Biological invasions alter environmental microbiomes: a meta-analysis

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Abstract

Biological invasions impact both agricultural and natural systems. The damage can be quantified in terms of both economic loss and reduction of biodiversity. Although the literature is quite rich about the impact of invasive species on plant and animal communities, their impact on environmental microbiomes is underexplored. Here, we re-analyze publicly available data using a common framework to create a global synthesis of the effects of biological invasions on environmental microbial communities. Our findings suggest that non-native species are responsible for the loss of microbial diversity and shifts in the structure of microbial populations. Therefore, the impact of biological invasions on native ecosystems might be more pervasive than previously thought, influencing both macro- and micro-biomes. We also identified gaps in the literature which encourage research on a wider variety of environments and invaders, and the influence of invaders across seasons and geographical ranges.

Introduction

Biological invasions have severe impacts on biodiversity, community composition and ecosystem functions [1–5]. Invasive plants can alter many important ecosystem functions including the nitrogen cycle [6], carbon cycle, and decomposition. For example, invasion by the plant Amur Honeysuckle altered the decomposition rate in the invaded environment likely through changes in litter quality [7]. Exotic snails have been found to alter carbon and nitrogen fluxes in freshwater systems through their consumption/excretion activity [8]. These functions are provided by environmental microbiomes. Yet, despite the implications for ecosystem

functioning, we are still learning the consequences of biological invasions on environmental

microbiomes.

Previous studies have shown biological invasions can impact the diversity and

taxonomical structure of environmental microbiomes. For example, we often see a shift in soil

microbiota following invasion by non-native plant species [9,10,19,11–18]. Removal of feral pigs

increased the diversity of soil bacterial communities and shifted their structure [20], and

invasive crustaceans [21], mussels [22] and jellyfish [23] produce changes in the structure of

water microbiomes. However, shifts in environmental microbiome as consequence of biological

invasions do not always occur. For example, invasion by the plants *Robinia pseudoacacia* [24],

Eucalyptus sp. [25], and *Vincetoxicum rossicum* [26] did not alter the structure of soil microbial

communities. Also, some microcosms exposed to the simultaneous invasion of multiple plant

species [27–29] did not alter soil microbiomes. Similarly, soil microbiome structure in

microcosms did not change with the addition of the invasive earthworm *Aporrectodea*

trapezoides [30]. Several of these studies used techniques (e.g. DGGE, PLFA, t-RFLP) that limit

fine scale investigations of biological invasions on environmental microbiome diversity and

taxonomical composition. Among the studies using high-throughput amplicon-sequencing

techniques, most did not find changes in microbiome diversity [12,14,17,18,21,25,27,28,30],

few reported a decrease of microbial diversity in response to invasion [15,20,29], and fewer still

reported an increase [13,19]. Thus, there is still little consensus on the effects of biological

invasions on the diversity and taxonomical structure of the environmental microbiomes, both

tied to the stability and function of microbial communities [31,32].

59    Our ability to draw broad conclusions from published studies is limited, because

60  individual studies have occurred within a limited geographical range or with a limited group of

61  species. Meta-analyses of published biological means have long enabled more robust

62  conclusions than individual studies [33–36]. However, the meta-analytic approach has less

63  frequently been applied to amplicon-sequencing data that represent environmental

64  microbiome community composition. The majority of meta-analytic metabarcoding studies

65  have occurred in the medical sciences [37–45]. This approach can be successfully used to

66  address ecological questions. For example, meta-analytic metabarcoding studies have found

67  common patterns in the structure of indoor microbiomes [46] and freshwater eukaryotes [47].

68  Shade et al. [48] also used a meta-analysis of metabarcoding datasets from different

69  environments highlighting a time-dependent structure of microbiomes. A meta-analytic

70  approach has also been used to test the effects of stressors (e.g. water availability,

71  temperature, heavy metals) on environmental microbiomes [49]. Thus meta-analyses on

72  microbiome data have a striking potential to address global-scale questions, generate new

73  hypotheses and model common patterns [50], because they provide across study comparisons

74  [39,51,52].

75    Here, we aim to test whether the effect of biological invasion on environmental

76  microbiomes can be generalized or is idiosyncratic. To do so, we collected publicly available

77  data and re-analyzed this data under a common framework. We tested the effect of invasive

78  species on the diversity and structure of environmental microbiomes, with the hypothesis that

79  the presence of invasive species will decrease microbial diversity and alter the composition of

80 the environmental microbiome. We then investigated whether certain taxonomical groups are

81 more responsive to biological invasions.

Methods

Data collection

We searched for metabarcoding studies that evaluated the effect of biological invasions on

environmental microbiomes, and compared invaded and non-invaded habitats. Our literature

search for this study was conducted using Web of Science Core Collection (accessed on March

6th, 2020) using the keywords "Invasive speci*" and "microbio*" published between 2010-2020,

and found 1,471 studies. Two additional studies were added by searching the same keywords

on Google Scholar (S1 Figure). Records were manually filtered based on the study design

appropriate for our research question. This step yielded 22 studies, and we further filtered

these studies based on data availability in public repositories. When data was not available, we

attempted to contact the corresponding author. Finally we selected only studies that used the

16S rRNA marker gene, primer pair 515F/806R [53] or 341F/785R [54], and Illumina MiSeq

sequencing platform. After discarding studies that failed quality checks (see below), we were

able to include a total of five studies (Tab. 1), summing up to a total of 356 samples. The study

by Gibbons et al. [28] tested the impact of five invasive plant species (*Agropyron cristatum*,

Bromus tectorum, *Sisymbrium altissimum*, *Erodium cicutarium* and *Poa bulbosa*) on soil

microbiome using microcosms, comparing monocultures of each one of them towards a

mixture of eight native plant species. A similar question was tested in Rodrigues et al. [18] in

field condition. They identified three locations invaded by three different exotic plant species

(*Microstegium vimineum*, *Rhamnus davurica* and *Ailanthus altissima*) and, within each location,

they sampled soil form an invaded area and a non-invaded area for comparisons. Similarly,

Collins et al. [19] compared the soil microbial community of field sites invaded by *Artemisia*

rothrockii to non-invaded sites. The study by Wehr et al. [20] focused on the effects of feral pig

(*Sus scrofa*) invasion on soil microbiome comparing invaded areas to those where pigs were

removed over a ~25 year chronosequence. Finally, the only study performed in an aquatic

environment [22] compared water samples collected in lake areas invaded by the exotic mussel

Dreissena bugensis to non-invaded sites. Three studies focused on invasive plants, and the

remaining studies focused on a mammal and a mussel (Tab. 1).

110   **Table 1**. Summary of studies included in the meta-analysis

Study ID	Invasive organism	Species	Invaded environment	Reference
MPG13011	Plant	*Agropyron cristatum, Bromus tectorum, Sisymbrium altissimum, Erodium cicutarium* and *Poa bulbosa*	Soil	Gibbons et al. [28]
MPG87547	Mammal	*Sus scrofa*	Soil	Wehr et al. [20]
PRJNA296487	Plant	*Microstegium vimineum, Rhamnus davurica* and *Ailanthus altissima*	Soil	Rodrigues et al. [18]
PRJNA320310	Plant	*Artemisia rothrockii*	Soil	Collins et al.

				[19]
PRJNA385848	Mussel	*Dreissena bugensis*	Water	Denef et al. [22]

We took the following steps to alleviate some of the potential sources of bias due to

studies performed in different labs, using different protocols and sequenced on different

instruments. First, all studies included were performed using the Illumina MiSeq platform, in

order to reduce the potential bias that might be generated by directly comparing data obtained

from different platforms. Second, all studies targeted the same region of the 16S rRNA, as

several primer pairs targeting different regions are currently published and widely used. Three

out of five papers we considered in our analysis used the 515F/806R primer pair [53], while two

used the 341F/785R [54]. Because these primer pairs overlap in the V4 region of 16S rRNA we

feel confident that the chance of including spurious OTUs in our analysis is quite negligible. To

account for study-specific variances due to small differences in sampling procedures and lab

protocols, we also included the study itself, the environment where the study was performed

(i.e., soil or water) and the identity of the invasive species as stratification variables in the

PERMANOVA and as random factors in our linear model. This allowed us to ensure that our

results are not biased by study-specific features.

Once the papers were selected, we assigned each a "Study ID" and collected meta-data

from each sample in each study (invasive species, type of organism, invaded environment). We

then downloaded data from repositories using SRA Toolkit 2.10.4 for data on the SRA

databases, or by manually downloading files from the MG-RAST database.

Data processing and analysis

Paired-end reads were merged using FLASH 1.2.11 [55] and data were processed using

QIIME 1.9.1 [56]. Quality-filtering of reads was performed using default parameters, binning

OTUs and discarding chimeric sequences identified with VSEARCH 2.14.2 [57]. Taxonomy for

representative sequences was determined by querying against the SILVA database v132 [58]

using the BLAST method. A phylogeny was obtained by aligning representative sequences using

MAFFT v7.464 [59] and reconstructing a phylogenetic tree using FastTree [60].

Data analysis was performed using R statistical software 3.5 [61] with the packages

phyloseq [62] and *vegan* [63]. Read counts were normalized using DESeq2 v1.22.2 [64] prior to

data analysis. Singletons and sequences classified as chloroplast were excluded, as well as

samples which had less than 5000 sequence counts. Shannon diversity was fit to a linear mixed-

effects model specifying *sample type* (invaded or control), *organism* (plant, mammal, mussel),

and their interactions as fixed factors. We included *studyID* or both *studyID* and *environment*

(soil or water) as random factors, and both models reported similar results (S2 Table). We

focused on the one with only *studyID* as random effect due to the lower AIC value. Models

were fit using the *lmer*() function under the *lme4* package [65] and the package *emmeans* was

used to infer pairwise contrasts (corrected using False Discovery Rate, FDR). Furthermore, we

explored the effects of *sample type* and *organism* on the structure of the microbial

communities using a multivariate approach. Distances between pairs of samples, in terms of

community composition, were calculated using a Unifrac matrix, and then visualized using an

RDA procedure. Differences between sample groups were inferred through PERMANOVA

multivariate analysis (999 permutations). We ran two different PERMANOVA models obtaining

similar results: in one we stratified permutations at level of *studyID* and *identity of invasive*

species, and in the other we stratified permutations at level of *studyID*, *environment* and

identity of invasive species, obtaining similar results (S3 Table). Pairwise contrasts from

PERMANOVA were subjected to FDR correction. Finally, the relative abundance of each

bacterial family was fit using the *lmer*() function to test the effects of *sample type* (invaded or

control) on individual taxa. We ran two different linear mixed-effects models, one including

studyID, *organism* (plant, mammal, mussel) and *environment* as random factors, and another

with *studyID* and *organism* as random factors, obtaining similar results (S4 Table).

Results

Our search yielded 5 studies with an appropriate experimental design and available

data, for a total of 356 samples. A few samples failed quality checks and we further considered

335 samples for downstream analyses. Sequences clustered into 22831 OTUs, after quality

checks, removal of singletons and "chloroplast" reads, with an average of 61776.92 reads per

sample. This high OTU count is likely a result of increased richness from analyzing samples

across multiple environments (soil and water) and from different geographical regions.

Biological invasions led to a reduction in Shannon diversity (Control = 6.92±0.06,

Invaded = 6.73±0.07, χ^2= 3.85, df=1, *P*=0.04). We also found biological invasions altered

microbiome community composition in the invaded environment compared to the control (Tab.

2, Fig 1). The type of invasive organism (plant, mammal, or mussel) produced a different

community structure (pairwise *P*<0.01, FDR corrected). A deeper analysis of bacterial families

(S5 Table) revealed that some taxonomic groups are significantly more abundant in invaded

environments (Blastocatellaceae, Chitinophagaceae, Nitrosomonadaceae, Pirellulaceae,

Sphingomonadaceae), while others are more abundant in non-invaded samples

(Acetobacteraceae, Beijerinckiaceae, Gemmataceae, Micromonosporaceae, Pedosphaeraceae,

Solibacteraceae, Solirubrobacteraceae).

179   **Fig 1**. RDA ordination using a Bray-Curtis distance matrix of samples.

181   **Table 2**. Results from PERMANOVA analysis testing the effects of *sample type*

182   (invaded/control), *organism group* (plant, mammal, mussel) and their interaction on microbial

183   community composition. The factors *studyID* (unique for each study) was used as strata to

184   constrain permutations.

Factor	df	R^2	F	P
Sample type (Invaded/Control)	1	0.011	6.68	<0.001
Organism group (plant, mammal, mussel)	3	0.411	118.86	<0.001
Sample type × Organism group	3	0.007	2.1	0.01

Discussion

Here we show biological invasions decrease the diversity of environmental

microbiomes. While several studies have investigated the effects of species invasions on

environmental microbiomes, we still lack a generalized consensus across different

environmental microbiomes and systems. Previous studies have found that invasive species

increased environmental microbial diversity [13,19], while others reported a decrease

[15,20,29]. However, the majority of studies did not analyze the microbial diversity, as they

used techniques that did not allow for such analysis, or reported no changes [9,10,23–

28,30,11,12,14,16–18,21,22]. Within the studies included in our analysis, invasion by feral pigs

decreased soil microbial diversity, while invasion by *Artemisia rothrockii* increased soil microbial

diversity. The remaining three studies in our analysis reported no effects of biological invasions

on environmental microbiome diversity. Our analysis was constrained in terms of sampled

environment (soil) and invasive organism (plants), and an expanded dataset would be beneficial

to generalize our results. Microbial diversity is tied to the function of microbiomes, and changes

in diversity can reflect changes in function [66–68]. Changes in microbial diversity and function

do not always have the same direction [69], which might explain the discrepancy between our

results and other studies. While we observed a relatively small reduction of the Shannon

diversity index in invaded environments compared to non-invaded environment, this matches

with the changes we observed in terms of community composition.

Indeed, our report of changes in community composition was relatively consistent with

the published literature and the individual results of the studies we analyzed. Most studies of

the influence of biological invasions on environmental microbiomes found that biological

invasions alter environmental microbial community composition. However, some previous

reports did not report changes [24–30], including the study by Gibbons et al. [28] considered in

our analysis. This variation may be due to individual effects of organisms on the environment.

For example, invasive plants may alter soil microbiome composition through root exudates [5],

and invasive mussels may alter water microbiome composition via bacterial removal through

their feeding activity [22]. Thus, reported influences on community composition are more

consistent. Alternatively changes in community composition might be due to the response of

some bacterial groups to environmental disturbance. The bacterial families that we found to be

differentially abundant between the invaded and control environments have diverse ecological

functions ranging from nitrogen fixation and carbohydrate metabolism to antimicrobial

properties. Although the differences in relative abundance we found might be relatively small,

they can have an important impact on the functions of the environmental microbiome [70].

Many of the families that showed a significant difference in abundance between invaded and

control environments include taxa that play important roles at various points during nitrogen

and carbon cycling (i.e. Nitrosomonadaceae, Acetobacteraceae, Chitinophagaceae,

Micromonosporaceae, Gemmataceae, Beijerinckiaceae, Pirellulaceae) [71,72,81,73–80].

However, nitrogen-fixing and carbohydrate-degrading bacteria did not have a unified response

to invaded environments as some increased and others decreased in abundance in invaded

environments. Many nitrogen-fixing bacteria have been shown to respond to environmental

disturbance, such as Acidobacteria abundances during forest to pasture conversions or

Pirellulaceae's response to the presence of microplastics [82,83]. Thus, changes in

environmental microbiome community composition appear to be linked to changes in

ecosystem functions, although this pattern is not yet predictable across functions and taxa.

Few previous studies on biological invasions have reported details on the differential

abundance of taxa, and among these we found limited general consensus. For example, some

studies report a decrease in abundance of bacteria associated with nitrogen cycling (e.g.

Nitrosphaeria, Nitrospira, Nitrosomonadales) [12,13,18], while others report an increase of

Nitrosomonadaceae following invasion [30]. In our study some groups associated with the

nitrogen cycle were positively associated with biological invasions (i.e. Nitrosomonadaceae,

Pirellulaceae, Chitinophagaceae) while others were negatively associated (Beijerinckiaceae,

Micromonosporaceae). Unfortunately, amplicon-based sequencing has a limited power to infer

changes in the functions of microbiomes. Future metagenomic and metatranscriptomic studies

are needed to investigate whether biological invasions alter gene content or gene expression of

environmental microbiomes, and whether this reflects changes in biogeochemical cycling.

Meta-analyses are also useful to highlight gaps in the literature, and here we highlight

some aspects that warrant further investigation. First, we identified a large gap in the

availability of sequencing data from multiple types of environments and types of invasive

species. For our analysis almost all available data came from two environments: four sets of

data came from soil and one came from freshwater. Greater effort is needed for sample

collection from invasions in both freshwater and marine environments. Without sufficient

diversity of sample environments, it is impossible to tell whether microbial shifts following an

invasion are unique to an invaded environment. Second, in our analysis the majority of data

came from one type of invasive species: plants. Noticeably absent from our dataset were

invasions by insects, fish, and amphibians. Sequencing data is needed from a larger number of

invasive species to allow us to broadly assess shifts in microbial community structure. A third

gap we identified was the lack of spatial and temporal resolution. Almost all of the initially

identified 22 studies we assessed were also restricted to one season of sampling and were

conducted in the Northern Hemisphere. Thus, it is infeasible with existing datasets to validate

the influence of latitude or explore how seasonality and biological invasions interact to
modulate microbial communities. Thus, there are a number of opportunities for future research
on how biological invasions alter environmental microbial communities.

Here we analyzed 16S amplicon sequencing data from five studies and show that
biological invasions influence both the diversity and the structure of environmental
microbiomes. Understanding the impact of biological invasions on environmental microbiomes
is of high priority to preserve ecosystem functions [84]. We identified a number of gaps in our
knowledge, including the need to assess a wider range of environments, invasive species,
temporal variation, and latitudinal variation. We also demonstrate the power of re-analysis of
publicly available datasets using a common pipeline which benefited from open-data initiatives.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Kali Mattingly (Ohio State University, USA) and Davide Rassati
(Università degli Studi di Padova, Italy) for their helpful comments on the manuscript.

Data accessibility

Raw data from single studies is publicly available. The code used to perform our
analyses has been deposited on GitHub:
https://github.com/amalacrino/Biol_Invasion_Microb_MA

Supporting information

S1 Figure. PRISMA workflow. From: Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, Altman DG, The
PRISMA Group (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses:

The PRISMA Statement. PLoS Med 6(7): e1000097. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed1000097

S2 Figure. Primers pairs considered in our analysis mapped to the structure of the 16S

rRNA gene that includes here just the hypervariable regions V1–V4.

S1 Table. PRIMA checklist. From: Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, Altman DG, The PRISMA

Group (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The

PRISMA Statement. PLoS Med 6(7): e1000097. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed1000097

S2 Table. Comparison of two different linear mixed-effects models testing the effect of

biological *sample type* (invaded or control), *organism* (plant, mammal, mussel), and their

interactions, on Shannon diversity index of the environmental microbiome. In Model 1 we

included *studyID* as random factor, while in Model 2 we included both *studyID* and *environment*

(soil or water) as random factors

S3 Table. Comparison of two different PERMANOVA models testing the effect of

biological *sample type* (invaded or control), *organism* (plant, mammal, mussel), and their

interactions, on the structure of the environmental microbiome. In Model 1 we included

studyID and *speciesID* as stratification factor, while in Model 2 we included *studyID, speciesID*

and *environment* (soil or water) as stratification factors.

297 **S4 Table.** Results from two different the linear mixed-effects model testing the

298 abundance of each bacterial family against *sample type* (invaded or control), *organism* (plant,

299 mammal, mussel), and their interactions. In Model 1 we included *studyID* as random factor,

300 while in Model 2 we included both *studyID* and *environment* (soil or water) as random factors.

302 **S5 Table.** Comparison of the relative proportion of each bacterial family between

303 control and invaded environments. Differences are assessed using a linear mixed-effects model

304 testing the normalized proportions of each bacterial family against *sample type* (Model 1 in S4

305 Table).

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