Modeling Cellular Resource Allocation Reveals Low Phenotypic Plasticity of C_4 Plants and Infers Environments of C_4 Photosynthesis Evolution

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Total word count (excluding summary, references and legends):	6499	No. of figures:	5 (Figs 1–5 in color)
Summary:	199	No. of Tables:	1
Introduction:	963	No of Supporting Information files:	20 (Methods S1–S5, Tables S1–S8, Figs. S1–S7)
Materials and Methods:	2380		
Results:	2144		
Discussion:	900		
Acknowledgements:	64		

Summary

- The regulation of resource allocation in biological systems observed today is the cumulative result of natural selection in ancestral and recent environments. To what extent are observed resource allocation patterns in different photosynthetic types optimally adapted to current conditions, and to what extent do they reflect ancestral environments? Here, we explore these questions for C₃, C₄, and C₃-C₄ intermediate plants of the model genus *Flaveria*.
- We developed a detailed mathematical model of carbon fixation, which accounts for various environmental parameters and for energy and nitrogen partitioning across photosynthetic components. This allows us to assess environment-dependent plant physiology and performance as a function of resource allocation patterns.
- To achieve maximal CO₂ fixation rates under growth conditions differing from those experienced during their evolution, C₄ species need to re-allocate significantly more nitrogen between photosynthetic components than their C₃ relatives. As this is linked to a limited phenotypic plasticity, observed resource distributions in C₄ plants still reflect optimality in ancestral environments, allowing their quantitative inference.
- Our work allows us to quantify environmental effects on resource allocation and performance of photosynthetic organisms. This understanding paves the way for interpreting present photosynthetic physiology in the light of evolutionary history.

Key Words

C₄ photosynthesis, C₃ photosynthesis, C₃-C₄ photosynthesis, evolution, *Flaveria*, phenotypic plasticity, resource allocation, systems modeling

Introduction

Metabolic efficiency is an important determinant of organismal fitness (Ibarra *et al.*, 2002; Heckmann *et al.*, 2013). Major constraints on metabolic fluxes can arise from scarcity of chemical compounds, e.g., nitrogen necessary to produce enzymes (Baudouin-Cornu *et al.*, 2001), or from the limited solvent capacity of cellular compartments (Atkinson, 1969; Beg *et al.*, 2007). To ensure optimal metabolic efficiency, gene regulation has to balance available resources appropriately. Modern methods of modeling metabolism rely strongly on the assumption of metabolic optimality under physico-chemical constraints (Oberhardt *et al.*, 2009; de Oliveira Dal'Molin *et al.*, 2010; Dourado *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, resource allocation and its constraints are under intense investigation, although these studies are mostly

restricted to unicellular organisms. However, the metabolic efficiency of a given metabolic system is not static, but depends on the environment. Thus, uncertainties about the environmental properties that an organism has adapted to remain a major obstacle in the application of these methods. Autotrophic systems, such as plant leaves, are ideal to study the interaction of the environment and resource allocation, as the diversity of nutrient sources is much lower than for heterotrophs, which results in a reduced complexity of the space of possible environments. Furthermore, the effect of environmental factors on plant performance, e.g., the rate of CO₂ assimilation, have been studied intensively (von Caemmerer, 2000). In particular, C₃ and C₄ photosynthesis represent complementary gene expression and resource allocation patterns that result in high fitness in specific ecological niches.

In all plants, the fixation of carbon from CO₂ is catalyzed by the enzyme ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate carboxylase/oxygenase (Rubisco) as part of the Calvin-Benson cycle. Rubisco also shows an affinity for O₂, resulting in a toxic by-product, which needs to be recycled by the photorespiratory pathway and causes a significant loss of carbon and energy (Maurino & Peterhansel, 2010). Rubisco is an important resource sink in the leaf proteome of plants: it utilizes up to 30% of leaf nitrogen and up to 65% of total soluble protein (Ellis, 1979; Makino *et al.*, 2003). While C₃ plants operate the Calvin-Benson cycle in their mesophyll cells to fix carbon, C₄ plants express it in the bundle sheath cells and use phosphoenolpyruvate (PEP) carboxylase (PEPC) for the initial fixation of carbon. The resulting C₄ acids are eventually decarboxylated in the bundle sheath cells, creating a local high-CO₂ environment around Rubisco that suppresses photorespiration. The C₄ cycle is completed by the regeneration of PEP by pyruvate, phosphate dikinase (PPDK).

Compared to C₃ photosynthesis, C₄ metabolism requires additional nitrogen to produce the C₄ enzymes; this additional investment is counteracted by reduced Rubisco requirements due to the concentration of CO₂ around Rubisco (Sage, 2004). The energy requirements of C₄ metabolism also differ from those of the C₃ pathway (Munekage & Taniguchi, 2016), as further ATP is needed for the regeneration of PEP, while ATP and NADPH requirements of the photorespiratory pathway are reduced. The metabolic efficiencies of the C₃ and C₄ system depend strongly on the environment. To achieve optimal metabolic efficiency, plants have to coordinate gene expression of the Calvin-Benson cycle, C₄ cycle, photorespiration, and light reactions in a complex response to the availability of light energy and nitrogen, as well as factors that influence the rate of photorespiration. The diversity of photosynthetic resource allocation patterns is emphasized by the existence of C₃-C₄ intermediate photosynthesis in some plants, where features of the

archetypical C_4 syndrome are only partially expressed. The *Flaveria* genus contains closely related plants of C_3 , C_4 , and C_3 - C_4 intermediate types, making it an ideal system to study the interaction between resource allocation and environment in photosynthesis.

The selection pressures caused by environmental factors over evolutionary time scales are expected to lead to corresponding adaptations of gene regulation. In contrast, environmental variation on the time scale of individual generations may select for regulatory programs that adjust plant metabolism to the environment they currently face, a process called phenotypic plasticity. Reviewing the occurrence of phenotypic plasticity in C_3 and C_4 plants, Sage and McKown (2006) concluded that C_4 plants show inherent constraints that prevent the acclimation to environmental changes. Although the occurrence of phenotypic plasticity in plants is intensively studied, the plasticity in terms of resource allocation is not fully understood. In particular, it is not clear whether the phenotypic plasticity of different plant lineages is sufficient to acclimate optimally to the current environment; instead, many plants might still allocate at least parts of their resources in patterns that were optimal in the environments that dominated their recent evolutionary history.

The areas where C_4 dicotyledonous plants are assumed to have evolved are regions of low latitude showing combinations of heat, drought, and salinity (Sage, 2004). For *Flaveria*, analyses that combine phylogenetic context and environmental information point toward an evolutionary origin in open habitats with high temperatures (Powell, 1978; Sage, 2004; McKown *et al.*, 2005). The last common C_3 ancestor of the current *Flaveria* species lived 2–3 million years ago (Christin *et al.*, 2011), when CO_2 levels were significantly lower than the current, postindustrial level (Sage & Cowling, 1999; Gerhart & Ward, 2010). In summary, *Flaveria* species likely faced high light intensities, high temperature, and low atmospheric CO_2 level during their recent evolutionary history.

Here, we aim for a detailed understanding of the interplay between resource allocation and current and past evolutionary environments in plant physiology, examining C_3 , C_4 , and C_3 - C_4 intermediate photosynthesis. To achieve this goal, we developed a mathematical model for these photosynthetic types that integrates knowledge on resource costs and relevant environmental factors. Using this model, we seek to understand (1) to what extent resource allocation is phenotypically plastic and to what extent it appears adapted to an environment the plants were facing during their evolutionary history; and (2) if resource allocation patterns can be used to identify unique environments of optimal adaption.

Results

Predicting resource allocation and fitness across environments and photosynthetic types: a mathematical model

The standard method to model the light- and enzyme-limited CO₂ assimilation rate of C₃, C₄, and C₃-C₄ intermediate plants is based on the mechanistic biochemical models of Berry and Farquhar (1978), Farquhar *et al.* (1980), and von Caemmerer (1989; 2000). With great success, these models predict the CO₂ assimilation rate considering enzymatic activities and various environmental parameters, including mesophyll CO₂ level and light intensities. In many ecosystems, the most limiting resource for plant growth is nitrogen (Malhi *et al.*, 2001; Vance, 2001). The increased nitrogen-use efficiency of C₄ species compared to C₃ relatives indicates that nitrogen availability may have played a major role in C₄ evolution (Vogan & Sage, 2011). However, existing model implementations predict CO₂ assimilation rates from known or estimated enzyme activities and electron transport capacity. Thus, these models do not allow to assess the effects of nitrogen investment into different classes of proteins—including enzymes and components of the electron transport chain—on the CO₂ assimilation rate of a given photosynthetic type in a specific environment.

Here, we present a nitrogen-dependent light- and enzyme-limited model for the steady-state CO₂ assimilation rate (Fig. 1). The model describes C₃, C₄, and all intermediate photosynthetic types depending on its parameterization, including the nitrogen investment into its different components (see Heckmann *et al.* (2013) for details and Supporting Information for our parameterization). We modified the light- and enzyme-limited C₃-C₄ models developed by von Caemmerer (2000) and added a fixed budget of nitrogen constraining the total abundance of photosynthetic proteins. Furthermore, we extended the existing models by explicitly modeling the ATP and NADPH production of the linear and cyclic electron transport (LET and CET, respectively). Thus, a photosynthetic nitrogen budget is distributed across the enzymes of the Calvin-Benson cycle in the mesophyll and bundle sheath cell, the C₄ cycle, and the proteins of the linear and cyclic electron transport in the thylakoid membranes. Combining this model with the temperature dependency of the photosynthetic apparatus (Massad *et al.*, 2007) results in a detailed model of photosynthesis that incorporates leaf nitrogen level, light intensity, mesophyll CO₂ and O₂ levels, as well as the effects of temperature (see Methods for details).

In order to understand physiological data in the context of adaptive environments, we aim to find optimal resource allocation in a given environment. To this end, we assume that resource allocation has been

optimized by natural selection to maximize the net CO₂ assimilation rate (Zhu *et al.*, 2007; Gerhart & Ward, 2010; Vogan & Sage, 2012). We developed a robust optimization pipeline that reliably finds optimal resource allocation dependent on environments and photosynthetic types (see Methods for details). In previous work, optimality assumptions were successfully used in a variety of plant systems biology contexts; examples are candidate identification of photosynthetic engineering targets (Zhu *et al.*, 2007), explanation of the coordination of C₃ photosynthesis (Friend, 1991; Maire *et al.*, 2012), the exploration of evolutionary trajectories of C₄ photosynthesis (Heckmann *et al.*, 2013) and of inter-cellular pathways in C₂ plants (Mallmann *et al.*, 2014), and the prediction of dynamic proteome allocation in cyanobacteria (Reimers *et al.*, 2017). We use optimality of CO₂ fixation rate to determine (1) the optimal partitioning of NADPH between the Calvin-Benson cycle and the photorespiratory pathway, (2) the optimal partitioning of ATP across the Calvin-Benson cycle, photorespiratory pathway, and the C₄ cycle (if relevant), (3) the optimal proportion of LET and CET, and (4) the relative investment of nitrogen into Rubisco, the C₄ cycle enzymes, and the proteins of the light-dependent reactions (see Methods). For a specific photosynthetic type, the optimization procedure estimates the resource allocation that is optimally adapted to a given environment. Note that at the point of optimal resource allocation, the light- and enzyme-limited CO₂ assimilation rates are equal, as otherwise resources could be shifted from the non-limiting to the limiting sector.

Optimal resource allocation in the evolutionarily relevant environment explains physiological data and outperforms models based on the growth environment in C₄ plants

Do photosynthetic types exhibit differences in phenotypic plasticity, *i.e.*, do they differ in their ability to adjust their photosynthetic resource allocation to optimally fit the environment in which they were grown? Or is resource investment static and reflects past environments in which the plants' ancestors evolved? To compare these competing hypotheses, we predict physiological data of plants that are either optimally adapted to the experimental growth conditions used in the respective studies ('growth scenario') or to the environments in which they likely evolved ('evolutionary scenario'). This *in silico* experiment also serves as validation for our modeling framework; if the parameterization for *Flaveria* and our optimality assumptions are correct, we would expect the model to explain physiological responses in one of the two or an intermediate scenario. Based on the suggested environment of C₄ evolution in *Flaveria* (Powell, 1978; Sage, 2004; McKown *et al.*, 2005), the evolutionary environment is defined as

having 1750 $\mu\text{mol quanta m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$ light intensity, 30°C temperature, 150 μbar mesophyll CO_2 , and 200 mbar mesophyll O_2 .

Vogan and Sage (2012) measured the net CO_2 assimilation rate as a function of intercellular CO_2 concentration (A- C_i curve) for *Flaveria robusta* (C_3), *F. ramosissima* (C_3 - C_4), and *F. bidentis* (C_4). In this experiment, plants were grown at light intensities of 560 $\mu\text{mol quanta m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$, 37°C at daytime, current atmospheric O_2 concentration and current or low atmospheric CO_2 concentrations. However, CO_2 assimilation curves calculated from a model parameterized for optimal CO_2 assimilation in these growth conditions are qualitatively different from the experimental curves (Fig. 2a; Supporting Information Figs. S2–S4). In contrast, the modeled curves based on a model optimally adapted to the evolutionary scenario are qualitatively consistent with the measured curves; this difference is especially pronounced in the case of the C_4 plant *F. bidentis*.

In the same study, Vogan and Sage (2012) measured the CO_2 assimilation rate for temperatures between 15°C and 45°C (A-Temperature curve; Fig. 2b; Supporting Information Fig. S5). The results assuming an optimal allocation under the evolutionary scenario agree qualitatively with the measured data, again in contrast to the values predicted from a model optimally adapted to the growth environment. Note that none of the species in this data set were used to obtain the temperature response curves used in the model (see Methods).

In an independent experiment, Vogan and Sage (2011) measured the dependence of CO_2 assimilation rate on leaf nitrogen levels in C_3 , C_3 - C_4 intermediate, C_4 -like, and C_4 *Flaveria* species (Fig. 3). The plants were grown at 554 $\mu\text{mol quanta m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$ light intensity, 30°C at daytime, at current atmospheric CO_2 and O_2 concentrations. Again, the model results assuming optimal resource allocation in the evolutionary scenario are consistent with the measured data and outperform the results based on optimality in the growth scenario for C_3 - C_4 intermediate, C_4 -like, and C_4 plants.

We quantified the disagreement between measured curves and predicted results through the residual sum of squares (Table 1). In C_4 and C_4 -like plants, the evolutionary scenario predicts all measured curves better than the growth scenario, except for the A-Temperature curve for C_4 plants grown at low CO_2 concentration. Jointly considering all measured curves in Figs. 2 and 3 as well as Supporting Information Figs. S2–S5 (Vogan & Sage, 2011; Vogan & Sage, 2012), we find that for the C_4 and C_4 -like species, squared

residuals for the evolutionary scenario are statistically significantly smaller than for the growth scenario (C_4 : $P = 6.0 \times 10^{-8}$; C_4 -like: $P = 0.007$; Wilcoxon rank sum tests). This finding indicates that observed resource allocation patterns in C_4 and C_4 -like plants reflect past environments relevant during evolution more than the environment in which the assayed plants were grown. Conversely, and as expected from Table 1, the observed differences between predictions from the evolutionary and growth scenario are not statistically significant for the C_3 and the C_3 - C_4 intermediate species (C_3 : $P = 0.35$; C_3 - C_4 : $P = 0.55$).

Dwyer *et al.* (2007) performed detailed experiments on the photosynthetic resource allocation and performance of the C_4 species *F. bidentis*. This data allows us to compare the predicted nitrogen investment into the three major photosynthetic components—Rubisco, C_4 cycle, and electron transport chain—as well as the corresponding CO_2 assimilation rate to experimentally observed resource allocation patterns. The plants were grown under 25°C or 35°C at daytime, 550 $\mu\text{mol quanta m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$, and current atmospheric CO_2 and O_2 concentrations. Model predictions of chlorophyll content and the amount of photosystem II agree within a factor of 1.10 to 1.22 with values measured by Dwyer *et al.* (2007) (see Supporting Information Table S7). For plants grown at 25°C, the resource allocation determined under the evolutionary scenario agrees with the measured data within a factor of 0.47 to 1.22 (Fig. 4a); at 35°C, agreement is within a factor of 0.43 to 1.12 (Fig. 4b). In both cases, agreement is much lower for predictions in the growth scenario. We assessed the statistical significance of the superior performance of the evolutionary scenario by comparing the distributions of the squared residuals (expressed as fractions of the experimental means). The resource allocation calculated for the evolutionary scenario outperforms the growth scenario significantly for the data represented in Fig. 4 ($P = 7.2 \times 10^{-5}$, Wilcoxon rank sum test).

Although we could obtain the majority of our model parameters from the literature, the relationship of cytochrome f and the maximal electron transport rate of the CET had to be estimated (see Methods). We performed a sensitivity analysis to examine the robustness of the results to changes in the estimated parameters and to uncertainties in values obtained from the literature, focusing on parameters with high uncertainty or major expected effect on model predictions (see Supporting Information Method S5). The predictions based on the evolutionary scenario outperform those based on the growth environment consistently across all parameter sets (Supporting Information Fig. S1).

The model identifies a unique evolutionary environment for C₄ photosynthesis in Flaveria

The model optimally adapted to the evolutionary scenario leads to superior predictions of plant performance and resource allocation in C₄ plants compared to a parameterization optimized for the growth scenario across diverse physiological data sets. The inferior performance of the growth scenario model indicates a lack of phenotypic plasticity of resource allocation in C₄ plants. This finding points to the possibility that the environment most relevant for recent evolutionary adaptation of a given C₄ plant could be inferred quantitatively from observations on plant physiology and resource allocation. Thus, to infer a typical evolutionary environment for C₄ *Flaveria bidentis*, we calculated optimal resource allocation under conditions covering plausible ranges of mesophyll CO₂ partial pressure, temperature, and light intensities to identify the conditions that best explain the empirical data (Fig. 5). As atmospheric O₂ concentration remained almost constant for at least the last few million years (Gerhart & Ward, 2010), this environmental parameter is set to a constant value. We use the empirical data of Dwyer *et al.* (2007), as this data set comprises detailed measurements for each nitrogen pool and the resulting CO₂ assimilation rate, allowing us to quantify the discrepancy between modeled and measured values as the mean squared residuals (expressed as fractions of experimental means).

We find that the model showing minimal prediction error defines a unique environment (Fig. 5), exhibiting 1562.5 $\mu\text{mol quanta m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$ light intensity, 30°C, a mesophyll CO₂ level of 100 μbar , and an O₂ level of 200 mbar. As indicated in Fig. 5, the areas in which the model successfully describes the empirical values generally show high light intensities, intermediate to high temperatures, and a trend towards low CO₂ partial pressures. High light intensities and low CO₂ levels, as in the evolutionary scenario, favor an increased nitrogen investment into the dark reactions, which goes along with a reduced investment into the electron transport chain. The effect of temperature is of special importance for plants using the C₄ cycle, as temperature increases PEPC activity drastically and therefore reduces the necessary nitrogen investment into the C₄ cycle. This allows an increased investment into the electron transport chain and Rubisco, which show reduced activity at elevated temperatures due to thermal instabilities.

Our results indicate that C₄ *Flaveria* species show a lower degree of photosynthetic phenotypic plasticity than closely related C₃ species. On a molecular level, this plasticity predominantly requires the re-allocation of nitrogen between the major photosynthetic protein pools. To assess the costs of phenotypic plasticity, we thus quantified the total fraction of nitrogen that needs to be re-allocated between photosynthetic pools to optimally adjust photosynthesis from the evolutionary scenario to a

given growth environment (δ_n , see Methods). We find that photosynthetic types that utilize the C_4 cycle require a consistently higher amount of re-allocation compared to C_3 plants ($P = 1.5 \times 10^{-5}$, sign test, see Supporting Information Table S5). Our results thus reveal a link between required nitrogen re-allocation and limited photosynthetic phenotypic plasticity (see Supporting Information Tables S4–S6), suggesting a possible causal relationship.

Discussion

Our novel modeling framework allows us to study the interplay between photosynthetic plant performance and resource investment on the molecular level. Comparisons of model predictions with phenotypic and molecular data reveal that C_4 plants have low phenotypic plasticity in terms of resource allocation. This limited phenotypic plasticity may be explained by the large amount of nitrogen that needs to be re-allocated by C_4 plants to optimally adapt to a given growth environment (Supporting Information Table S5). The lack of phenotypic plasticity allowed us to make quantitative predictions for the environments that dominated recent evolution of C_4 photosynthesis in *Flaveria*. Previously, environments relevant for C_4 photosynthesis evolution have been inferred—mostly qualitatively—based on C_3 - C_4 habitat comparisons (Powell, 1978; Sage, 2004; McKown *et al.*, 2005) and geophysiological considerations (Christin *et al.*, 2011). Our results are consistent with and refine these earlier estimates.

In contrast to our findings for C_4 and C_4 -like plants, the performance of the evolutionary and the growth scenario models is similar for C_3 and C_3 - C_4 intermediate *Flaveria* species (Table 1; Figs. 2 and 3; Supporting Information Figs. S2–S5). It is conceivable that the lack of superior performance for the evolutionary scenario in C_3 *Flaveria* species is not a result of higher phenotypic plasticity in these plants, but is due to an inappropriate parameterization of the evolutionary scenario. The environment most relevant for the recent evolution of C_3 *Flaveria* may be different from the environment used in the simulations, which was chosen based on its relevance for the C_4 lineages. To explore this possibility, we simulated a wide range of alternative environments, testing if resource allocation optimized for any of these leads to significantly improved model predictions for the data from Vogan and Sage (2012) for C_3 plants (Supporting Information Figs. S6 and S7). However, none of the environments tested led to a significant improvement. This result is in agreement with habitat studies that show that niches of C_3 and C_4 *Flaveria* species overlap (Powell, 1978). A more likely explanation for the similar performance of evolutionary and growth scenario models in C_3 plants could lie in the small amount of re-allocation C_3 plants require to transfer adaptively between environments (Supporting Information Tables S4–S6). Our results thus suggest that C_3 (but not

C₄) plants are phenotypically plastic enough to show some degree of adaptation towards current, postindustrial conditions.

Given the complexity of our physiological model, we needed to make a number of assumptions. We addressed uncertainties in model parameters through a sensitivity analysis, showing that our conclusions are robust against variation in these parameters (Supporting Information Fig. S1). Furthermore, our predictions assume that nitrogen availability in the evolutionary scenario is identical to current nitrogen availability.

Even though we find that the evolutionary scenario leads to superior predictions of physiological responses in C₄ plants when compared to the growth scenario, the PEPC activity predicted to be optimal in the evolutionary scenario is approximately 55% lower than experimentally observed data (Fig. 4). This discrepancy might in part be explained by the assumption of a fixed average daytime temperature in the simulations. Temperature variation strongly affects the PEPC activity; lower temperatures in the morning and evening may require higher PEPC activity than assumed in the simulations. Although predictions for total nitrogen investment into the thylakoids based on the evolutionary scenario are highly consistent with the measurements, the model overestimates the amount of cytochrome f by a factor of 2 (1.65 $\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$ instead of the measured 0.87 $\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$ for plants grown at 25°C, 1.43 $\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$ instead of 0.81 $\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$ at 35°C). However, the error of the measurements is uncertain, as no replicate measurements were performed for this parameter (Dwyer *et al.*, 2007). Discrepancies between model predictions and observations may also be in part due to error propagation from modeled amounts of chlorophyll and the photosystems. In each simulation, we optimized resource allocation for an environment that represents a static approximation to the dynamic environment a plant is facing. As diurnal and annual variations (which are no focus of this work) potentially show short-term trade-offs (Mori *et al.*, 2017; Reimers *et al.*, 2017), these might lead to a discrepancy between modeled and real evolutionary scenario. In particular, the difference between periodic and fluctuating conditions of the natural ancestral habitat on one hand, and the stable experimental growth conditions in audited growth chambers and the statically modeled evolutionary scenario on the other hand might have a strong effect.

In summary, we developed a general model of the complex photosynthetic apparatus, its resource requirements, and its interactions with environmental conditions. The presented modeling pipeline allows us to determine the extent of phenotypic plasticity and the relevance of different environmental

conditions for photosynthetic organisms using C₃, C₃-C₄ intermediate, and C₄ metabolism. Applied to the physiological data from *Flaveria*, our work points to a strongly constrained phenotypic plasticity of C₄ plants towards all considered environmental factors. This allows us to infer unique selective environments from plant performance and resource allocation data. More generally, our model provides a powerful tool to analyze the resource allocation of photosynthetic organisms and its dependence on environmental factors, allowing estimates for physiological and molecular parameters for which measurements are currently infeasible or impractical. This may prove to be of particular utility for systematically assessing the likely performance of crops in environments distinct from their natural habitats and for suggesting engineering targets in cases of limited phenotypic plasticity.

Description

Model overview

The nitrogen-dependent light- and enzyme-limited model allows us to calculate the environment-dependent net steady-state CO₂ assimilation rate (*A*) of C₃, C₄, and all C₃-C₄ intermediate photosynthetic types. The model inputs are parameters defining the photosynthetic type and species-specific, invariable biochemical properties of the leaf to be modeled. Additionally, the input parameters comprise the following environmental factors: light intensity, leaf nitrogen level, temperature, and CO₂ and O₂ mesophyll partial pressures. We simulate a plant that is adapted to the input environment with respect to photosynthetic nitrogen and energy allocation. To this end, the nitrogen and energy allocation pattern that maximizes the net steady-state CO₂ assimilation rate (*A*) is calculated via optimization, subject to the environmental and species-specific input parameters.

Environmental factors and evolutionary parameters

We specify the environment in terms of the following factors: light intensity, leaf nitrogen level, temperature, and CO₂ and O₂ mesophyll partial pressures. The photosynthetic type is defined by six parameters: the Rubisco distribution between mesophyll and bundle sheath cells (β); the Rubisco kinetics, (specified through a single parameter, k_{ccat} [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$], due to the known trade-off relationships between the kinetic parameters (Savir *et al.*, 2010)); the maximal C₄ cycle activity (V_{pmax} , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$]); the fraction of glycine decarboxylated by the glycine decarboxylase complex in the bundle sheath cell that is derived from oxygenation by Rubisco in the mesophyll cell (ξ); the Michaelis constant of PEPC for bicarbonate (K_p , [μbar]), and the bundle sheath cell conductance (g_s , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$]) (see Heckmann *et al.*

(2013) for details). The values for the parameters are taken from the literature (see Supporting Information for details).

Nitrogen allocation

To calculate the CO₂ assimilation rate, we focus on the photosynthetic nitrogen pool (N_{ps} , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$]). In our model, N_{ps} can be allocated across the following major pools of leaf photosynthetic nitrogen: the main enzyme of the Calvin-Benson cycle (n_{Etot}), Rubisco; the main enzymes of the C₄ cycle (n_{C4}), PEPC and PPDK; and the thylakoids (n_{Jmax}), which include the electron transport chains. N_{ps} is calculated as a fraction of total leaf nitrogen (N_t , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$]) based on phenomenological observations according to Eqn 1, which comprises measured values for the investment into Rubisco, 12%, and the investment into the thylakoids (n_{fit} , [fraction]) of C₃ plants (Vogan & Sage, 2011; Vogan & Sage, 2012). n_{fit} represents a fit of the proportion of nitrogen invested into the thylakoids as a function of N_t , based on the data of Vogan and Sage (2011).

$$N_{ps} = (0.12 + n_{fit}) \cdot N_t \quad (1)$$

with

$$n_{fit} = \left(\frac{50.38 - 0.270 \cdot N_t \cdot 10^{-3} + 0.0005035 \cdot (N_t \cdot 10^{-3})^2}{100} \right)$$

We assume a nitrogen investment into the photorespiratory enzymes of 13.8%, as suggested by Zhu *et al.* (2007) for a ‘typical’ C₃ plant. To account for the reduced enzyme requirements of the photorespiratory cycle, we assume that N_{ps} increases by 10% in plants that show sufficient C₄ cycle activity; in our analyses, this applies to the C₃-C₄ intermediate, C₄-like, and C₄ species.

Nitrogen allocated to Rubisco

We only consider the nitrogen requirements of Rubisco in the Calvin-Benson cycle, as it accounts for the major nitrogen costs of this cycle (Evans & Seemann, 1989). The amount of catalytic sites of Rubisco (E_{tot} , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$]) is calculated from the invested nitrogen by Eqn 2, where n_{Etot} represents the fraction of N_{ps} invested into Rubisco:

$$E_{tot} = \frac{n_{Etot} \cdot N_{ps} \cdot 8}{11.4 \cdot 550} \quad (2)$$

The parameters of this relationship are taken from Harrison *et al.* (2009).

Nitrogen allocated to enzymes of the C₄ cycle

The nitrogen cost of C₄ cycle enzymes is calculated from data on enzyme kinetics. The nitrogen requirements of the C₄ cycle consider co-limitation of PEPC and PPDK, whose molecular weight (MW) and k_{cat} are used to calculate the maximal rate of C₄ cycle activity (Evans & von Caemmerer, 2000; Wang *et al.*,

2014). Eqn 3 represents the relationship between V_{pmax} and nitrogen investment into the C_4 enzymes ($n_{C4}N_{ps}$). MW^* represents the nitrogen requirement of a catalytic site, assuming the nitrogen content is 16% (Makino *et al.*, 2003). Indices declare the considered enzyme.

$$V_{pmax} = \frac{n_{C4} \cdot N_{ps}}{\left(\frac{MW^*_{PPDK}}{kcat_{PPDK}}\right) + \left(\frac{MW^*_{PEPC}}{kcat_{PEPC}}\right)} \quad (3)$$

Nitrogen and the maximal electron transport rate

Nitrogen invested into the thylakoids ($N_{thy} = N_t n_{thy}$, [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$]) is related to the maximal electron transport rate (J_{max} , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$]) via the amount of cytochrome f (cyt, [mmol/mol Chl]) and by considering photosystems I and II (PSI and PSII, [mmol/mol Chl]) as well as the light harvesting complexes (LHC, [mmol/mol Chl]). We use data from Ghannoum *et al.* (2005) for abundances of PSI and PSII to include phenomenological stoichiometry rules between LHC and the components of the electron transport chain (Eqns 4–8) and to relate N_{thy} to the amount of cyt (Eqns 9–11). We assume that the chlorophyll content is shared between PSI, PSII, and LHC (Eqns 7 and 8). To be able to consider LET and CET, these complexes are split according to the proportion of LET (p) and CET ($1 - p$). Indices represent the considered pathway.

$$PSI_{LET} = 2 \cdot p \quad (4)$$

$$PSI_{CET} = 2 \cdot (1 - p) \quad (5)$$

$$PSII = 2.5 \quad (6)$$

$$LHC_{LET} = \frac{1000 \cdot p - PSII \cdot 60 - PSI_{LET} \cdot 184}{13} \quad (7)$$

$$LHC_{CET} = \frac{1000 \cdot (1-p) - PSI_{CET} \cdot 184}{13} \quad (8)$$

For the LET, J_{max} is related to N_{thy} as described in Eqns 9–12. cyt_{Jmax} describes the relation of cyt to J_{max} and was measured by Niinemets and Tenhunen (1997), who determined 156 (mmol e^-)/(mmol cyt s) across various C_3 species. Assuming 95% of LET in C_3 plants, this leads to a capacity of 172 (mmol e^-)/(mmol cyt s) for cyt_{Jmax} .

$$N_{thy_{LET}} = \frac{n_{Jmax} \cdot N_{ps} \cdot p}{Chl} \quad (9)$$

$$N_{LH_{LET}} = PSII \cdot 83.3 \cdot 0.06 + PSI_{LET} \cdot 32.8 \cdot 0.184 + LHC_{LET} \cdot 26 \cdot 0.013 \quad (10)$$

$$cyt_{LET} = \frac{1}{8.85} (N_{thy_{LET}} - N_{LH_{LET}}) \quad (11)$$

$$Jmax_{LET} = \max\left(0, \frac{cyt_{LET} \cdot Chl \cdot cyt_{Jmax}}{1000}\right) \quad (12)$$

Chlorophyll content (Chl , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}$]) is calculated based on an empirical factor (Vogan & Sage, 2012) that relates the amount of nitrogen invested into thylakoids ($n_{fit} N_t$, Eqn 1) to the amount of chlorophyll in C_3 plants:

$$Chl = n_{fit} \cdot N_t \cdot 0.0158887 \quad (13)$$

The response of chlorophyll content to leaf nitrogen does not differ significantly between different photosynthetic types in *Flaveria* (Vogan & Sage, 2011).

The derivation for the CET is analogous to the case of the LET (Eqns 14–17); additionally, the factor $J_{max_{CL}}$ is required, which describes the scaling of J_{max} with cyt for the CET:

$$N_{thy_{CET}} = \frac{n_{Jmax} \cdot N_{ps} \cdot (1-p)}{Chl} \quad (14)$$

$$N_{LH_{CET}} = PSI_{CET} \cdot 32.8 \cdot 0.184 + LHC_{CET} \cdot 26 \cdot 0.013 \quad (15)$$

$$cyt_{CET} = \frac{1}{8.85} (N_{thy_{CET}} - N_{LH_{CET}}) \quad (16)$$

$$J_{max_{CET}} = \max \left(0, \frac{cyt_{CET} \cdot Chl \cdot cyt_{Jmax} \cdot J_{max_{CL}}}{1000} \right) \quad (17)$$

Optimization procedure

To find the maximal CO_2 assimilation rate under the given environmental, physiological, and biochemical constraints, we optimize the allocation of photosynthetic nitrogen (assumed to depend only on total leaf nitrogen) into Rubisco, C_4 cycle, LET, and CET through an augmented Lagrangian approach. The optimization is constrained to make sure that the results are biologically realistic, e.g., C_3 species were not able to invest nitrogen into the C_4 cycle (see Supporting Information for additional details).

The model and its optimization were implemented in the R environment (R Core Team, 2017), using the `auglag`-function of the package ‘`nloptr`’ (Johnson, see Supporting Information for details). The optimization algorithm can use various local solvers; we chose a derivative-free solver, ‘`COBYLA`’. We adapted the parameters of the `auglag`-function as follows: (1) $xtol_rel=1 \times 10^{-100}$, i.e., we stop the optimization when all parameters changed by a proportion $< 1 \times 10^{-100}$ in the last iteration; (2) $localtol$, the tolerance applied in the selected local solver, is set to 1×10^{-100} ; and (3) $maxeval$, the maximal number of optimization iterations, is set to 5×10^3 . To ensure robust retrieval of the global optimum, we perform a large number of optimizations starting from a wide range of initial values (see Supporting Information for details). The successful run resulting in the maximal CO_2 assimilation rate is used.

Modeling the effect of light

The relationship of the electron transport rate (J_t , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$]) and the absorbed light of a certain irradiance (I , [$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$]) is presented in Eqns 18–20. I is related to J_t by a widely accepted empirical hyperbolic function (Eqn 18), (von Caemmerer, 2000; Bernacchi *et al.*, 2003) that includes the following parameters: (1) J_{max} , the maximum electron transport rate; (2) θ , the convexity of the transition between the initial slope and the plateau of the hyperbola; (3) α , the leaf absorptance; (4) f , a correction factor accounting for the spectral quality of the light; and (5) p , the fraction of absorbed quanta that reaches PSI and PSII of LET (with $(1 - p)$ reaching the CET). I_{abso} is set to I_{LET} and I_{CET} dependent on the considered path of electron transport. The fraction of irradiance that is absorbed by the LET is shared equally between PSI and PSII (resulting in the factor 0.5 in Eqn 19), while the fraction of irradiance that is absorbed by the CET is assumed to reach PSI in full.

$$J_t = \frac{I_{\text{abso}} + J_{\text{max}} - \sqrt{(I_{\text{abso}} + J_{\text{max}})^2 - 4 \theta I_{\text{abso}} J_{\text{max}}}}{2\theta} \quad (18)$$

$$I_{\text{LET}} = I \cdot \alpha \cdot (1 - f) \cdot p \cdot 0.5 \quad (19)$$

$$I_{\text{CET}} = I \cdot \alpha \cdot (1 - f) \cdot (1 - p) \quad (20)$$

In our model it is assumed that the electron transport chain is the only source of ATP and NADPH and that both are used exclusively for CO_2 fixation (von Caemmerer, 2000). As NADPH production results from LET, the amount of electrons is calculated using Eqns 18 and 19. The amount of electrons utilized for ATP production depends on both LET and CET (see below). There are multiple pathways of CET (Kramer & Evans, 2011); the model considers those pathways with an active Q-cycle and a ratio of two protons per electron. Note that Rubisco is assumed to be fully activated, independent of the irradiance (von Caemmerer, 2000).

The available energy needs to be partitioned between five pools: (1) the Calvin-Benson cycle (CBB) in the mesophyll; (2) the CBB in the bundle sheath; (3) the photorespiratory pathway (PR) in the mesophyll; (4) the PR in the bundle sheath cell; and (5) the C_4 pathway. This means that the available energy is calculated in total and then partitioned (Kanai & Edwards, 1999) into J_{mp} , J_{mc} and J_s , the fractions invested into the C_4 cycle, the CBB and the PR in the mesophyll, and the CBB and the PR in the bundle sheath cell, respectively. During optimization, the activity of each process is constrained by its allocated energy pool, *i.e.*, the energy allocation equals the relative energy allocation of the processes (see Supporting Information Method S1 for details).

The number of electrons transported to generate one molecule of ATP is unknown; for a discussion, see, e.g., Amthor (2010). We address these uncertainties by a factor that represents the ratio of electron transported per ATP in LET, which we set to $e_{ATP} = 4/3$ in this work. In *Flaveria*, this ratio is supported by Siebke *et al.* (1997). The ATP and the NADPH requirements of the CBB, the PR, and the C₄ cycle are based on the work of von Caemmerer (2000, see Supporting Information for equations). The energy requirements of the C₄ cycle are adequate for the C₄-subtypes that utilize NAD-malic enzyme or NADP-malic enzyme, whose ATP demand can be assumed to be equal. For the C₄-subtype that utilizes PEP carboxykinase, the energetic costs are different and currently unclear (Kanai & Edwards, 1999; von Caemmerer, 2000).

CO₂ assimilation rate

A limitation in the production of both ATP and NADPH arises under light-limited conditions (von Caemmerer, 2000). The ATP-limited CO₂ assimilation rate (A_j^{ATP}) is calculated according to the light-limiting model of von Caemmerer (2000) (see Supporting Information for equations). The NADPH limitation is calculated analogously to the ATP-limited scenario (A_j^{NADPH} , see Supporting Information). The light-limited CO₂ assimilation rate is then:

$$A_j = \min(A_j^{ATP}, A_j^{NADPH}) \quad (24)$$

The model for the CO₂ assimilation rate when the electron transport rate is not limiting (A_c) is taken from Heckmann *et al.* (2013) and extended by a parameter representing the fraction of PSII activity in the bundle sheath cells, which affects O₂ evolution. This parameter is set to p . In the whole model, each limitation is considered independently; the minimal CO₂ assimilation rate determines the limiting process:

$$A = \min(A_j, A_c) \quad (25)$$

Temperature-dependent model

Temperature affects the CO₂ assimilation rate by changing the maximal activity of the C₄ cycle, the carboxylation rate of Rubisco, and the electron transport rate. Temperature also affects the specificity of Rubisco as well as the Michaelis constants of Rubisco and PEPC. We model the temperature response by an extended Arrhenius function that describes two counteracting effects: rate increases with increasing temperature and enzyme inactivation through thermal instability (Massad *et al.*, 2007). We use

parameters taken from literature or fitted to available data (see Supporting Information for the equation and a full list of parameters and their sources).

Data used in the analyses

As the raw data of Vogan and Sage (2012) was not available, we extracted it from the corresponding figures using the Graph Grabber software provided by Quintessa Limited (Version 1.5.5). The measured curves consider the CO₂ assimilation rate per intercellular CO₂ concentration (C_i). We assume that the mesophyll CO₂ level is 85% of the C_i .

For the detailed analysis of the C₄ plants (Fig. 4), we used data published by Dwyer *et al.* (2007) for the CO₂ assimilation rate at 25°C and 35°C, Rubisco catalytic sites, the PEPC activity, and the nitrogen investment into the thylakoids. As PEPC activity in *Flaveria* does not serve as a proxy for C₄ cycle activity above values of around 130 μmol m⁻² s⁻¹ (Heckmann *et al.*, 2013), the maximal PEPC activity in C₄ plants is set to 130 μmol m⁻² s⁻¹.

Required nitrogen re-allocation (δ_n)

Required nitrogen re-allocation (δ_n , [fraction]) is defined as the total fraction of nitrogen that needs to be re-allocated between photosynthetic pools to optimally adjust photosynthesis from the evolutionary scenario (n_{Etot}^{evo} , n_{C4}^{evo} , n_{Jmax}^{evo}) to a given growth environment (n_{Etot}^{growth} , n_{C4}^{growth} , n_{Jmax}^{growth}):

$$\delta_n = \sum_{i \in \{Etot, C4, Jmax\}} |n_i^{evo} - n_i^{growth}| \quad (26)$$

Statistical information

The differences between adaptation scenarios are tested with the Wilcoxon rank sum test. Due to computational limitations, only a limited number of leaf nitrogen levels can be used to calculate the resource allocation for the data set of Vogan and Sage (2011) (Fig. 3). We considered 16 leaf nitrogen levels for the calculation of the resource allocation and CO₂ assimilation rates. We inferred the CO₂ assimilation rates required for the remaining leaf nitrogen levels from linear interpolation between the two closest leaf nitrogen levels. For the statistical analysis, the data of the modeled species, *F. pringlei* (C₃), *F. floridana* (C₃-C₄), *F. palmeri* (C₄-like), and *F. bidentis* (C₄), was considered. All statistical analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team, 2017).

The difference of δ_n for various photosynthetic types was tested by a sign test, applied to the data of Vogan and Sage (2011) (Supporting Information Table S5).

Acknowledgements

We thank Prof. Rowan F. Sage and Prof. Susanne von Caemmerer for providing raw data from their publications. We further acknowledge financial support by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (grants IRTG 1525 to DH, EXC 1028 to MJL and ES, CRC 680 and CRC 1310 to MJL). We would like to thank Bernhard O. Palsson and his group for hosting ES and for valuable discussions.

Author Contributions

ES, MJL, and DH designed the research, interpreted the results, and wrote the paper. ES developed and implemented the model for nitrogen allocation and light reactions, and implemented the optimization procedure. DH developed and implemented the model for temperature responses. ES and DH conducted simulations and data analysis.

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Figure legend

Table 1 In C₄ and C₄-like plants, the evolutionary scenario shows significantly smaller residual sum of squares compared to the growth scenario. The residual sum of squares for the evolutionary and growth

scenario, each photosynthetic type, and all measured curves of Vogan and Sage (2011) and Vogan and Sage (2012) are presented.

Figure 2 Model results based on optimality in the evolutionary scenario (solid lines) describe the measured data (dots $\pm$ SE) better than the model assuming optimal adaptation to the growth conditions (dashed lines) for *F. robusta* (C₃), *F. ramosissima* (C₃-C₄), and *F. bidentis* (C₄) grown at the current CO₂ level (data from Vogan and Sage (2012)). (a) The net CO₂ assimilation rate as a function of intercellular CO₂ concentration measured at 30°C. (b) The net CO₂ assimilation rate as a function of temperature.

Figure 3 The dependence of the CO₂ assimilation rate on leaf nitrogen levels for various *Flaveria* species is consistent with model results based on optimality in the evolutionary scenario (solid lines). For C₃-C₄ intermediate, C₄-like, and C₄ these results outperform the ones assuming optimal phenotypic adaptation to the growth conditions (dashed lines). The modeled species are *F. pringlei* (C₃), *F. floridana* (C₃-C₄), *F. palmeri* (C₄-like), and *F. bidentis* (C₄) (data from Vogan and Sage (2011)).

Figure 4 A detailed analysis of resource allocation and physiology in *F. bidentis* (C₄) shows a good agreement between experimental data (Dwyer *et al.*, 2007) and model results based on the evolutionary scenario (orange dots). Alternative model results assuming optimal phenotypic adaptation to the growth scenario consistently show higher disagreement with the data (purple dots). Values are mean log₂(modeled results/measured data) $\pm$ SE. (a) Plants grown at 25°C (b) Plants grown at 35°C. A = net CO₂ assimilation rate; N = nitrogen.

Figure 5 Discrepancy between measured and modeled *F. bidentis* data across diverse environments. The black dot indicates the environment that best explains the experimental data of Dwyer *et al.* (2007). The deviation between model predictions and measurements ('error') is defined as the mean of the squared residuals (which are expressed as fractions of experimental means).

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article.

Methods S1 Details about the optimization procedure of resource allocation

Methods S2 Equations of the energetic costs

Methods S3 Equations of the light-limited CO₂ assimilation rate

Methods S4 Details about the temperature-dependent model

Methods S5 Sensitivity analysis

Table S1 *Flaveria* parametrization.

Table S2 Lower and upper bounds for the model parameters subject to numerical optimization.

Table S3 The parameters of the temperature-dependent model.

Table S4 Required nitrogen re-allocation (δ_n) for *F. bidentis* (C₄) grown at different temperatures.

Table S5 Required nitrogen re-allocation (δ_n) for different on leaf nitrogen level for various *Flaveria* species.

Table S6 Required nitrogen re-allocation (δ_n) for various *Flaveria* species grown at current or low CO₂ level.

Table S7 The modeled and measured data of chlorophyll and PSII of *F. bidentis* (C₄).

Table S8 Distribution parameters used to generate the random parameter sets for the sensitivity.

Fig. S1 Sensitivity analysis.

Fig. S2 A-C_i curve measured at 40°C using plants grown at the current CO₂ level.

Fig. S3 A-C_i curve measured at 30°C using plants grown at the low CO₂ level.

Fig. S4 A-C_i curve measured at 40°C using plants grown at the low CO₂ level.

Fig. S5 A-Temperature curve using plants grown at the low CO₂ level

Fig. S6 Discrepancy between measured and modeled results of *F. robusta* (C₃) across diverse environments assuming no phosphate-limitation.

Fig. S7 Discrepancy between measured and modeled results of *F. robusta* (C₃) across diverse environments assuming phosphate-limitation.

Table 1 In C_4 and C_4 -like plants, the evolutionary scenario shows significantly smaller residual sum of squares compared to the growth scenario. The residual sum of squares for the evolutionary and growth scenario, each photosynthetic type, and all measured curves of Vogan and Sage (2011) and Vogan and Sage (2012) are presented.

		C_3	C_3 - C_4 intermediate	C_4 -like	C_4
Evolutionary scenario	Fig. 2a	58.1	77.1		93.4
	Fig. 2b	823.7	524.6		155.6
	Fig. 3	549.2	1554.3	1443.5	834.9
	Supporting Information Fig. S2	616.3	299.1		136.9
	Supporting Information Fig. S3	39.9	40.4		166.0
	Supporting Information Fig. S4	137.0	85.6		286.4
	Supporting Information Fig. S5	14.5	93.9		275.5
Growth scenario	Fig. 2a	602.2	238.2		2454.5
	Fig. 2b	755.2	306.1		340.3
	Fig. 3	386.5	2122.2	3052.2	1873.2
	Supporting Information Fig. S2	252.7	84.9		433.9
	Supporting Information Fig. S3	140.84	50.7		436.1
	Supporting Information Fig. S4	97.8	38.8		460.0
	Supporting Information Fig. S5	13.4	53.9		142.8

Figure 1 An overview of the nitrogen-dependent light- and enzyme-limited model. CO₂ entering the mesophyll cell (M) can be fixed by Rubisco (C₃ and intermediates) or PEPC (C₄ and intermediates); The C₄ cycle then shuttles CO₂ fixed by PEPC to the bundle sheath cell (BS) and releases it, allowing it to be re-fixed by Rubisco. The fixation of O₂ by Rubisco leads to photorespiration (PCO). Blue arrows indicate the nitrogen allocation and yellow arrows represent the energy allocation considered in the model.

Figure 2 Model results based on optimality in the evolutionary scenario (solid lines) describe the measured data (dots ± SE) better than the model assuming optimal adaptation to the growth conditions (dashed lines) for *F. robusta* (C₃), *F. ramosissima* (C₃-C₄), and *F. bidentis* (C₄) grown at the current CO₂ level (data from Vogan and Sage (2012)). (a) The net CO₂ assimilation rate as a function of intercellular CO₂ concentration measured at 30°C. (b) The net CO₂ assimilation rate as a function of temperature.

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Figure 5 Discrepancy between measured and modeled *F. bidentis* data across diverse environments. The black dot indicates the environment that best explains the experimental data of Dwyer *et al.* (2007). The deviation between model predictions and measurements ('error') is defined as the mean of the squared residuals (which are expressed as fractions of experimental means).