Genomic fingerprints of the world's soil ecosystems

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Running head: Genomic fingerprints of the world's soil ecosystems

Abstract. Despite the explosion of soil metagenomic data, we lack a synthesized understanding

of patterns in the distribution and functions of soil microorganisms. These patterns are critical to

predictions of soil microbiome responses to climate change and resulting feedbacks that regulate

greenhouse gas release from soils. To address this gap, we assay 1512 manually-curated soil

metagenomes using complementary annotation databases, read-based taxonomy, and machine

learning to extract multidimensional genomic fingerprints of global soil microbiomes. Our

objective is to uncover novel biogeographical patterns of soil microbiomes across environmental

factors and ecological biomes with high molecular resolution. We reveal shifts in the potential

for (1) microbial nutrient acquisition across pH gradients; (2) stress, transport, and redox-based

processes across changes in soil bulk density; and (3) greenhouse gas emissions across biomes.

We also use an unsupervised approach to reveal a collection of soils with distinct genomic

signatures, characterized by coordinated changes in soil organic carbon, nitrogen, and cation

exchange capacity and in bulk density and clay content that may ultimately reflect soil

environments with high microbial activity. Genomic fingerprints for these soils highlight the

importance of resource scavenging, plant-microbe interactions, fungi, and heterotrophic

metabolisms. Across all analyses, we observed phylogenetic coherence in soil microbiomes —

more closely related microorganisms tended to move congruently in response to soil factors.

Collectively, the genomic fingerprints uncovered here present a basis for global patterns in the

microbial mechanisms underlying soil biogeochemistry and help beget tractable microbial

reaction networks for incorporation into process-based models of soil carbon and nutrient

cycling.

Importance. We address a critical gap in our understanding of soil microorganisms and their

functions, which have a profound impact on our environment. We analyzed 1512 global soils

with advanced analytics to create detailed genetic profiles (fingerprints) of soil microbiomes.

This reveals novel patterns in how microorganisms are distributed across different soil

environments. For instance, we discovered shifts in microbial potential to acquire nutrients in

relation to soil acidity, as well as changes in stress responses and potential greenhouse gas

emissions linked to soil structure. We also identified soils with putative high activity that had

unique genomic characteristics surrounding resource acquisition, plant-microbe interactions, and

fungal activity. Finally, we observed that closely related microorganisms tend to respond in

similar ways to changes in their surroundings. Our work is a significant step towards

comprehending the intricate world of soil microorganisms and its role in the global climate.

Introduction.

Soil microbiomes catalyze some of the most biogeochemically important reactions on

Earth, yet their complexity hampers our efforts to fully understand their function (1–6).

Microbial destabilization of soil carbon stores, for instance, has positive feedbacks with global

climate change (7–9); and microbial nutrient cycling sustains life at higher trophic levels (10–

12). The molecular revolution, including new 'omics sequencing approaches, promises a new

generation of fundamental and predictive understanding; imperatives for understanding how soil

microbial communities individually and collectively contribute to carbon and nutrient cycling

under environmental change. Yet despite the immense amount of soil metagenomic data now

available, we lack a synthesized understanding of patterns in the distribution and functions of

soil microorganisms that are critical to developing new and improved models (13–18).

While global patterns are well-established for most macroorganisms, the extreme

diversity of the soil microbiome and the myriad ecological forces that act upon it complicate

efforts to understand patterns in its structure and function (19–27). Microbial assembly

processes, dormancy, interspecies interactions, and aboveground-belowground connectivity in

particular are among the many factors that influence soil microbial biogeography (19, 21, 26,

28–33). As a result, patterns in microbial distributions are almost always weaker than those

observed in macroecological systems (26, 34, 35). Still, soil microbiome structure and function

have been associated with variables such as latitude, vegetation, climate, and edaphic properties

at local to global scales (3–5, 18, 19, 28, 34, 36–60).

A clear understanding of soil microbial biogeography is essential to predictions of soil

microbiome function under novel climate scenarios. Microbiome composition (i.e., taxonomy

and functional potential) impacts ecosystem processes (e.g., biogeochemical cycles) through

differences in extracellular enzyme production, carbon use efficiency, symbioses, and other

ecological traits among microorganisms (14, 44, 61–68). Correspondingly, changes in microbial

distribution across environmental gradients can elucidate how soil functions may shift in relation

to environmental change; particularly if novel ecosystems supplant existing soil environments

(26, 69, 70). For instance, Ladau et al. (71) used current and historical biogeographical patterns

of microorganisms to predict their distributions and possible ecosystem impacts under future

climate scenarios.

New analytical techniques allow for direct assessment of the potential functions encoded

by soil microorganisms (4, 18) but genomic sequencing technologies also generate a tremendous

amount of data. The detection of genes that are nearly ubiquitous (e.g., central metabolisms),

poorly annotated, and/or of little relevance to soil processes in particular can obscure ecological

patterns in the soil microbiome. Many researchers have attempted to distill this information into

tractable units using trait-based approaches, keystone species analyses, and/or core microbiome

assessments, with mixed results (27, 44, 62, 72–74). Other common challenges to understanding

microbial biogeography include the detection of rare organisms and assigning thresholds for

microbial taxonomy, both of which can influence patterns observed in soil microbiomes (34, 75).

As such, fundamental questions regarding global soil microbial distributions and their

drivers remain largely unanswered (74, 76). Advanced analytics, including machine learning-

based approaches, in combination with global sequencing resources are essential for the next

generation of research in microbial ecology (18, 61, 77, 78). Here, we examine a comprehensive

set of 1512 manually-curated soil metagenomic samples to decipher patterns in soil genomic

potential across commonly measured environmental gradients and ecological biomes. We assay

metagenomic sequences using an array of complementary annotation databases, read-based

taxonomic assignment, and machine learning algorithms to extract multidimensional genomic

fingerprints of global soil microbiomes. Our objective is to uncover never reported

biogeographical patterns in soil microbiome composition and functional potential that can

provide a molecular basis for predicting soil microbial responses to climate change.

Results.

Microbial clades and genomic potential across all soils.

103   We collated soil metagenomic sequences from a wide range of environmental conditions

104   across global biomes (Figure 1, Table S1 and Table S2). Bulk density, cation exchange capacity

105   (CEC), nitrogen (N), pH, soil organic carbon (SOC), and clay content ranged from 0.28-1.56

106   kg/dm³, 7.7-68.7 cmol C/kg, 0.25-22.4 g/kg, 4.4-8.3, 2.4-510.9 g/kg, and 2.7-57.1 %

107   respectively.

108   To reveal the full range of taxonomies and functional potential encoded by global soils,

we first assessed microbial attributes (i.e., gene annotations by Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and

Genomes (KEGG)(79, 80), the Pfam (81) and TIGRFAM protein databases (82), and read-based

taxonomy, see methods) with the highest normalized abundance across all soils (Figure 2).

Multiple annotation databases provide complementary information and are standard operating

procedure by the U.S. Department of Energy Joint Genome Institute (JGI)(83, 84). Abundant

KEGG orthologies (KO) were associated bacterial secretion systems (K12510), redox reactions

(K00104, K00334, K03882, K00380), and cellular growth processes (K02335, K02049, K00334,

K03882, K03088). Abundant Pfam were comprised of functions related to the tolerance of

common soil stressors including temperature (PF11999, PF08496) and salinity (PF12838), as

well as functions involved in microbial growth (PF08511, PF07357, PF13247, PF00005). The

most abundant TIGRFAM were also associated with soil stressors; for example, TIGR00229

(PAS Domain S-box protein) is involved in sensing changes in light, redox potential, oxygen,

and other stressors (85). Other highly abundant TIGRFAM across all soils included a sigma-

factor that may be associated with microbial responses to environmental fluctuation

(TIGR02937) and other signaling and sensing processes (TIGR00254, TIGR00231). Finally,

abundant microbial genera included diverse microorganisms including Burkholderia,

Mycobacterium, Streptomyces, Acetobacter, and Pseudonocardia.

Variation in genomic potential across environmental gradients.

To reveal biogeographic patterns in microbiomes across global soils, we extracted

microbial attributes characteristic of soil factors and ecological biomes using random forest

regression models (see methods, Table S1). Soil pH, bulk density, and biome type were the

strongest correlates of microbial attributes (i.e, they generated well-fitting models with

comparatively high explanatory power relative to other factors; Table S1). The cross-validated

random forest model for each of the variables above had a root mean square error (RMSE) of

less than 0.8 (often < 0.2) and/or at least 60% variance explained. Models for CEC, N, SOC, and

clay content did not meet these thresholds. Results were conceptually consistent across different

microbial attributes. A full description of all genomic fingerprints is in Extended Data File 1.

pH separated soil microbiomes by nutrient and vitamin B-related genes (Figure 3). More

alkaline soils were characterized by vitamin B-, nutrient-, and phosphatase-related activities, for

instance with genomic fingerprints that included K01662, PF01872, K08717, TIGR00378,

PF01966, and PF00481; as well as many genera of Alphaproteobacteria. More acidic soils were

signified by ammonia- and complex organic polymer- (e.g., wood-) related reactions, with

genomic fingerprints that included K14333, K01684, TIGR03404, and TIGR02093, and

microbial clades using ammonia as a substrate (Rhodopseudomonas and Klebsiella).

Bulk density separated soil microbiomes by factors associated with soil structure,

hydrology, and nutrient content. The genomic fingerprint of low bulk density soils comprised

genes involved in organic N and methane cycling, as well as signatures of anoxia (Figure 3). It

included K00992, K11261, K11959, TIGR03323, TIGR01392, and microorganisms associated

with anoxic and/or aquatic environments (Gardnerella, Cetia, Salmonella, Olleya, Mycoplasma,

Escherichia, Enterobacter, and Chitinophaga). Conversely, high bulk density soils were signified

by genes involved in microbial transport, stress, pigmentation, and infection mechanisms.

Notable attributes associated with high bulk density soils included K00854, K11733, K03799,

TIGR01263, TIGR01957, TIGR01203, PF00582, PF03631, and four Alphaproteobacteria.

Four biomes were highlighted with distinct genomic signatures by our models – (1)

flooded grasslands & savannas, (2) tundra, (3) boreal forest, and (4) montane

grasslands/shrublands (Figure 4). The soil genomic fingerprint of flooded grasslands/savannas

was primarily characterized by positive associations with organic N (K13497, K07395, K19702,

K02042), phosphorus (P, K02042, K00854, K02800, PF04273), stress tolerance (heat and

arsenic: TIGR04282, TIGR02348), and motility (PF00669, PF00482, Paeniclostridium). The

genomic fingerprint for tundra had the greatest number positive gene associations, including

those associated with methanogenesis (K11261, TIGR03323, TIGR03321, TIGR03322,

TIGR03306, TIGR01392, TIGR02145), nitric oxide production (PF08768), P transfer (K03525,

K00997, K00992, K13497, PF08009), and pathogenesis (PF11203, PF05045); supported by the

presence of anaerobic (Gardnerella, Escherichia, Kosakonia, Glaesserella, Mycoplasma,

Treponema, Paeniclostridium) and possible plant-growth promoting genera (Kosakonia).

Boreal forests and montane grasslands/shrublands were primarily negatively associated

with microbial attributes. Boreal forests displayed negative relationships with the normalized

abundance of magnesium- (Mg, K03284) and P- (K06217) related genes and carbohydrate and

organic N metabolism (K02800, K11472, PF00208, PF04685); as well as some metal-related

genes (TIGR00378, TIGR04282, TIGR00003). Montane systems were negatively characterized

by genes related to Mg and P (K01520, K04765, TIGR01203), carbohydrate metabolism

(K01816), virulence (PF09299), and motility (PF00669), as well as organic N (K07395, K00600,

PF00208) and S (K03644). Both boreal forests and montane grasslands/shrublands were

negatively associated with anaerobic genera (Gardnerella, Thielavia, Coniochaeta, Escherichia,

Salmonella, Kosakonia, Shigella, Mycoplasma, Treponema, Glaesserella, Enteractinococcus,

Paeniclostridium).

Interestingly in all analyses across pH, bulk density, and biomes, we observed

phylogenetic coherence in soil microbiomes — the normalized abundances of more closely

related microorganisms tended to move congruently in response to biome type and

environmental factors (Figure 4B, Extended Data File 1).

Unsupervised machine learning to disentangle environmental interactions associated with soil

genomic potential.

Finally to detect emergent patterns in microbial biogeography, we used unsupervised

machine learning to reveal a collection of soils with distinct genomic fingerprints. These soils

and their resident microbiomes were associated with coordinated changes in SOC content, total

N, and CEC and with opposite coordinated changes in bulk density and clay content (Figure 5,

Extended Data 2). We identified KO cluster 7, genus cluster 6, and Pfam cluster 1 as containing

soil samples that exhibited the strongest coordinated changes (defined by number of significant

correlations and R^2 values, see methods). TIGRFAMs did not exhibit these patterns.

Selected microbial KO and genera were positively correlated with SOC, N, and CEC and

negatively associated with bulk density and clay; while Pfam cluster 1 exhibited opposite

patterns (i.e., negative associations with SOC, N, and CEC; and positive associations with bulk

density and clay). Soil microbiomes in KO cluster 7 and genus cluster 6 contained high

normalized abundances of genes associated with energy generation (K00334, K00339, K00324,

K08738), filamentous bacteria/biofilms (K11903, Nocardia, Streptomyces, Mycobacterium,

Leptolyngbya), chemically complex organic matter decomposers (Nocardia, Rhodococcus,

Streptomyces) and N-fixing organisms and plant symbionts (Rhizobium, Bradyrhizobium,

Nostoc). Additionally, genes associated with N-cycling processes (K07685, K10041) and

microbial interactions (e.g., signaling and secretion, K12537, K02661) changed most

dramatically across environmental gradients. The most variable taxa across environmental

gradients were diverse— they included N cycling (Uliginosibacterium, Microvirgula),

autotrophic and/or anaerobic (Methanosalsum, Salana, Pseudobacteroides, Sulfurirhabdus,

Microvirgula, Desulfallas, Pelotomaculum, Risungbinella), and plant-related microorganisms

(Pseudobacteroides, Zeaxanthinibacter, Parapedobacter). Samples in Pfam cluster 1 had high

relative abundances of organic N- (PF01979, PF08352, PF01842), P- (PF00406, PF01380), and

signaling-related (PF01627, PF09413) genes, while many genes thought to be associated with

eukaryotes changed most dramatically across environmental gradients in Pfam annotations

(PF04178, PF03188, PF01793).

Discussion.

Global soil microbiome taxa and functional potential..

Across all soils, the most abundant microbial attributes spanned disparate lineages and

potential functions, highlighting the high microbial diversity of soils relative to other global

habitats (5, 18, 45, 46). While we note that we assayed microbial genes which do not necessarily

reflect expressed functions (61, 88–91), the genomic potential revealed by this investigation

provides a basis for more targeted research into soil microbiome function across different soil

habitats. The most prevalent microbial genera included members of commonly observed soil

taxa including Alphaproteobacteria, Betaproteobacteria, and Actinobacteria (45). Widespread

genomic functions included growth, resource acquisition, and stress tolerance strategies that are

essential for microbial persistence in heterogeneous soil environments. Bacterial secretion

systems were common, as well as DNA repair/replication, transport, and energy generation

functions. Interestingly, genes for the sensing and/or tolerance of fluctuations in temperature,

salinity, light, and redox conditions were among the most abundant soil microbial genes; all of

which are common soil microbial stressors (86, 87). Collectively, the diverse taxa and functions

encoded by the soil microbiome underscores the heterogeneous stressors on the soil microbiome.

The high global soil microbial diversity observed here can obscure patterns in microbiome

structure and function, indicating the use of machine learning-based tools to unravel its

complexity (18, 45, 88).

Soil genomic potential corresponds to pH, bulk density, and biome type.

Soil genomic patterns were evident across soil pH, bulk density, and biomes; however,

some hypothesized drivers of the soil microbiome including SOC, total N, and CEC were not

statistically linked to microbial taxa or genomic functional potential. Soil carbon, N, and cation

exchange capacity can reflect resource availability and are often associated with soil microbiome

change at local scales (14, 36, 89–91). The lack of trends at the global scales may represent

heterogeneity in the importance of resources in structuring microbiomes; indeed, the influence of

deterministic (e.g., selection) versus stochastic (e.g., random) assembly processes on soil

microbiomes varies through space and time (30, 92–95). While our results support pH and biome

type as primary determinants of soil microbial structure and function (5, 6, 28, 45), it is

interesting that bulk density was also a strong correlate of genomic patterns. This may reflect the

importance of biophysical and hydraulic properties on soil microbiome structure and function

(92, 96–98).

Collectively, we reveal novel biogeographical patterns in specific aspects of soil

microbiome composition and potential function that have not been reported elsewhere. Our

results are consistent with ecological processes hypothesized to influence the soil microbiome

and provide greater molecular specificity than revealed by previous works. They enable us to

better understand microbial lifestyles that support the persistence of certain members over others;

such knowledge underlies a predictive understanding of soil microbiome changes with shifts in

the global climate.

Microbial nutrient acquisition potential shifts across pH gradients.

The genomic fingerprint of alkaline soils demonstrated an association with microbial

nutrient acquisition and is important for understanding belowground microbial dynamics in arid

and semiarid ecosystems (>35% of global land surface (99)). The soil matrix in these systems is

porous, has low rates of water retention, and contains an abundance of calcium carbonate that

limits P bioavailability (100). Accordingly, the alkaline soil fingerprint was enriched in genes

encoding phosphatases and related functions (PF01966, PF00481) that may signify the

importance of microbial P acquisition and/or limitation in alkaline soils (101–104). Vitamin B-

related genes were also included in this fingerprint and have also been linked to P solubilization

(K01662, PF01872)(105). The presence of a urea transporter (K08717) may likewise indicate the

importance of nutrient acquisition in alkaline soils (106). Notably, the high-Ca^{2+} alkaline soil

environment was also characterized by a calcium/proton exchanger (TIGR00378)—which

regulates intracellular Ca^{2+} concentrations to prevent Ca^{2+} overload (107) and an uncharacterized

hydrophobic domain (TIGR00271) that may arise from low moisture environments that are often

characteristic of alkaline soils.

In contrast, more acidic soils were characterized by a distinct set of nutrient acquisition

genes, in particular genes encoding ammonia and wood decomposition reactions that produce H^+

as a byproduct. For instance, nitrification is a hallmark of microbial genera Rhodopseudomonas

and Klebsiella (108–110) and increases soil acidity through the release of H^+ from ammonia.

Likewise, wood-degrading fungi often secrete acidic compounds to aid in the digestion of

chemically-complex polymers (111–114). This is consistent with the association of K14333,

K01684, TIGR03404, and TIGR02093 with low pH soils.

Finally, Alphaproteobacteria have been previously shown to be sensitive to variation in

soil pH (118, 119) and were included in the genomic fingerprints of both high and low pH soils,

further bolstering their potential sensitivity to global change processes that impact soil pH (e.g.,

atmospheric nitrogen deposition).

Genes encoding stress, transport, and/or redox-based processes change with bulk density.

Bulk density reflects biophysical soil properties such as texture, water content, porosity,

and mineralogy that drive microbial community structure and function (19, 53, 54, 117, 118).

Patterns in the relationships between these variables and the soil microbiome can be complex at

global scales (19), and our findings are to our knowledge, the first to report a global-scale

relationship between bulk density and the distribution of genes encoded by the soil microbiome.

Low bulk density soils were characterized by genes common to water-logged and/or

agricultural soils, while high bulk density soils included potential functions associated with

transport mechanisms, stress tolerance, and virulence. For instance, K11261, TIGR03323, and

TIGR01392 – all signatures of low bulk density soil – are each associated with methanogenic

processes that are prevalent in saturated soils (119). Low bulk density soils were further

characterized by anaerobic and/or aquatic microorganisms including Gardnerella, Cetia,

Salmonella, Olleya, Mycoplasma, Escherichia, Enterobacter, and Chitinophaga that also supports

microbial persistence in water-saturated environments (120–128). Though we did not directly

assess land cover, the presence of potential functions associated with organic N cycling in the

low bulk density fingerprint (K00992, K11959) may additionally suggest the influence of

agriculture on soil microorganisms, where tillage generates loosely packed soils (i.e., low bulk

density) and fertilizer application enhances nutrient cycles.

In contrast, the genomic fingerprint of high bulk density soils suggests an environment

inclusive of density-dependent relationships between microorganisms, their substrates, and

pathogens (transport: K00854, K11733, TIGR01957, TIGR01203; virulence: PF03631,

TIGR01203). Stress-related genes (K03799, PF00582.24) may be reflective of this competitive

environment; or related to ecosystem processes such as soil compaction which is common in

deserts (K03799).

Soil genomic potential for greenhouse gas emissions differs by biome.

304   Finally, soil habitat (reflected here by biome type) seemed to be a driver of dissimilarity

305   in microbiome structure and potential function, providing detailed information on the molecular

306   biology of global soil ecosystems.

307   We first highlight microbial genomic attributes of tundra ecosystems, as they are

experiencing rapid transformations in response to global climate change (129, 130). Tundra

exhibited the highest number of microbial taxa and potential functions in their genomic

fingerprint, the vast majority of which displayed positive associations. Given the relationship

between soil microbial diversity and biogeochemical function, this provides a consistent and

distributed genomic basis for enhanced greenhouse gas emissions that has been associated with

permafrost thaw in tundra (129, 131, 132). The microbial attributes associated with tundra in this

study reveal clues into the biology that drives active biogeochemical cycles in these vulnerable

ecosystems. Methanogenesis in particular is responsible for fluxes of methane in warming tundra

(131, 133, 134) and was associated with tundra in the current study. Additionally, a gene

involved in nitric oxide cycling (PF08768) (135–137), as well as a variety of anaerobic

organisms and P-related genes (K03525, K00997, K00992, K13497, PF08009) (138–140), also

provide insight into the molecular functions of tundra in the context of global climate change.

Interestingly, we also found evidence for pathogen resistance within the tundra genomic

signature (PF11203, PF05045), lending credence to a small number of recent studies suggesting

permafrost environments as one of the largest reservoirs of soil viruses (141–144) and a possible

linkage between soil methane and viral infection (145).

Flooded grasslands/savannas were also generally positively associated with many

microbial attributes, several of which encoded nutrient cycling, stress tolerance, and/or motility

traits. Genes related to organic N cycling (K13497, K07395, K19702, K02042), P (K02042,

K00854, K02800, PF04273) and/or stress tolerance (TIGR04282, TIGR02348) may signify

microbial adaptations to nutrient scarcity and other stressors. Motility (PF00669, PF00482,

Paeniclostridium) may be reflective of beneficial microbial lifestyles in saturated systems, where

movement is facilitated by high pore space connectivity. Interestingly, a mechanism for arsenic

resistance was affiliated with flooded grasslands and savannas, possibly denoting arsenic

groundwater contamination in many regions of the world (146).

In contrast, boreal forest and montane grasslands/shrublands were signified by negative

associations with Mg- and P-related genes (boreal: K03284, K06217, montane: K01520,

K04765, TIGR01203) and with organic N and carbohydrate-related genes (boreal: K02800,

K11472, PF00208, PF04685; montane: K01816, K07395, K00600, PF00208). In addition,

anaerobic microbial genera were negatively associated with these ecosystems. The boreal forest

fingerprint uniquely included some metal-related genes (TIGR00378, TIGR04282, TIGR00003);

while montane systems were uniquely characterized by virulence (PF09299), motility

(PF00669), and sulfur-related genes (K03644). The negative associations with carbon, N, and P

suggest that carbon and inorganic nutrients may be more available in these systems relative to

other biomes; and Mg is often associated with plant growth (147). Taken together, microbial

fingerprints of boreal forests and montane grasslands/shrublands convey slower growth rates

and fewer resource constraints than other ecosystems.

Resource scavenging, plant-microbe interactions, fungi, and heterotrophic metabolisms

prevalent in fertile soils.

Relationships between biomes and specific microbial attributes suggest that there may be

multiple simultaneous factors that structure soil microbiome composition and function. Because

of this, we next explored relationships between microbial attributes and soil factors that arose

naturally out of unsupervised analysis. This allowed us to infer interactive effects that could not

be assessed when specifying a single environmental gradient.

Unsupervised machine learning uncovered soil microbial genomic attributes associated

with coordinated changes in SOC, total N, and CEC and oppositely with clay content and bulk

density that may represent some of the most biologically-active soils on Earth (Figure 5). Soils

rich in SOC and N with high CEC constitute resource- and energy-rich environments, supported

by an abundance of energy generating genes in the fingerprint of these soils (K00334, K00339,

K00324, K08738). Interestingly, these environments are best explained by a combination of

environmental variables rather than an individual factor. As an example, soils with high SOC

alone could be limited by N or other nutrients; thus, we propose that genomic fingerprints for

multiple simultaneously interacting factors may be among the most critical for understanding

global biogeochemistry. They are nearly impossible to discern without unsupervised statistical

approaches, and we know of no other work that has done so.

Soils with high SOC, N, and CEC were characterized by genes associated with resource

scavenging, plant-microbe interactions, and heterotrophic metabolisms. We observed numerous

attributes in their genomic fingerprint associated with filaments or biofilms, intra-organism

signaling, and/or chemically-complex organic matter decomposition (K11903, K12537,

K02661, Nocardia, Streptomyces, Mycobacterium, Leptolyngbya, Nocardia, Rhodococcus,

Streptomyces). This is consistent with microbial morphologies and lifestyles that support the

decay of chemically recalcitrant polymers (e.g., wood), as well as nutrient acquisition and

transport across soil pore networks. Plant-microbe interactions, including symbiotic N-fixing

organisms, were also a key feature of these soils, highlighting the importance of above- and

belowground connectivity in productivity (Rhizobium, Bradyrhizobium, Nostoc,

Pseudobacteroides, Zeaxanthinibacter, Parapedobacter, Zea)(148). In contrast, anaerobic and

autotrophic organisms were highly sensitive to changes across these connected environmental

gradients, possibly reflecting their exclusion from more oxygen- and energy-rich environments

where heterotrophic organisms tend to dominate.

We also selected one Pfam cluster that was associated with low SOC, N, and CEC and

with high clay and bulk density soils, which seemed to underscore the importance of fungi in

resource- and energy-rich environments. The most sensitive genes in this cluster of samples

corresponded to eukaryotic organisms (PF04178, PF03188, PF01793). Previous work has shown

fungal sensitivity to soil resource availability, as well as high fungal diversity in organic-rich

tropical soils (52). Overall, these insights provide greater resolution into the microbial

mechanisms that support both belowground biogeochemical cycles and aboveground

productivity than ever before, and they can provide a basis for the next generation of microbial

ecology research and model development.

Phylogenetic coherence in microbial biogeography.

The extent to which selection acts on phylogenetically-conserved properties of soil

microbiomes and further translates into differences in functional potential (e.g., response-effect

traits (149)) is a long running unknown in microbial ecology. Some previous studies have shown

little connection between functional attributes and microbial phylogeny (44, 150), while others

have indicated the existence of taxa-function relationships (88). And still others have suggested

variation in the coupling of taxonomy and function across various functions of interest, levels of

phylogenetic resolution, and/or spatial scales (34, 55, 61, 151, 152). Though microbial taxa were

generally less correlated to the environment than functional potential (Table S1), we found

strong phylogenetic coherence in the response of genera to changes in the soil environment

(Figure 4B). That is, closely related organisms tended to respond similarly to environmental

change. This implies that evolutionary history, life history strategies, and/or morphology (all

traits that tend to be phylogenetically conserved (153)) could influence changes in microbial

community membership in response to environmental change. As such, metabarcoding

approaches that yield microbiome taxonomy may be among the first indicators of ecosystem

transitions, such as response to disturbances and transitions between state archetypes (30).

Conclusions.

Despite the significance of soil microorganisms in global biogeochemistry, we still know

little about the ecological processes that regulate their community composition and function

across the wide range of global soil environments. We used machine learning to sift through tens

of thousands of taxa and potential functions encoded by 1512 global soil microbiomes, revealing

novel biogeographical patterns in soil microbiome composition and functional potential with

high molecular resolution. Specifically, we demonstrate shifts in the potential for (1) microbial

nutrient acquisition across pH gradients; (2) stress, transport, and redox-based processes across

changes in soil bulk density; and (3) genes and organisms associated with soil greenhouse gas

emissions across biomes. We also uncover a suite of metabolic processes that are enriched in the

microbial genomes of energy-rich soils. These changes were coincident with phylogenetically

congruent compositional shifts – suggesting that closely related soil microbial taxa are sensitive

to similar environmental stressors. Our work enables us to better understand microbial lifestyles

that support the persistence of certain members over others along environmental gradients; such

knowledge underlies a predictive understanding of soil microbiome changes with shifts in the

global climate and is vital to constraining biochemical reactions that regulate the release of

greenhouse gasses from soils.

Materials and Methods.

Dataset Description and Normalization.

We collected 1512 manually-curated soil metagenomic samples available in the Joint

Genome Institute's (JGI) Integrated Microbial Genomes and Microbiomes (IMG/M) platform in

August 2020 as described by Graham et al. 2024 (accepted), of which 1493 were associated with

latitudinal and longitudinal information. Samples span most major biomes and continents (Figure

1; Table S2 and Table S3). Sequences were quality controlled, assembled, and annotated by

KEGG Orthology (KO), the Pfam and TIGRFAM protein family databases, and read-based

taxonomy by the JGI's standard workflows (80–84). While sample collection and sequencing

methods inevitably vary in meta-analyses such as the current study, we applied standardized

analytical workflows to minimize methodological artifacts to the greatest extent possible. Due to

the collective size of assembled sequences, we focused on annotations and read-based taxonomy

for downstream analysis, which is more computationally feasible than sequence assemblies or

metagenome-assembled genomes that are impractical at the scale of thousands of samples.

Each dataset (i.e., KO, Pfam, TIGRFAM, and read-based taxonomy) was independently

normalized by the following procedure prior to analysis. For Pfam and KO annotations only,

samples with greater than 2000 total reads were retained. For TIGRFAM annotations only,

samples with greater than 500 total reads were retained. A lower cutoff was used for TIGRFAM

data as the total read counts were lower in this dataset. For all three annotations, only functions

with a non-zero value in at least half of the samples or a total count of 7560 (corresponding to an

average of 5 reads per sample for each function) were retained. For species, we retained only

samples with greater than 4000 counts and species with a non-zero value in at least half of the

samples or a total count of 7560 (corresponding to an average of 5 reads per sample for each

species). After removing low abundant samples and functions/species, all four datasets were then

normalized using the trimmed mean of M values (TMM) method (154). We found that this

method gave us the best results when examining normalized data using a box and whisker plot

(Figure S1).

We assigned biome type and soil properties to each sample using publicly available

resources. We used latitude and longitude to derive using Olson biomes (155) for each sample

using data provided by the World Wildlife Federation (156). Soil parameters were collected from

the SoilGrids250m database from 0-5 cm (157). SoilGrids250m is a spatial interpolation of

global soil parameters using ~150,000 soil samples and 158 remote sensing-based products.

Here, we focus on six parameters often associated with soil microbiomes: bulk density, cation

exchange capacity, nitrogen, pH, soil organic C, and clay content. Because our focus on spatial

dynamics and soils were collected at various times, we did not include temporally dynamic

variables such as soil moisture or temperature in our set of environmental parameters, though we

acknowledge they may have profound impacts on the soil microbiome. Additionally, because

soil data are derived from a comprehensive spatial interpolation and not measured directly on

each soil sample, our models may fail to capture local-scale heterogeneity in relationships.

Further investigations that generate and leverage fully standardized data are needed to resolve

this discrepancy. Nonetheless, local heterogeneity should statistically weaken the relationships

observed here, and our results present a promising investigation into the global biogeography of

soil microbiomes.

Machine Learning for Genomic Fingerprints.

We selected random forests as our primary statistical approach by assessing the ability of

various machine learning algorithms to adequately parse soil microbial attributes across

environmental variables and ecological biomes. Models were built and validated using 10-fold

cross validation repeated five times, 50% of the data for training, and 50% of the data for testing.

Models from different algorithms were compared using cross validation (CV) scores and

variance explained (Figure S2). Random forest models consistently yielded comparatively high

CV scores and proportion of variance explained.

Thus, we constructed random forest models to extract genomic fingerprints from soil

microbiomes using two approaches (1) a supervised split across variables known to be associated

with soil microbiomes and (2) an unsupervised approach that allowed predictors and their

interactions to naturally arise. Random forest models were built in R Software (158) for each

attribute type independently using the 'caret' package (159).

In (1), we divided samples into either two groups containing the highest and lowest 10%

of values for each environmental factor or one group per biome. We then used random forests to

rank each microbial attribute according to their importance (i.e., difference in mean square error

normalized by standard error, varImp function in 'caret' package) to differentiate samples across

each environmental factor or biome. Subsequently, because variable importances followed an

exponential decay, we used breakpoint analysis to define a set of the most important variables

distinguishing each group ('strucchange' package, $h = 0.01$ with a minimum segment size of

two) (160). Because this resulted in one set of attributes that drove variation in soil microbiomes

in relation to a given environmental factor or biome, we extracted attributes associated with high

(positive slope) or low (negative slope) values of each environmental factor using linear

regression. The resultant attributes comprised two genomic fingerprints per environmental factor

or biome—one associated with low values and one associated with high values.

In (2), we first used k-means clustering to group samples with similar microbial attributes

using R packages: 'vegan' (161), 'mgcv' (162), and 'cluster' (163). The optimal number of

clusters was chosen by evaluating the total sum of squares and the silhouette index (164). To

determine the extent to which soil microbiomes within each cluster corresponded to changes in

environmental factors, we related the total normalized abundance of attributes per sample to each

environmental factor using linear regression. We then selected one cluster per attribute type for

deeper investigation, chosen by the number of significant correlations with environmental

factors. To generate a genomic fingerprint for the selected cluster, we extracted attributes that

were either most abundant or most variable within the cluster. As in approach (1), we used

breakpoint analysis to define a set of the most abundant attributes per cluster ('strucchange'

package, $h = 0.01$ with a minimum segment size of two). To determine the most variable

attributes per cluster, we calculated the coefficient of variation for each attribute and then used

breakpoint analysis to extract the most variable attributes.

We used the following packages for data manipulation and visualization: 'ggplot2' (165),

'dplyr' (166), 'factoextra' (167), 'Hmisc' (168), 'colorspace' (169), 'RColorBrewer' (170),

'gridExtra' (171), 'tidyverse' (172), and 'maps' (173). Additionally, for visualizations of read-

based taxonomy, we generated phylogenetic trees using phyloT v2 (174), an online tree

generator based on the Genome Taxonomy Database. Then, we visualized the tree in R using the

packages 'ggtree'(175), 'treeio'(176), and 'ggnewscale'(177). We generated heatmaps using the

'pheatmap' package (178).

Acknowledgements.

This work was performed under a Laboratory Directed Research and Development (LDRD) from

the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL). PNNL is operated by Battelle Memorial

Institute for the U.S. Department of Energy under Contract No. DE-AC05-76RL01830. We

thank the U.S. Department of Energy Joint Genome Institute (JGI) for maintaining the public

Integrated Microbial Genomes and Microbiomes (IMG/M) platform from which we obtained this

dataset.

Data availability.

All data are publicly available via the JGI IMG/MG platform. Please see Tables S2 and S3 for

further information. Code for data analysis and all figures is available at:

10.6084/m9.figshare.25374427.

Figures.

Figure 1. Dataset description. (A) Map of samples, (B) total assembled bp, and (C) number of

samples; all colored by biome according to Olson et al. (155). (D-I) distribution of environmental

variables from SoilGrids250m (157).

Figure 2. Most abundant genomic attributes across all soils. Relative abundance of the top 15

most abundant soil microbial genomic attributes annotated by (A) KEGG orthology, protein

family (B, Pfam, C, TIGRFAM), and (D) read-based taxonomy collated at the genus-level.

Figure 3. Genomic fingerprints of high- and low-pH and -bulk density soil environments.

Genomic attributes selected in at least one fingerprint for pH or bulk density are visualized.

Pearson correlation coefficient is shown from blue to red in the primary heatmap, with bulk

density correlations on the left and pH correlations on the right. The sidebars (respectively, from

left to right) represent variable importance from random forest models of pH and bulk density

and the type of attribute (e.g., KO, Pfam, TIGRFAM). Please refer to Extended Data 1 for more

information on the specific attributes associated with each soil environment. Read-based

taxonomy collated at the genus-level for each fingerprint is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Genomic fingerprints of soil biomes and phylogenetic distributions of selected soil

microbiomes. (A) The normalized abundance of microbial attributes selected in at least one

biome fingerprint is shown from blue to red. Variable importance is shown in the left side bar

and attribute type is shown in the right side bar. Please refer to Extended Data 1 for more

information on the specific attributes associated with each soil environment. (B) Microbial

genuses selected in at least one fingerprint are depicted on a phylogenetic tree (generated by

PhyloT). The innermost circle shows Pearson correlations with bulk density from green to purple

and variable importance from green to orange. The middle circle shows Pearson correlations

with pH from green to purple and variable importance from green to orange. The outer circle

shows the normalized abundance of genera across biomes (from outer to inner: Temperate

Broadleaf & Mixed Forests; Tundra; Mediterranean Forests, Woodlands & Scrub; Tropical &

Subtropical Grasslands, Savannas & Shrublands; Temperate Grasslands, Savannas &

Shrublands; Boreal Forests/Taigas; Deserts & Xeric Shrublands; Temperate Conifer Forests;

Tropical & Subtropical Dry Broadleaf Forests; Flooded Grasslands & Savannas; Tropical &

Subtropical Moist Broadleaf Forests; and Montane Grasslands & Shrublands). Variable

importance is shown in the outermost ring from green to orange.s

Figure 5. Unsupervised clusters of microbial attributes associated with multiple soil factors.

Column (A) KEGG Orthology, (B) microbial genus, and (C) Pfam. TIGRFAM annotations did

not yield a satisfactory model. Rows represent environmental variables. The total normalized

abundance of an attribute per sample is plotted against each environmental variable. Lines and

statistics represent linear regression.

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Importance (pH)

Importance (bulk density)

■ KO
■ pfam
■ tigrfam

Bulk
Density   pH