Meetings

Improving collaborations between empiricists and modelers to advance grassland community dynamics in ecosystem models

Climate change, increasing atmospheric CO₂, and land use change have altered biogeochemical and hydrologic cycles world-wide, with grassland systems being particularly vulnerable to resulting vegetation shifts (Komatsu et al., 2019). Therefore, incorporating plant community dynamics into ecosystem models is critical for accurate forecasting of ecosystem responses to global change (Levine, 2016). Process-based ecosystem models, which simulate the biogeochemical transfers of mass and energy among biota, the subsurface, and atmosphere, require representation of dynamic composition of organisms within ecosystems. For example, these models simulate leaf and plant-level characteristics, such as electron transport rate and allometry of carbon (C) allocation, to predict how net primary productivity and other ecosystem processes respond to abiotic drivers. These models are particularly useful in scaling from organismal to ecosystem levels but are still underdeveloped in their ability to capture community change, especially in grassland ecosystems. To represent compositional changes, these models must simulate competition, mortality, establishment, and reproduction of plant populations within communities. Yet, current ecosystem modeling approaches to forecast plant community change have derived from studies of forested systems and are either too coarse to capture fine-scale community dynamics (e.g. dynamic global vegetation models (DGVMs)) or too complex to be used at large spatial scales (e.g. forest gap models).

Community ecology often relies on statistical models describing population dynamics or the abundance/frequency of individual species to identify linkages between community dynamics and ecosystem processes. For example, there is a vast literature linking species richness to ecosystem function using statistical models (Hooper et al., 2005; Cardinale et al., 2006). Yet, statistical models are rarely able to scale leaf and plant-level characteristics to ecosystem levels owing to data constraints and the fact that they do not incorporate process knowledge. Process-based ecosystem models are thus needed to predict whole ecosystem function, especially under novel environmental conditions. Yet, as already mentioned, these models often struggle to link plant characteristics to local-scale community dynamics.

To better represent community dynamics in ecosystem models, scientists must identify: (1) how physiological and morphological traits of plant species or functional types, and their diversity, can drive changes in community structure (Fig. 1, arrow 1); and (2) how community dynamics alter the distribution of traits across the entire community (Fig. 1, arrow 2); leading to (3) improved ability to simulate shifts in community structure and their concurrent effects on ecosystem functioning (Fig. 1, arrows 6 and 7). Additionally, ecosystem processes, as forced by abiotic drivers, should alter the competitive balance in community dynamics that are sensitive to the coupling between their physiological/morphological traits and the abiotic drivers (Fig. 1, grey arrow). Integration across organismal, community, and ecosystem ecology, as well as between empirical and process-based modeling approaches, is necessary to address this issue. Toward this end, we (K. Komatsu, M. Avolio, K. Wilcox) led a working group funded by the Long-Term Ecological Research Network from 2017 to 2019, where we gathered scientists from diverse fields (C2E Consortium) to identify challenges and formulate directions for better integration of community dynamics in land surface models (LSMs).

Modelers and empiricists have similar goals

Whether simulating ecosystem processes or conducting field studies, our goal in ecology is often the same: to provide predictions of ecological states and processes under a variety of environmental conditions. Many studies of community dynamics do not collect the data necessary to parameterize process-based models, and models do not represent many of the processes that empiricists consider fundamental. This is often due to limited communication between process-based modelers (hereafter ‘modelers’) and ‘empiricists’ who collect biotic and abiotic data, where both modelers and empiricists lack familiarity with the needs of the other’s approaches. Though there are existing channels of communication, there is room for more discussion between modelers and empiricists focusing on population, community, and ecosystem dynamics. During our meetings, participant modelers and empiricists agreed on three existing knowledge gaps that should be prioritized by the scientific community to better represent critical processes controlling ecosystem dynamics: (1) resource competition; (2) community and population dynamics; and (3) grassland plant processes. To fill these knowledge gaps, empiricists should seek input from modelers when designing experiments, and modelers should consult empiricists when altering or developing models. In other words, let’s talk more.

Resource dynamics in dynamic global vegetation models

Current DGVMs are based on the integration of physical (e.g. light penetration through plant canopies, water transport across soil layers), biophysical (coupling of photosynthesis and transpiration),
and biogeochemical (e.g. allocation of C to growth, uptake of available nutrients by plant roots) processes (Fig. 1, arrows 5 and 6). Whereas leaf biophysics are currently well-modeled in most ecosystem models, scaling up from the leaf to the canopy is challenging. Accounting for demography, plasticity, and other resource dynamics (e.g. nitrogen and water) and their trade-offs is less well developed. For example, stress-tolerant species can outcompete fast-growth species under low resources (sensu R* theory, Tilman, 1982; Fig. 1, arrow 1). Although this phenomenon would be represented in the demographic component of many models if the process-based physics of C uptake, respiration, and allocation to growth were perfectly described for different species, even the most advanced demographic components of current models struggle to show R* -type dynamics due to insufficient data to parameterize the differences between plant types. To enable ecosystem models to better represent plant diversity in resource use and competitive trade-offs, empiricists need to provide modelers with additional data on species characteristics (e.g. demography, physiology, morphology) that define the strategies and trade-offs among plant traits and differential sensitivity to core environmental variables (e.g. soil moisture, temperature) at different temporal scales: sub-diurnally for sensitivity of biota to environmental drivers, daily to seasonally for growth and senescence timing and rates, and interannually for community change. These data will allow for models to better represent differential species responses to environmental drivers in their acquisition of resources, and how this translates to community structure and ecosystem function.

**Community dynamics in models**

Plant community dynamics can have strong impacts on ecosystem function, which has been demonstrated both theoretically (Smith *et al.*, 2009; Langley & Hungate, 2014; Polley *et al.*, 2014) and empirically (Isbell *et al.*, 2013; Reich & Hobbie, 2013; Avolio *et al.*, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2015; Xu *et al.*, 2015; Fig. 1, arrow 4). Ecosystem function can be altered when community dynamics result in a system having a different collection of plant physiological and morphological traits. Thus, incorporation of community dynamics related to species identities and their traits into process-based models is critical for accurately forecasting ecosystem processes.

The need to incorporate community dynamics into process-based models has been recognized by the scientific community, and increasing efforts are being made to achieve this goal for LSM-coupled DGVMs (Moorcroft, 2006; Evans, 2012; Scheiter *et al.*, 2013; Levine, 2016). Ecosystem models represent community change in a few different ways: DGVMs define suites of traits associated with broad functional groups; gap models assign traits to individual organisms to allow species and cohorts to compete for resources; and trait-based models allow traits to vary plastically with...
environmental conditions without explicit representation of species (Fisher et al., 2018). Each of these methods provides unique strengths and challenges. For example, community shifts within functional groups (e.g. shift in dominance from one C₃ grass to another C₄ grass) can have large impacts on ecosystem function (Wilcox et al., 2016), which would not be captured by DGVMs; gap-based models do well to represent cohort competition for light after disturbance, yet they struggle to represent competition for resources such as water and nutrients (Powell et al., 2013); and global or regional-scale trait–environmental relationships used within trait-based approaches often make assumptions about space-for-time substitutions, which can be problematic (Burke et al., 1997). Thus, better understanding and representation of mechanisms behind intra-functional group dynamics within ecosystem models is important to improve accuracy of temporal projections under chronically altered environmental scenarios. This requires expanding the number of species or functional groups represented within ecosystem models and a better parameterization of these species/groups.

Grasslands are not well represented in land surface models

Grasslands, in addition to driving the evolution and rise of hominids (Bobe, 2004; Uno et al., 2016), cover c. 40% of the Earth’s ice-free terrestrial surface (White et al., 2000) and provide vital ecosystem services, such as forage production, C sequestration, and agriculture (Sala & Paruelo, 1997). Yet, many ecosystem models were initially designed based on forest dynamics and so have difficulty representing important dynamics in grasslands, including C₃ vs C₄ competition, the distribution of mixed grass–tree systems, and intra-functional group competition. Some reasons for these difficulties are variable grassland phenology and grass allometry, and inadequate representation of key drivers of grassland dynamics, such as fire and grazing.

Through our discussions, we identified some important considerations for overcoming current limitations of representing grasslands in ecosystem models. First, grasses and trees have fundamentally different growth forms, and models need to move beyond current approaches that incorporate grasses as either miniature trees or as a green carpet. Instead, ecosystem models should represent the unique attributes of grasses, including strong water limitation, fast tissue turnover rates, multiple aboveground stems from one belowground organ system, and a high prevalence of vegetative reproduction. These are major distinctions important for the C balance and total biomass of grasses. Additionally, moving beyond a ‘green carpet’ approach may be important for accurate representation of surface roughness in grasslands. Going forward, vegetation demographic models (Moorcroft et al., 2001) are emerging as an approach to solve the potential pitfalls of scaling from individuals to the ecosystem level, as well as from ecosystem patches to the global scale. This approach could be particularly applicable to grasslands, where the number of individuals per square meter makes modeling interactions among individuals computationally unreasonable. Second, the way that fire – a key driver of grassland form and function (Bond & Keeley, 2005) – is currently modeled in LSMs has also been built with forested ecosystems in mind, leading to poor representation of this driver for grassland ecosystems. For example, although fire can result in mortality in forest systems, thus ‘resetting’ the ecosystem, fire in grasslands often does not kill individuals, and many dominant grassland species are promoted by frequent fire (Hulbert, 1988).

Leveraging existing coordinated experiments

One exciting opportunity to realize better understanding and forecasts of community-to-ecosystem linkages is to leverage existing coordinated experiments. Coordinated experiments implement the same experimental design at many sites around the globe, typically involving teams of investigators at each site. Coordination with these existing teams could allow for the measurement of necessary environmental and species physiological/morphological trait data around the globe, which may then be incorporated into models. Examples of such coordinated networks include the Nutrient Network (NutNet; Borer et al., 2014), Drought Network (DroughtNet), and Forest Geological Observatory (ForestGEO; Anderson-Teixeira et al., 2015). For these networks to be leveraged, prioritization of measurements is needed to prevent overloading of network investigators, as these experiments have been designed to limit time investment by any one investigator. Alternatively, the network can be leveraged without relying on many individual investigators if outside funding is available for a small team to make many measurements across many sites. By highlighting the common goals of empiricists and modelers for investigators within coordinated networks, and developing protocols for field measurements of key model parameters, the goal of improved understanding of how community dynamics drive ecosystem processes can be made more achievable.

Conclusions

Working together, empiricists and modelers can overcome some of the limitations of isolated empirical studies (relatively short timescale, small spatial extent, costs of measuring everything required to mechanistically explain responses) and modeling efforts (unreasonable/simplistic assumptions, limited representation of environmental heterogeneity and ecological complexity). This may be done using data collected from empirical studies for model initialization and parameterization, using updated models to quantitatively test and develop mechanistic ecological hypotheses, and to help explain the processes causing observed community dynamics. We have identified three core areas where both empiricists and modelers could work together to improve understanding of community and ecosystem processes: first, trait diversity in resource use and trade-offs; second, better representation of mechanisms controlling community dynamics; and third, more accurate representation of key grassland processes. Achieving these core goals will require an iterative process where empiricists and modelers work together to develop hypotheses about community dynamics and ecosystem processes, design experiments to generate data to test these hypotheses, and incorporate these data
into ecosystem models for evaluation, which can lead to development of new hypotheses. These types of collaborative research cycles will allow scientists to greatly increase understanding and forecasting capabilities of ecological patterns and processes at broad scales.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for funding to K. (La Pierre) Komatsu, M. Avolio, and K. Wilcox for the Introducing plant community and ecosystem responses to chronic global change drivers: toward an explanation of patterns and improved global predictions Synthesis Group from the National Science Foundation under grant DEB no. 1545288, through the Long Term Ecological Research Network Communications Office, National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis, University of California–Santa Barbara. ORNL is managed by UT-Battelle, LLC, for the DOE under contract DE-AC05-1008 000R22725.

Author contributions

KRW, KJK and MLA conceived of and organized the meeting. All co-authors attended the meetings. KRW, KJK and MLA wrote the manuscript, with editorial contributions from all other co-authors.

ORCID

Meghan L. Avolio https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2649-9159
Kimberly J. Komatsu https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7056-4547
Kevin R. Wilcox https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6829-1148

Kevin R. Wilcox1*, Kimberly J. Komatsu2†, Meghan L. Avolio3& & C2E Consortium‡

1Department of Ecosystem Science and Management, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY 82071, USA;
2Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, Edgewater, MD 21037, USA;
3Department of Plantary Sciences, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD 21218, USA

(*Author for correspondence: email kevin.wilcox@uwoyo.edu)

References


†Formerly La Pierre.
‡C2E Consortium present in Appendix A1.


**Appendix A1**

C2E Consortium:
William D. Bowman (Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309, USA), Ethan E. Butler (Department of Forest Resources, University of Minnesota, St Paul, MN 55108, USA), Scott L. Collins (Department of Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131 USA), Jeffrey S. Dukes (Department of Forestry and Natural Resources and Department of Biological Sciences, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA), Rosie Fisher (National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, CO 80305, USA), Trevor F. Keenan (Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720 USA; Climate and Ecosystem Science Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Lab., Berkeley, CA 94720, USA), Nancy Y. Kiang (NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, New York, NY 10025, USA), Alan K. Knapp (Department of Biology and Graduate Degree Program in Ecology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA), Sally E. Koerner (Department of Biology, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27402, USA), Lara M. Kueppers (Energy and Resources Group, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA; Climate and Ecosystem Sciences Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA), Nathan P. Lemoine (Department of Biological Sciences, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI 53233, USA; Department of Zoology, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI 53233, USA), Guopeng Liang (Department of Biological Sciences, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86001, USA), Michael E. Loik (Department of Environmental Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA), Yiqi Luo (Department of Biological Sciences, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86001, USA), Ben Poulter (NASA GSFC, Biospheric Sciences Lab., Greenbelt, MD 20771, USA), Peter B. Reich (Department of Forest Resources, University of Minnesota, St Paul, MN 55108, USA; Hawkesbury Institute for the Environment, Western Sydney University, Penrith New South Wales 2753, Australia), Katherine M. Renwick (US Forest Service Northern Region, Missoula, MT 59801, USA), Melinda D. Smith (Department of Biology and Graduate Degree Program in Ecology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA), Andrew Tredennick (Western EcoSystems Technology, Inc., Laramie, WY 82072, USA), Anthony P. Walker (Environmental Sciences Division and Climate Change Science Institute, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge, TN 37831, USA), Ensheng Weng (Center for Climate Systems Research, Columbia University, New York, NY 10025, USA; NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, 2880 Broadway, New York, NY 10025, USA).

**Key words:** community ecology, dynamic global vegetation model (DGVM), ecosystem function, gap model, grassland dynamics, process-based models, statistical models, trait-based models.