Soil disturbance by soil animals on a topoclimatic gradient

Yosef Steinberger a, b, Stanislav Pen-Mouratov a, Walter G. Whitford b

a Faculty of Life Sciences, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 52900, Israel
b USDA-ARS Aridland Experimental Range, P.O. Box 20003, MSC 1188, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003, USA

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Abstract

We measured the area and volume of soil disturbed by various groups of animals at three sites on a topoclimatic gradient in the Judean Desert, Israel. Both the area and volume of soil disturbed by animals correlated with the cumulative precipitation of the winter rain season. Rodent activity accounted for most of the soil disturbance at all sites except for site 2001, when the volume of soil transported to the surface by ants in the construction of nest chambers accounted for most of the soil volume moved at the intermediate rainfall site. The aggregate stability of soil ejected from animal excavation was significantly lower than that of undisturbed soil during and immediately following the winter rain season, but not during the following dry seasons. The quantities of soil moved by ants in the Judean Desert were comparable to quantities moved by ants in the Chihuahuan Desert of North America.

1. Introduction

One of the most important challenges in the ecology of desert ecosystems is understanding the relationship between rainfall (either individual rain events or seasonal rainfall) and ecosystem processes. Most desert ecosystem research has been based on the pulse-reserve conceptual model (7). This model emphasizes the importance of rainfall as a trigger that initiates a pulse of biological activity. The duration of the pulse should be a function of the amount and distribution of rainfall. This relationship should be examined for a variety of ecosystem processes and taxa topoclimatic gradients. One successful approach was to examine the relationship between rainfall as a trigger and its role in maintaining a pulse of biological activity (8,9).

Soil disturbance by animals is an important ecosystem process that was recognized as early as the nineteenth century (2). There is rich literature on soil disturbance by a variety of animal species (5,6,11,12). Virtually all the studies cited in these reviews were anecdotal and most of the studies focused on a single ecosystem process or soil property that was affected by the species studied. To evaluate the importance of faunal pedurbation in desert ecosystems, it is necessary to consider all types of soil disturbance by the assemblage of animals living in the ecosystem. We designed an experiment of faunal pedurbation on a topoclimatic gradient to evaluate the relationship between pulse duration and amount of rainfall, and to evaluate the contribution of soil disturbances to soil properties and ecosystem processes.

2. Methods

The study sites were located in the Judean Desert in Israel, which is a rain-shadow desert occupying the east-facing slopes of the Judean Mountains. The eastern border of this desert is the Dead Sea, which is approximately 394 m below sea level. The mean annual rainfall decreases on a west-to-east gradient from approximately 620 mm in the west to less...
Study sites and site characteristics of the Arava Desert topoclimatic gradient in Israel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study site</th>
<th>Elevation (m)</th>
<th>Slope angle and aspect</th>
<th>Mean annual rainfall (cm)</th>
<th>Mean annual temperature (°C)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maale Adumin</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>15° S facing</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>15°C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitzpe Ramon</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>10° N facing</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>17°C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalia</td>
<td>-50</td>
<td>12° S facing</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>20°C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

than 100 mm at the easternmost point. Study plots were established at three sites along this topoclimatic gradient (Table 1).

The frequency of occurrence, abundance and turnover (occurrence of pits which we filled with organic matter and then covered by soil) of faunal perturbations was measured in permanent plots randomly located at each site. Three circular plots of 10 m in radius were established at permanent center plots. All measurements described were of both soil disturbances. Soil disturbances were identified and assigned to the appropriate species or season. For each disturbance, we recorded depth, diameter of opening, height and average diameter of ejected soil mound.

We measured differences in aggregate stability of ejected soil, and disturbed soil was compared with soil less than 1 m from the disturbance. Aggregate stability was measured by a modified wet sieving technique[3].

Organic matter collected in soil pits was sampled by collecting the cores from animal-produced soil pits in areas adjacent to the study plots. The collections were made four times during the year: in August during the summer dry season, in January and February during the winter rain season, and in June at the end of the winter wet season. Because of the unstable political situation in the western region of the Judean Desert, we were unable to visit our study plots at Maale Adumin after February 2001. Within each study plot, all pits were tracked to determine the density and species composition of plants that germinated.

The data from each site on the topoclimatic gradient in Israel was evaluated by Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance of biological activities along the study period.

3. Results

Total area of soil disturbed by animals was not related directly to the average annual rainfall at the site but there was a relationship between average annual rainfall and volume of soil ejected from soil disturbances (Fig. 1). At the intermediate rainfall site, there was significantly less soil disturbance in February, the mid-point in the winter rain season, than in August and June. During the rainless summer months (Fig. 1). In February 2001, there was high pit cover of animal and no soil disturbances were visible. At the Maale Adumin site, the field measurements were made approximately two weeks after a 47.5 mm rainfall. At the most arid site, soil disturbance was significantly greater during August at

![Fig. 1. Total area of disturbance v. soil volume of soil ejected at the different sites during the study period.](image)

the beginning of the study than during the following summer or winter (P < 0.05, Fig. 1). At the densest site on the gradient, root excavations and burrows accounted for most of the soil disturbance (Table 2). At the intermediate rainfall site, most soil disturbances were due to invertebrates contributing only a small fraction to the total area of soil disturbed (Table 2).

The largest differences in soil aggregate stability classes were during and immediately following the rainy season (February and June) (Table 3). There were larger differences in aggregate stability of undisturbed soil compared to soil ejected from excavations by animals at the dense site than at the other sites.

4. Discussion

Although there was a relationship between average annual rainfall and soil disturbance by animals, that relationship was not the same for area of soil disturbed and
Table 2

The percentage of contribution to the soil area of soil disturbed by animals reported by several groups, for each month and site: 1 in Kali—average annual rainfall of 110 mm; 2 in Mishur Ashmun—average annual rainfall of 260 mm; and 3 in Mada Ashmun—average annual rainfall of 450 mm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Comparison of aggregate stability classes of soil exposed to exposure by rodents or are not mound. *Undisturbed soil, eject: soil ejected from excavations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Kali</th>
<th>Mishur</th>
<th>Mada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acknowledgements

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References


quantity of soil ejected by animals. Rodents prospected most of the soil disturbance at the sites and redress excavations have relatively small surface area compared to depth. This accounts for the differences in surface area disturbance and soil ejected from disturbances. In the Chihuahuan Desert, rodent activity accounted for most of the soil surface area disturbed by animals [4] and soil disturbance patterns were similar to those reported here. Most of the seasonal differences were a function of the activity patterns of ants and spiders in the two deserts.

Because ants transport soil from depths of 1 to 2 m or more, soil removed from construction of suricate galleries and chambers in nobs is a more important contributor to pedogenesis and soil profile development than rodent activity. At the intermediate rainfall sites, ants transported an average of 924.5 kg/m² of soil from the soil profile to the soil surface. This quantity of soil transport is slightly greater than the largest quantities of soil moved by ants in the Chihuahuan Desert [21.3-38.5 kg/m²] [11]. Annual average precipitation at the Chihuahuan Desert is 25 cm with 60% at summer rainfall compared with the Mishur Ashmun 200 cm winter rainfall. Maximum soil movement by ants at the Kali site was 0.58 kg/m². The small amount of soil turnover by ants at the other Jeden Desert site supports the relationship between rainfall, productivity and density of ant colonies [11].

This study documented a relationship between differences in aggregate stability of soil ejected by annual excavations and undisturbed soil and rainfall. Soil aggregate formation requires growth of soil microbes in the surface soil [10]. During the long dry period (April to October), there is unusually high mortality of bacteria and fungi on the surface soils of the Jeden Desert. When initial winter rains stimulate growth of the soil microflora, soil aggregators can reform. Soil that is excavated by animals is exposed to sunlight and desiccation, which cause mortality of soil microflora. This accounts for the significantly lower aggregate stability of the eroded soil compared to the undisturbed soil. Reduced aggregate stability of ejected soil makes the soil volume more susceptible to wind and water erosion and contributes to spreading subsoil transported by animals across the landscape.


