SHORT COMMUNICATION

# Grassland fire effect on soil organic carbon reservoirs in a semiarid environment

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## Abstract

The aim of this work was to investigate the effect of an experimental fire, used for grassland management, on soil organic carbon (SOC) stocks. The study was carried out on *Hyparrhenia hirta (L.)* Stapf (*Hh*) grassland and *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* (Desf.) T. Durand & Schinz (*Am*) grasslands, located in the north of Sicily. Soil samples were collected at 0-5 cm before and after experimental fire and SOC was measured. During grassland fire soil surface temperature was monitored. Biomass of both grasses was analyzed in order to determine dry weight and its chemical composition. The results showed that SOC varied significantly with vegetation type, while it is not affected in the short period by grassland fire. *Am* grassland stored more SOC compared with *Hh* grassland thanks to lower content in biomass of labile carbon pool. No significant difference was observed in SOC before and after fire which could be caused by several factors: first, in both grassland types the measured soil temperature during fire was low due to thin litter layers; second, in semiarid environment higher mineralization rate results in lower soil carbon labile pool; and third, the SOC stored in the finest soil fractions, physically protected, is not affected by fire.

Keywords: SOC, experimental fire, grassland, Mediterranean environment

## Introduction

Fire is part of the Earth System and has been for millennia a tool for many societies (Pyne, 2001). Fire is regarded as an active ecological agent able to mobilize nutrients and restore soil fertility (Snyman, 2003) but, also as a primary cause of soil degradation due to nutrients loss for volatilization, leaching and erosion, especially in severe wildfires. It is, in fact, considered a major disturbance in many ecosystems, which lead to important shifts in the soil properties and vegetation (Certini, 2005; Granged et al., 2011a). One of the most common effects of fire is the alteration in composition and amount of soil organic matter (Knicker, 2007, Terefe et al., 2008). Several studies recorded a decrease (Fernández et al., 1997; Novara et al., 2011) in soil organic carbon (SOC) after fire, while results of other studies showed no significantly changing or even increase of previous SOC content (Kavdir et al., 2005). These discrepancies occur due to the large amount of controlling factors and therefore the effect of fire is highly variable in space and time. Among these factors, fire intensity, fire severity, fire regimen, type of burned vegetation, connectivity, distribution of fuel on soil surface, type of ash produced and dispersion, topography, soil properties, aspect, regional climate and meteorological conditions in the immediate period after the fire play a key role to determine SOC alteration and accumulation in soils (Certini, 2005; Pereira et al. 2010; Pereira et al., 2013).

In semiarid areas fire is one of the common management tools used by shepherds to enhance pasture regrowth. In fact, the recovery of vegetation canopy after fire in the Mediterranean area can be quite rapid due to adaption of plant communities to the disturbances caused by fire as observed in several studies (Trabaud, 1981; Oba, 1990; Woube, 1998; Barberis et al., 2003; Pausas and Verdú 2005). It is known, moreover, that fire is considered an important factor for arid and semiarid grasslands because it avoids invasion of trees and shrubs with implications on soil carbon storage (Briggs et al., 2005). Despite the importance of fire on grassland ecosystems (Bond et al., 2005), its impact on SOC is not well understood in the immediate period after the fire in the Mediterranean grasslands (Snyman, 2003). The aim of this work is to quantify SOC stock change as a result of an experimental fire of two of the most widespread types of Mediterranean grasslands (Brullo et al., 2010; Díez-Garretas and Asensi, 1999) and, therefore, to establish if this practice could be used as a sustainably management tool for grazing recovery (Álvarez-Martínez et al., 2013).

## Materials and Methods

The field studies were carried out in the province of Palermo, Sicily (Italy) (350 m a.s.l.) (Fig. 1). Local soil type is an *Eutric Cambisol* according to WRB (WRB, 2006) with sand and clay contents of 18% and 46%, respectively. The climate is Mediterranean, with mean annual rainfall of 580 mm and yearly average temperature of 16 °C.

An experimental fire was conducted on July and September 2009 on five (replicas) delimited square areas (50×50 cm) in two different grassland types, dominated by *Hyparrhenia hirta (L.)* Stapf (Hh) and *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus (Desf.)* T. Durand & Schinz (Am). Each sampling square was about 2m distant from the neighbor square. In order to simulate a natural wildfire, burning was allowed to take its natural course until it extinguished itself. The fire was generated with a match, starting from leeward in each plot. Soil surface temperature during the burning was measured using a thermocouple system (type K Inconel 600 insulated). In each selected area three soil samples were collected at 0-5 cm depth before and immediately after fire. On three one meter square in both grasslands (dominated by *Hyparrhenia hirta* or *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus*) all plants were cut, oven dried for 3-4 days at 60-65 °C, and weighted. SOC content was measured using a CHN-Elemental Analyzer. For the δ13C analysis, an EA-IRMS (elemental analyzer isotope ratio mass spectrometry) was used. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Vienna, distribute IAEA-CH-6 as a reference standard material. The results of the isotope analysis are expressed as a δ value (‰) relative to the international Pee Dee Belemnite standard as follows:

$$\delta(‰) = \frac{Rs - Rst}{Rst} * 1000$$

where δ = δ 13C, R = 13C/12C, s = sample, and st = standard.

Dry biomass weight and its chemical composition (ADF acid detergent fiber, NDF neutral detergent fiber, Cellulose, Hemicellulose, Lignin, Ash) were determined on three 0.5 $m^2$ square area subsamples for each grassland types.

Data analysis was conducted using the SAS statistical package (SAS Inst., 2002). Normal distribution of data was verified previously to statistical data comparisons and analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Significant differences were considered at a $p<0.05$.

## Results and discussion

SOC ranged from 20.3 to 37.0g $kg^{-1}$ and from 15.4 to 32.5 g $kg^{-1}$ before and after experimental fire, respectively, in soil covered by *Hh*, and from 32.5 to 38.2 g $kg^{-1}$ and from 38.3 to 49.1 g $kg^{-1}$ before and after experimental fire, respectively, in soil covered by *Am*. The experimental fire did not have significant differences in SOC in both grassland types (Fig. 2). Similarly to SOC results, $\delta^{13}C$ was not affected significantly by fire. The average by time of $\delta^{13}C$ values measured in *Hh* grassland were -25.418 ± 0.25‰ and -25.161 ± 0.40‰ in soil sampled before and after fire, respectively; while in *Am* grassland were -26.873 ± 0.16‰ and -26.98 ± 0.31‰ before and after fire, respectively. Our results are in agreement with similar observations reported by other authors (Granged et al., 2011b) who found no change in SOC content before and after prescribed fire. The experimental fire has a moderate fire severity, similar to prescribed fire described by Granged et al. (2011b). The time of combustion was 12±2 minutes and 7±1 minutes for *Hh* and *Am*, respectively (Fig. 3). The maximum temperature measured at soil surface was around 480 °C in both grasslands. Temperatures over 200 °C persisted for 5 minutes and 3 minutes for *Hh* and *Am*, respectively. The burning time and intensity was low due to low amount of fuel in both grasslands. Mediterranean environmental conditions involve high organic matter mineralization rates and, thus, negligible amounts of litter biomass stock. The low temperatures registered during low severity fires does not have important effects on SOC stock (Úbeda et al., 2005). The loss of organic carbon by burning can occur even at relatively low temperatures such as 200 °C, but total combustion is only observed at high temperatures 450-500°C (De Bano et al., 1998). When comparing the two grasslands, the SOC amount and the effect of fire on SOC stock was contrasted. The lower SOC content was measured under *Hh* grassland, which also recorded the lower biomass yield. The above ground biomass estimated is 4.76 Mg $ha^{-1}$ and 11.60 Mg $ha^{-1}$ of dry matter for *Hh* and *Am* grassland, respectively.

Even if the SOC change before and after fire was not statistically significant, after fire SOC content decreased of 11.5% in *Hh* and increased of 27.9 % in *Am* grassland. The increase of SOC after fire could occur due to external inputs of charred material and ash, as commonly is observed in low severity fires due fuel and organic matter incomplete combustion. In particular, the burned material returns to soil as particles smaller than 2 mm in the form of ash, which are mixed in the top horizon, and which cause a net increase of SOC content (González-Pérez et al., 2004). The reason for the slight SOC increase after fire only in *Am* grassland may depend on different characteristics of the two considered grasses. Firstly, *Am* biomass contains more lignin and cellulose than *Hh* biomass (Table 1), and, thus, more recalcitrant compounds that under low temperature do not completely volatilize. Secondly, *Am* has a densely caespitose habit: this feature impedes a complete burning and favors the retention of not completely burnt plant residues. The ash of *Hh* is, instead, lighter and quickly eroded by wind (Cerdà and Doerr, 2007). This is clear evidence that *Hh* grassland burned at higher severity, despite the similar temperatures observed. Previous studies observed that fire severity is different according the burned specie (Pereira et al., 2011). Thirdly, biomass of *Am* contains siliceous compounds that obstruct burning.

**Conclusions**

Data here reported confirm that the use of experimental fire to favour plant recovery in *Hh* and *Am* grassland does not affect SOC stock, even if these grasslands did not burn for many years. Our study shows that it is possible to adopt the system of controlled burning to maintain grassland formations, ~~however, this management tool must be adopted only after thorough phytosociological analyses of local vegetation patterns and dynamics and after detailed planning of grazing after fire.~~

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**Table caption**

Table 1. Biomass composition (% of dry biomass) of *Hyparrhenia Hirta* (Hh) and *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* (Am). Values in parenthesis are standard deviations. Abbreviations: ADF = acid detergent fiber, NDF = neutral detergent fiber.

| Grassland | ADF | Cellulose | NDF | Hemicellulose | Ash | Aboveground biomass (Mg ha$^{-1}$) | C Biomass (g kg$^{-1}$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Am* | 6.91 | 37.72 | 73.03 | 23.99 | 4.02 | 4.76 | 43.8 |
| | ((0.58) | (1.58) | (2.65) | (1.32) | (1.10) | | |
| *Hh* | 5.98 | 34.00 | 72.01 | 28.26 | 4.34 | 11.60 | 45.8 |
| | (0.68) | (1.20) | (1.53) | (1.76) | (1.49) | | |

**Figure Caption**

Fig.. Localization of the study area (black point) in Sicily (rectangle in inset) and with respect to the next urban settlement Cefalù. Grey scale represents altitudinal gradient (1 shade of grey = 200 m).

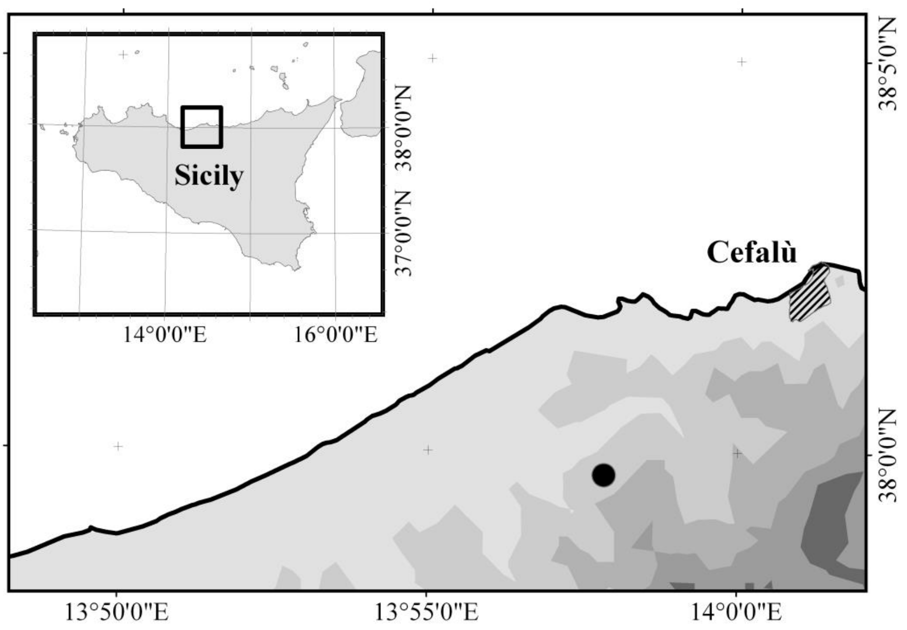

Fig. 2. Soil organic carbon before and after fire in *Hyparrhenia Hirta* (Hh) and *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* (Am) grassland.

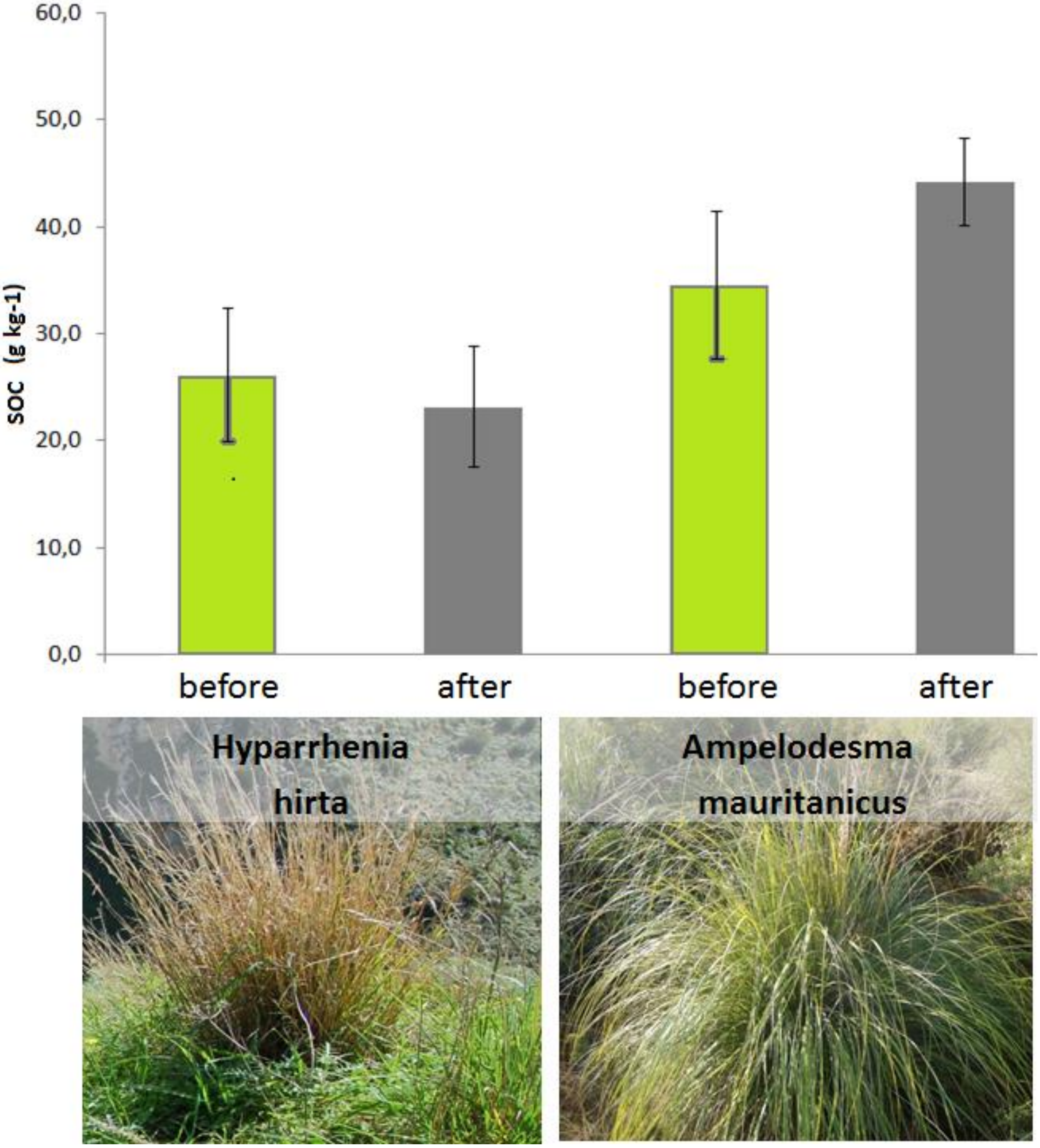

Figure 3- Soil temperature during fire under *Hyparrhenia Hirta* (Hh) (blu line) and *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* (Am) (red line) grassland