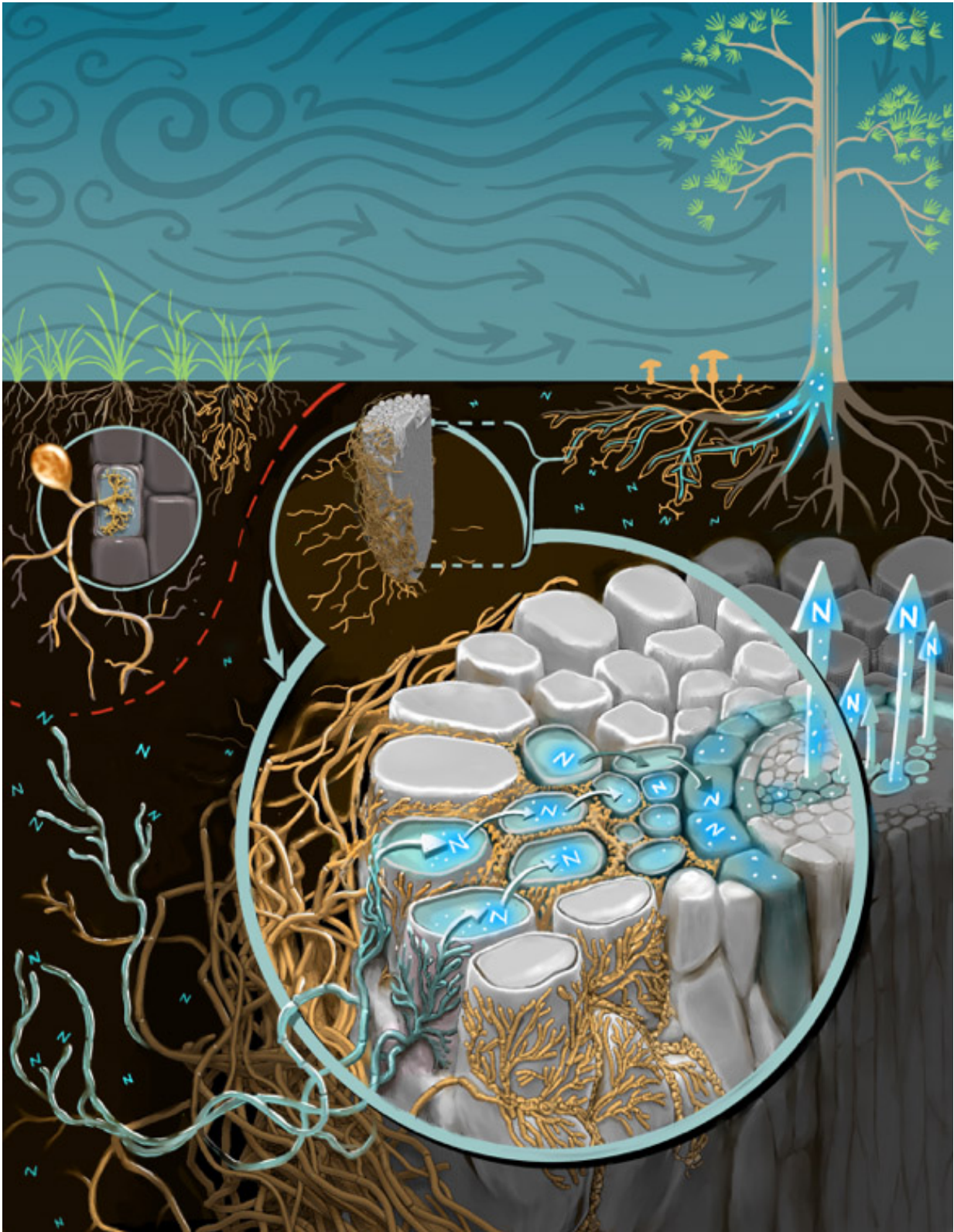


Microbes, nitrogen and plant responses to rising atmospheric carbon dioxide

June 30 2016



Ectomycorrhizal fungi (the mushrooms connected to the roots of the tree)

increase the uptake of nitrogen by the plant, even when that nutrient is scarce in soils. Arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (associated with the grass roots on the left) do not provide that advantage to their host. Credit: Victor O. Leshyk

Plants can grow faster as atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations increase, but only if they have enough nitrogen or partner with fungi that help them get it, according to new research published this week in *Science*.

The study was led by César Terrer Moreno, a Ph.D. student at Imperial College London, and included researchers from Northern Arizona University, the University of Antwerp (Belgium), Indiana University and New South Wales University (Australia).

The team synthesized more than 80 past experiments and found that higher CO₂ boosted plant growth, as long as the plants received enough [nitrogen](#). Without added nitrogen, CO₂ had no effect, confirming the long-standing idea that nitrogen limits plant response to rising CO₂. But there was a major exception: some plants—those with specialized partnerships with soil fungi—were able to respond to the extra CO₂, just as much as if they had been fertilized with nitrogen.

"Nitrogen and mycorrhizae are like the X-factors in plant responses to CO₂," said Bruce Hungate, Director of NAU's Center for Ecosystem Science and Society and Regents' Professor of Biological Sciences, who was a co-author on the study. "Rising CO₂ is not a universal fertilizer, but neither is nitrogen limitation a universal restriction on the CO₂ response. The truth is in the middle, and microbes are the key mediators," Hungate said.

Most plants associate with mycorrhizal fungi, a partnership in which the

fungus provides the plant with nutrients and water and receives food from the plant in return. But not all mycorrhizae are the same. Arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi specialize in taking up phosphorus from the soil, but not nitrogen, and plants that associated with arbuscular mycorrhizae were unable to respond to CO₂ unless extra nitrogen was added. It was the plants that form ectomycorrhizal partnerships that responded to extra CO₂ without any added nitrogen fertilizer, because these fungi produce enzymes that liberate bound nitrogen from soil organic matter, and the fungi can take up the nitrogen and pass some along to the plant.

This synthesis helps resolve a long-standing debate about the role of nitrogen limitation for plant responses to CO₂. Without enough nitrogen, it is thought that plants will be unable to respond much to rising CO₂, and many experiments support this idea. But in some experiments where nitrogen is in short supply, the [plants](#) still grow more with elevated CO₂, and the reasons have puzzled scientists for many years. The new synthesis offers a clear answer: "Plants need nitrogen to respond to high CO₂, whether they find it readily available in the soil, or whether their mycorrhizal partners can help them get it," explained Hungate.

The research should help project climate change into the future. Forests, grasslands and other ecosystems around the world currently absorb about 30 percent of human CO₂ emissions, without which climate change would be happening even faster than it is now. The future of this terrestrial carbon sink depends on carbon accumulation by ecosystems through plant growth. This new research shows that it is essential to take into account mycorrhizal fungi, and suggests that the next generation of global carbon cycle models should include mycorrhizae as an important control point on plant responses to rising CO₂ in the atmosphere. It is well known that grasses and herbs form arbuscular mycorrhizae, and that many trees form ectomycorrhizae. Since global carbon cycle models already recognize these different plant forms, adding mycorrhizae to

models of the [carbon cycle](#) should be straightforward, and the team is already moving toward that goal.

More information: "Mycorrhizal association as a primary control of the CO₂ fertilization effect," by C. Terrer et al. *Science*, [DOI: 10.1126/science.aaf4610](#)

Provided by Northern Arizona University

Citation: Microbes, nitrogen and plant responses to rising atmospheric carbon dioxide (2016, June 30) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-06-microbes-nitrogen-responses-atmospheric-carbon.html>

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