# Characterizing ammonia oxidizing communities under legumes and non-legume plants in the Sonoran Desert

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## INTRODUCTION

- Nitrogen (N) from the atmosphere can be converted to ammonium ($NH_4^+$) by the process of nitrogen fixation.
- Microorganisms that oxidize ammonia are called ammonia oxidizers, they possess specialized enzymes, such as ammonia monooxygenases[1, 2].
- Ammonia oxidation studies enhance the expansion of the knowledge about the relationship between ammonia oxidizer communities and the environment.
- N-fixation, which occurs via N-fixing bacteria in legume root nodules, free-living microorganisms in soil, and mineralization increases $NH_4^+$ in soil[1].
- Increased $NH_4^+$ in soil is expected to lead to higher ammonia oxidation rates.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

**What is the difference between the function of ammonia oxidizing microbial communities under legume and non-legume plants?**

## HYPOTHESIS

An elevated concentration of nitrogen in the soil signifies higher ammonia oxidizer abundance and ammonia oxidizing rates.

- Due to the additional $NH_4^+$ available from N fixation, we expected the nitrogen fertilized soil under non-legume (non-legume + N) to have the highest ammonia oxidation rates, followed by the legume soil.

Fig. 1

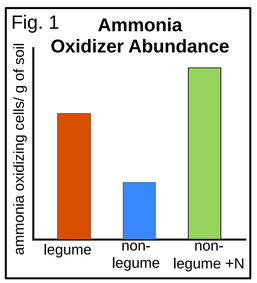
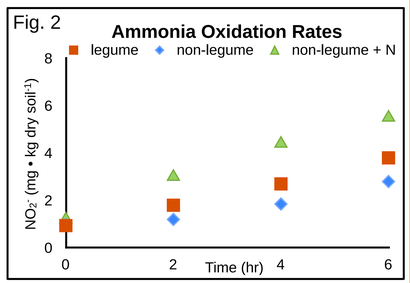



Fig. 2




- Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 represent hypothesized patterns.

## METHODS

- Samples were collected at South Mountain Park-East (SME) in Phoenix, AZ (Fig. 3).
- Soil samples were collected at a depth of 5cm from below the canopy of treatment plants.
- The treatments are: control mesquite (legume; Fig. 4), control ambrosia (non-legume; Fig. 5), and nitrogen fertilized ambrosia (non-legume + N).
- Nitrogen fertilized soil receives 60kg of N/hectare/year[1].
- Nitrification potential[2] was used to analyze the rate at which the ammonia oxidizing bacteria oxidized $NH_4^+$ into nitrite ($NO_2^-$) at 0, 2, 4, 6 hrs (Fig. 6).

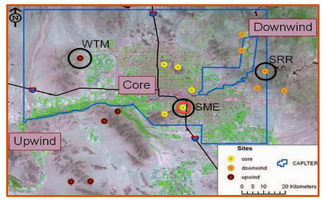
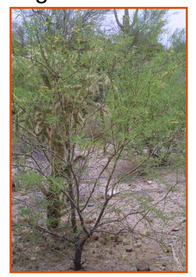



Fig. 3. Map of soil sampling location.

Fig. 4[3]

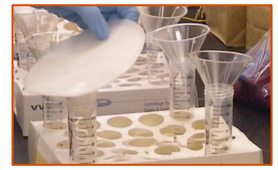


Legume:
*Prosopis glandulosa*
(mesquite)

Non-legume:
*Ambrosia deltoidea*
(triangle bur ragweed)

Fig. 5[3]

Fig.6



Nitrification potential extract filtration

## RESULTS

***Are ammonia oxidation rates higher in non-legume + N than in the legume treatments?***

- Rates of ammonia oxidation are not significantly different between legume, non-legume, and non-legume + N.
- Soils under legumes appear to have higher mean rates of ammonia oxidation than non-legume soil. (n=5)

Fig. 7

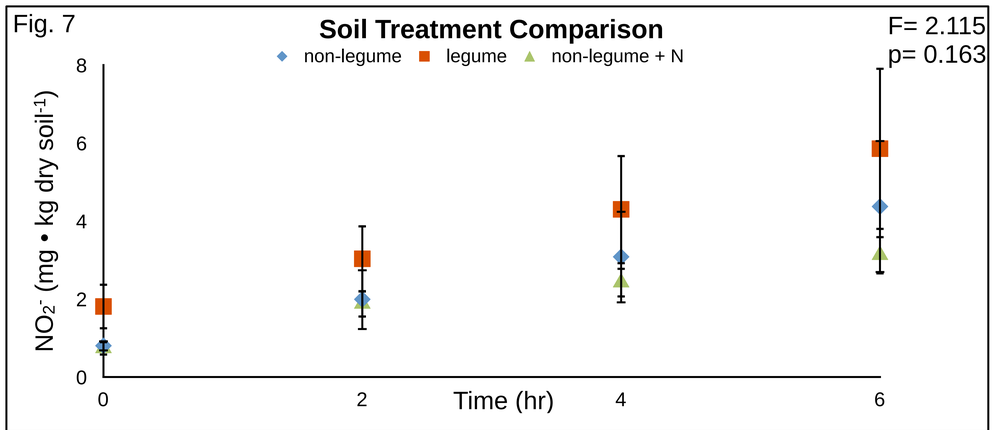



Fig. 7

- The amount of $NO_2^-$ (milligrams of $NO_2^-$ per kilogram of soil) that is accumulated from ammonia oxidation in the given time points.

## DISCUSSION

- Non-legume + N (N-fertilized soil) results were lower than expected.
- Even though N-fertilized soils are treated with significant amounts of nitrogen, they are not as fertile as soil under legumes.
- After soils are fertilized;
  - Fate 1: N is not retained and it does not accumulate, hence, microorganisms are not able to utilize it.
  - Fate 2: Even though it is fertilized, ammonia oxidizing communities have not adapted to fertilized environment, therefore not reacting to the nitrogen.
  - Fate 3: Ammonia oxidizers adapt to the new conditions. However, we did not see this response after sampling in only one location.
- Soil under legumes provide a fertility spot for microorganisms, where nitrogen fertilization does not compare to a natural soil.

## PROSPECTIVE EXPERIMENTS

- We will collect new samples from three locations to account for the heterogeneity across different soil types. Fig. 3 black circles indicate the two new locations: White Tank Mountain (WTM) and Salt River Recreation (SRR).
- We will choose sites that only vary in presence of legume and supplemental N.
- Molecular detection techniques will be used to characterize the microbial communities in these soils.

**REFERENCES**

1.Hall, S.J. et al. (2009). *Ecosystems*. 12.

2.Norton, J.M, Stark, J.M. (2011). *Methods in Enzymology*. 486.

3.Fig. 4 & 5: cas.vanderbilt.edu & fireflyforest.net

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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