23), which was significantly higher than that at sites with native tree species.

Table 2 Comparison of the effects of *P. cineraria*, *P. juliflora*, and *Acacia ehrenbergiana* as well as the combinations of these tree species on topsoil physicochemical properties

<table>
<tr><th>Topsoil physicochemical property</th><th><i>P. cineraria</i></th><th><i>P. juliflora</i></th><th><i>A. ehrenbergiana</i></th><th><i>P. cineraria</i> × <i>A. ehrenbergiana</i></th><th><i>P. juliflora</i> × <i>A. ehrenbergiana</i></th></tr>
<tr><td>Soil organic matter (%)</td><td colspan="5">1.27$±0.10$a$|1.07±0.31$a$|1.02±0.19$a$|1.30±0.22$a$|1.02±0.24$a$||$Soilmoisture$(±4.28$a$|8.26±2.41$b</td></tr>
</table>

Note: Different lowercase letters indicate significant differences among tree species (P<0.05). Mean±SD.

Exchangeable cations (sodium, potassium, calcium, and magnesium) were significantly different between sites with invasive *P. juliflora* and native tree species (Fig. 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]). Sodium (172.7 mg/L) and calcium (209.6 mg/L) were significantly higher at sites with only *P. juliflora* compared to sites with native tree species (Fig. 3a and c). In contrast, magnesium was significantly lower at sites with *P. juliflora* as compared to sites with single native tree species (Fig. 3d). Potassium was highest at sites with *P. cineraria* growing in combination with *A. ehrenbergiana*, and lowest at sites with only *P. juliflora* and only *A. ehrenbergiana* (Fig. 3b). Nitrogen was highest at sites with only *P. cineraria* (0.61 g/kg) and at sites with *P. cineraria* growing in combination with *A. ehrenbergiana* (0.63 g/kg), and lower at sites with only *P. juliflora* (Fig. 3e).

Fig. 3 Effects of *P. cineraria*, *P. juliflora*, and *Acacia ehrenbergiana* as well as the combinations of these tree species on topsoil exchangeable cations. (a) sodium; (b) potassium; (c) calcium; (d) magnesium; (e) nitrogen. Different lowercase letters indicate significant differences among tree species ($P<0.05$). Bars mean standard deviation.

4 Discussion

P. juliflora is a notorious global invader with multiple negative effects [**?**, **?**], and despite this, the planting of this tree species is still promoted in many arid lands for improving soils and restoring degraded ecosystems [**?**, **?**], including in Iran. To provide evidence to guide better decision-making, we assessed the effects of *P. juliflora* on topsoil physicochemical properties in comparison to native tree species in Iran. The results showed that native tree species generally had similar or even better effects on topsoil physicochemical properties compared to *P. juliflora*, suggesting that promoting native tree species for soil restoration in arid lands of Iran might be better than using non-native tree species. This is in line with the findings and suggestions of Sharifian et al. [**?**].

More specifically, we found that soil organic matter at sites with single native tree species (*A. tortilis* and *P. cineraria*) and combinations of native tree species (*P. cineraria* growing in combination with *A. tortilis*) was higher than at sites with only *P. juliflora* or *P. juliflora* in combination with native tree species. These results are consistent with the findings of Goel et al. [**?**], Kahi et al. [**?**], and Kaur et al. [**?**], who also found differences in soil organic matter between *P. juliflora* and native tree species. Annual litter fall from trees constitutes the most important source of organic matter in soil, but this is also affected by additional factors such as decomposition under microbial activity, mineralization, the release of exchangeable cations, and soil moisture and oxygen [**?**, **?**, **?**]. These factors might explain the differences found in this study.

Soil moisture at sites with *A. tortilis*, *A. ehrenbergiana*, and *P. cineraria* was higher than at sites with *P. juliflora*. These results are consistent with those found by Guevara et al. [**?**]. *P. juliflora* has extensive horizontal and vertical root systems that can absorb more moisture around itself, limiting the topsoil moisture available to other plants, which is less common in other tree species. Furthermore, *P. juliflora* is known to have a higher density of rhizobia and associated arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi than *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana* [**?**, **?**], which allows *P. juliflora* to obtain more water and thus leads to drier soil. Invasive *Prosopis glandulosa* in South Africa also has higher groundwater uptake (due to its larger root network and higher density) than native tree species, which may lead to increased mortality of native trees where they co-exist with *P. glandulosa* [**?**, **?**, **?**]. This alteration to local soil moisture by *P. juliflora*, compounded with climate change, may lead to greater impacts on water availability in this region in the future [**?**, **?**].

Similarly, we found that sites with *P. juliflora* had lower soil acidity than those with native tree species, which is consistent with the findings of Goel and Behl [?], Garg and Singh [?], Bavaraja et al. [?], and Shitanda et al. [?]. Soil acidity is an important factor in plant nutrient utilization, which increases the solubility of soil nutrients and the surface uptake of elements. A decrease in soil acidity can therefore be considered a major ecological and ecosystem impact [?, ?]. It is likely that *P. juliflora* has inhibitory compounds in its litter and secretes organic acids from its roots [?, ?, ?], which can affect soil acidity. Most of the compounds in the topsoil are phenolic compounds, which are the result of allelopathy caused by *P. juliflora.* These compounds lead to the decrease in soil acidity at sites with *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana* in combination with *P. juliflora* [?, ?, ?]. In Sahara-Sindi forests, species prefer alkaline soil, so the reduction of soil acidity by *P. juliflora* may lead to a decrease in native plant species growth. This could have significant impacts on native plant communities and biodiversity in this region over the long term [?, ?].

We found that EC in the topsoil at sites with *P. juliflora* was higher than those with *P. cineraria*, *A. tortilis*, and *A. ehrenbergiana*, which is similar to the findings of Abbasi et al. [?] and Moradi et al. [?]. Humus plays an important role in enhancing EC and is one of the reasons for its increase under tree canopies [?, ?]. Organic matter acts as a sponge, increasing the secretion of soil microorganism gels and soil moisture retention potential [?, ?]. The higher soil moisture produced by soil organic material makes the soil more active. These factors can cause the release of inorganic ions, increasing the solute concentration and consequently leading to an increase in the EC of soil. Trees also influence the amount of EC by absorbing solutes from their roots and bringing them to the surface [?, ?]. It is therefore likely that the strong rooting system of *P. juliflora* can lead to an increase in soil EC compared to *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana* [?, ?].

Sodium and calcium concentrations were generally higher in soil under the canopy of invasive *P. juliflora.* Conversely, magnesium, nitrogen, and potassium were generally lower at sites with *P. juliflora* compared to sites with just native *Acacia* and *Prosopis.* This is similar to the findings of Garg and Singh [?], Bavaraja et al. [?], and Kahi [?], who also found differences in topsoil exchangeable cations at sites with invasive *P. juliflora.* It should be noted that the combination of cations and metal ions in the soil accelerates the inhibitory effect of allelopathy [?, ?]. This might be the main reason for the generally lower levels of calcium, potassium, and magnesium at sites with *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana* in combination with *P. juliflora* as opposed to sites with only *Acacia* species.

5 Conclusions

Our results highlighted that *P. juliflora* invasions can alter topsoil physicochemical properties, which may have knock-on negative effects on native plant communities. The results showed that soil organic matter, soil moisture, and exchangeable cations (potassium, calcium, nitrogen, and magnesium) were generally higher at sites with native tree species (*A. tortilis*, *A. ehrenbergiana*, and *P. cineraria*) compared to sites with *P. juliflora*. In addition, we also found that sites with *P. juliflora* led to an increase in EC and a decrease in soil acidity, which could affect the growth of native plants and the stability of local ecosystems in the long run. This suggests that caution is needed when promoting and using known invasive trees such as *P. juliflora* for restoration initiatives, and that the use of native tree species may be more suitable for building resilient ecosystems in the long term. More research is needed on which native tree species are most suitable for restoration programs in arid areas.

Acknowledgements

The authors appreciate the Bandar Abbas Branch, Islamic Azad University and Hormozgan Agricultural and Natural Resources Research and Education Center, Agricultural Research, Education and Extension Organization (AREEO), Iran.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.