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2003

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# Increasing CO<sub>2</sub> from subambient to superambient concentrations alters species composition and increases above-ground biomass in a C<sub>3</sub>/C<sub>4</sub> grassland

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## Summary

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Received: 01 May 2003

Accepted: 20 July 2003

doi: 10.1046/j.1469-8137.2003.00897.x

- The glacial-to-present increase in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration is likely to have stimulated plant production, but experimental tests in natural ecosystems are lacking.
- We measured above-ground biomass production, plant nitrogen (N) accumulation, and species dynamics in a C<sub>3</sub>/C<sub>4</sub> grassland exposed for 4 yr (1997–2000) to a continuous gradient in CO<sub>2</sub> from 200–560 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup>.
- Biomass increased with CO<sub>2</sub> concentration in 1997–99. Biomass increases ranged between 121 and 161 g m<sup>-2</sup> per 100 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup> rise in CO<sub>2</sub> and were similar at sub-ambient and superambient concentrations. Biomass responses to CO<sub>2</sub> were determined by different species or functional groups of species during different years. Increasing CO<sub>2</sub> accelerated a successional shift initiated by release from grazing in which C<sub>3</sub> forbs increased at the expense of a C<sub>4</sub> grass. Effects of CO<sub>2</sub> on tissue N concentration varied among species and functional groups, but CO<sub>2</sub> did not alter total N in above-ground tissues.
- Results imply that rising CO<sub>2</sub> has stimulated plant production and accelerated successional change and that grasslands will remain sensitive to rising CO<sub>2</sub> for several decades.

**Key words:** biomass production, C<sub>3</sub> species, C<sub>4</sub> grasses, CO<sub>2</sub> concentration, grassland, nitrogen concentration, nitrogen use efficiency, species composition.

© *New Phytologist* (2003) **160**: 319–327

## Introduction

Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration has nearly doubled since the last glaciation (from < 200 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup>; Petit *et al.*, 1999) and may reach 550 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup> during the next 50 yr (Alcama *et al.*, 1996). Biological processes are fueled by carbon derived from CO<sub>2</sub>, so the ongoing increase in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration almost surely has enhanced plant productivity and affected ecosystem processes. Indeed, the large proportional increase in CO<sub>2</sub> since glaciation has been implicated in a variety of changes including shifts in vegetation (Johnson *et al.*, 1993; Ehleringer *et al.*, 1997; Street-Perrott *et al.*, 1997), stimulation of forest production and tree turnover rates (Phillips & Gentry, 1994), and an increase in soil carbon sequestration (Gill *et al.*, 2002). Yet, direct evidence from intact ecosystems for most of these trends is lacking.

Most experiments at subambient CO<sub>2</sub> have been conducted with simplified plant communities under conditions favorable for plant growth (Baker *et al.*, 1990; Allen *et al.*, 1991; Dippery *et al.*, 1995). In more natural ecosystems, CO<sub>2</sub> effects are influenced by plant community composition and plant accumulation and utilization of N and other limiting elements. Effects of CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment on production may be small in communities that are dominated by C<sub>4</sub> species (Owensby *et al.*, 1999), but atmospheric change also may increase the abundance of species that are responsive to CO<sub>2</sub> (Stöcklin *et al.*, 1998; Niklaus *et al.*, 2001). Nitrogen limitation, by contrast, usually dampens plant sensitivity to CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment (Poorter & Pérez-Soba, 2001).

We exposed a C<sub>3</sub>/C<sub>4</sub> grassland in central Texas, USA to a 200–560 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup> gradient in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration for 4 yr following the exclusion of cattle to determine effects of

prehistorical to predicted CO<sub>2</sub> levels on grassland productivity. Because primary production and its response to CO<sub>2</sub> are sensitive to plant N accumulation and species composition and dynamics, we measured N in above-ground tissues of dominant species and functional groups of plant species and assessed relationships between species dynamics and CO<sub>2</sub>. Results from mostly greenhouse and growth chamber experiments indicate that plant growth is highly responsive at subambient CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations (Baker *et al.*, 1990; Allen *et al.*, 1991; Dipperry *et al.*, 1995; Grünzweig & Körner, 2001) and that C<sub>3</sub> species are favored over C<sub>4</sub> species by increases in CO<sub>2</sub> at subambient concentrations (Johnson *et al.*, 1993). Consequently, we predicted that CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment would increase C<sub>3</sub> contribution to biomass production and consistently stimulate grassland biomass at subambient concentrations. Resource-based models of community composition predict that the species composition of plots differing in resource supply should become less similar or should diverge with time (Inouye & Tilman, 1988). We predicted therefore that the species composition of grassland plots exposed to different CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations would become increasingly dissimilar and that the magnitude of divergence in composition would increase with differences in CO<sub>2</sub> treatment. Consistent with results from other studies (Owensby *et al.*, 1993; Morgan *et al.*, 2001), we predicted that tissue N concentration would decline and that plant nitrogen use efficiency would increase as CO<sub>2</sub> concentration increased.

## Materials and Methods

### CO<sub>2</sub> chambers/Research site

We studied effects of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment on a C<sub>3</sub>/C<sub>4</sub> grassland in central Texas, USA (31°05′-N, 97°20′-W) with elongated field chambers that control CO<sub>2</sub> along continuous gradients from subambient to superambient concentrations (Johnson *et al.*, 2000). The site previously was cultivated, but has been managed as grassland and grazed by cattle for at least 50 yr. Cattle were excluded in 1992 before construction of chambers. Soils at the study site are classified as fine-silty, carbonatic, thermic Udorthentic Haplustolls. The surface 0.4 m of soil is composed mostly (55%) of clay. Annual precipitation at the site averages 879 mm (89-years average). Annual rainfall was greater than average in 1997, 1998, and 2000 (1143, 1043, and 903 mm), but was only 52% of the 89-yr mean during 1999 (461 mm).

The CO<sub>2</sub> facility consists of two transparent, tunnel-shaped chambers, each with 10 consecutive compartments that are 1 m wide and tall and 5 m long (Johnson *et al.*, 2000). Pure CO<sub>2</sub> is injected into one chamber during daylight to initiate a superambient CO<sub>2</sub> gradient (560–350 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup>). Ambient air is introduced to the second chamber to initiate a subambient CO<sub>2</sub> gradient (365–200 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup>). Night-time CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations are regulated at about 150 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup>

above daytime values along each chamber. Desired CO<sub>2</sub> concentration gradients are maintained by automatically varying the direction (daylight, night) and rate of air flow through chambers in response to changes in photosynthetic (daylight) or respiration rates (night). Air temperature and vapour pressure deficit are regulated near ambient values by cooling and dehumidifying air at 5-m intervals along chambers. Soil beneath chambers is separated from surrounding soil to a depth of 0.9 m with a rubber-coated fabric.

A continuous gradient in CO<sub>2</sub> from 560 to 200 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup> was maintained on this grassland dominated by the C<sub>4</sub> perennial grass *Bothriochloa ischaemum* (L.) Keng and C<sub>3</sub> perennial forbs *Solanum dimidiatum* Raf. and *Ratibida columnaris* (Sims) D. Don during growing seasons (March–November) of 1997 through 2000. Johnson *et al.* (2000) described in detail regulation of CO<sub>2</sub> concentration and environmental parameters along chambers.

Irrigation equivalent to rainfall was applied to the chambered grassland on the day following precipitation through July 1999. We eliminated runoff when irrigating, so soil sometimes was wetter beneath than outside of chambers. To better approximate soil water content in surrounding grassland, the irrigation regime was altered in August 1999. Subsequently, the amount of water applied to the entire system was determined weekly by subtracting the water content of soil in the chamber compartment maintained at 360 μmol mol<sup>-1</sup> from the mean soil water content ( $n = 5$ ) measured along a 50-m-long transect in adjacent *Bothriochloa*-dominated grassland. Water addition was calculated from weekly measurements of volumetric soil water content to 1.35 m depth in the center of chamber compartments and along the unchambered transect with a neutron probe.

### Sampling

Following imposition of CO<sub>2</sub> treatments, vegetation in the 0.5-m long and 1.0-m wide area immediately before and after each cooling coil was clipped monthly to ground level to minimize plant interference with air flow through coils, leaving 4 m<sup>2</sup> (4 m × 1 m) of vegetated area in each compartment for CO<sub>2</sub> experiments. Above-ground production was determined during each year of CO<sub>2</sub> treatment (1997–2000) by clipping all vegetation in the center 4-m<sup>2</sup> area of each chamber compartment to 5 cm height at the end of the growing season in early December. To estimate accumulation of N in actively growing above-ground tissues, we harvested two 0.5 m × 0.2 m (0.1 m<sup>2</sup>) areas from each 4-m<sup>2</sup> area during June and October of each year. These harvests were timed to correspond with periods of peak biomass of early season (June) and late-season species (October) in this grassland. Harvests were systematically allocated among adjacent 0.5 m × 0.2 m quadrats that spanned the 1 m width of compartments and that were located at two positions, 1 m from the air entrance and 1 m from the air exit of each 5-m long compartment.

At each harvest, plants were sorted by species and weighed after oven drying for 72 h at 60°C. For some analyses, biomass also was calculated for each of five functional groups of species ( $C_4$  grasses,  $C_3$  grasses,  $C_3$  annual forbs,  $C_3$  perennial forbs, and legumes). To minimize effects of harvesting on element cycling, plant material that was removed in December was returned in January before the next growing season to the 1 m<sup>2</sup> area in compartments from which it was harvested. Before plant material was returned, it was shredded with a wood chipping machine to simulate effects of late-season mowing that commonly is applied to grasslands in central Texas.

Plant tissue (green + senescent) removed from the two 0.1 m<sup>2</sup> plots during June and October of each year was assigned to functional groups. Nitrogen accumulation of each functional group was estimated by multiplying the value of peak biomass for the group by the N concentration of biomass. The total of above-ground N accumulation per year for vegetation was estimated by summing these values of peak N across functional groups for each compartment along the CO<sub>2</sub> gradient. The nitrogen use efficiency (NUE) of vegetation was calculated by dividing above-ground biomass by N contained in live plus dead above-ground tissues (productivity per unit of N accumulation).

Photosynthetic photon flux density (light) was measured at the soil surface, at 0.5 m above the surface, and above the plant canopy in the center of each compartment. Light was measured at mid-day on single days in May and October of each year with a 1-m long sensor (SunScan, Delta-T Devices, Ltd) placed diagonally across each of two 1-m<sup>2</sup> plots per compartment.

### Species composition

For each year, we calculated the 'similarity' in vegetation between pairs of chamber compartments using Sorensen's community coefficient (CC) weighted by biomass harvested in December (Barbour *et al.*, 1980).

$$\text{Sorensen's CC} = 2MC / (MA + MB),$$

(MA, summation of percentage of total biomass harvested from compartment A that is attributable to each species; MB, summation of percentage of total biomass harvested from compartment B that is attributable to each species; and MC, summation of minimum values of percentage of total biomass for each species common to compartments A and B.) Like other indices of community similarity, Sorensen's CC is a measurement of species shared between sampling units. Unlike the commonly used Jaccard's index as applied to weighted data, Sorensen's CC has the desirable property of ranging between 0 (complete difference) and 1 (identity). We tested for divergence in species composition along the CO<sub>2</sub> gradient by plotting values of Sorensen's CC calculated for all possible pairs of chamber compartments vs differences in CO<sub>2</sub>

concentration. As an index of species shared by compartments, Sorensen's CC should decline as differences in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration increase if CO<sub>2</sub> treatments influence species composition and abundances.

### Statistics

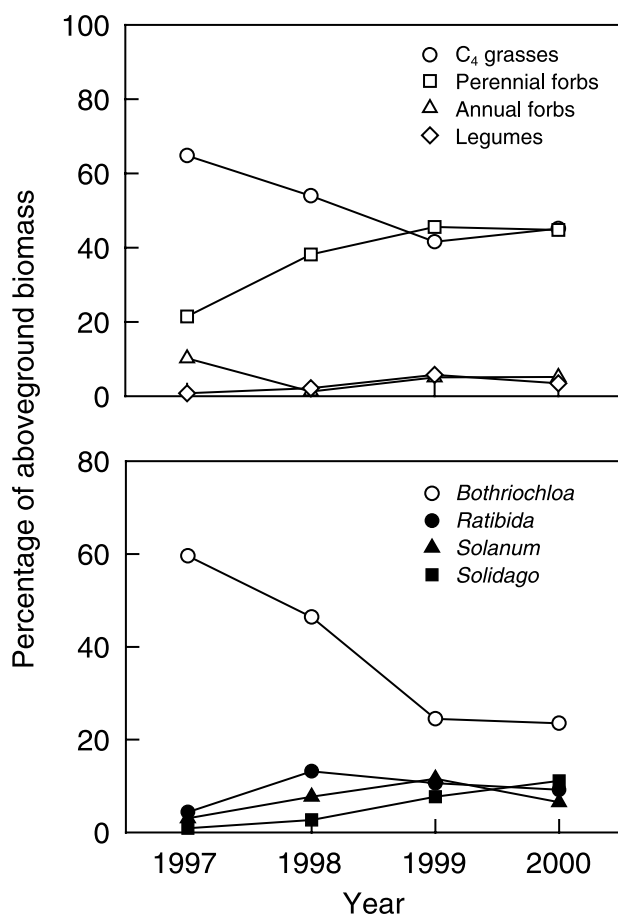
The relationship between CO<sub>2</sub> concentration during daylight and distance along both superambient and subambient chambers was slightly curvilinear (Johnson *et al.*, 2000). From these relationships, we calculated mean CO<sub>2</sub> concentration for each 5-m compartment along chambers. These CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations were used as the independent variable in regression analyses with biomass, N concentration and content, and parameters descriptive of species composition as dependent variables ( $P < 0.05$  significance level). To accommodate a variety of possible response curves, we fit linear, hyperbolic, power, and logarithmic functions to data. The model with the greatest  $r^2$  value was deemed the best fit. Differences among sampling years in light interception by plants were tested with single degree of freedom contrasts.

## Results

### Vegetation

Vegetation changed considerably during the 4 yr of this study, from dominance by  $C_4$  grasses to codominance by  $C_4$  grasses and  $C_3$  perennial forbs (Fig. 1). Among individual species, *Bothriochloa* exhibited the most striking change. This  $C_4$  grass alone comprised almost 60% of biomass harvested from chambers following the first season of CO<sub>2</sub> treatment, 1997. Contribution of *Bothriochloa* to end-of-season biomass declined to 24–25% in 1999 and 2000, partly because of an increase in abundances of taller perennial forbs *Ratibida columnaris*, *Solanum dimidiatum*, and *Solidago canadensis*. As abundances of forbs increased, light interception by taller plants also increased. Of total light intercepted by plants, the fraction intercepted above 0.5 m height was greater during the final 3 yr of the experiment than during the initial year of 1997 (linear contrasts,  $P < 0.0001$ ,  $n = 20$  values per year), whether measured in May (means = 0.05 and 0.24 in 1997 and across subsequent years) or October (means = 0.16 and 0.29 in 1997 and across subsequent years).

There was no relationship between Sorensen's CC, calculated using biomass per species of the total of 71 species encountered, and CO<sub>2</sub> during the 4 yr of this experiment (not shown). Species also were grouped by photosynthetic pathway (either  $C_3$  or  $C_4$ ) or into one of five functional groups before calculating Sorensen's CC between each pair of chamber compartments. Neither of these calculations of vegetation similarity was related to differences in CO<sub>2</sub> treatment (not shown). The absence of a relationship between Sorensen's CC and CO<sub>2</sub> across years indicates that CO<sub>2</sub> played little role in



**Fig. 1** Percentage contribution of each of four functional groups of species (upper panel) and of four dominant species (lower panel) to above-ground biomass harvested at the end of each season of CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment. Values are averages across 4-m<sup>2</sup> grassland plots along the CO<sub>2</sub> gradient ( $n = 20$ ). C<sub>3</sub> grasses comprised < 3% of total biomass in each year, so these data were omitted to improve clarity.

species composition during the experiment. Heterogeneity in species mixtures increased with time, irrespective of CO<sub>2</sub> treatment. Averaged across pair-wise comparisons of chamber compartments, values of Sorensen's CC that were calculated using biomass per species declined from 0.53 in 1997 to 0.29 in 2000 (values were 0.48 in 1998 and 0.31 in 1999,  $n = 190$ ).

### Above-ground biomass

Averaged across CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations, above-ground biomass was greater during the final 3 yr of treatment (means = 1086, 962, 1131 g m<sup>-2</sup> in 1998, 1999, and 2000;  $n = 20$ ) than during the initial year of 1997 (mean = 737 g m<sup>-2</sup>;  $n = 20$ ). Above-ground biomass increased significantly from subambient to superambient CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in 1997 and 1998 and increased marginally ( $P = 0.09$ ) with greater CO<sub>2</sub> concentration in 1999 (Fig. 2). Biomass production was best described by a positive, linear function of CO<sub>2</sub> in 1997 and by curvilinear

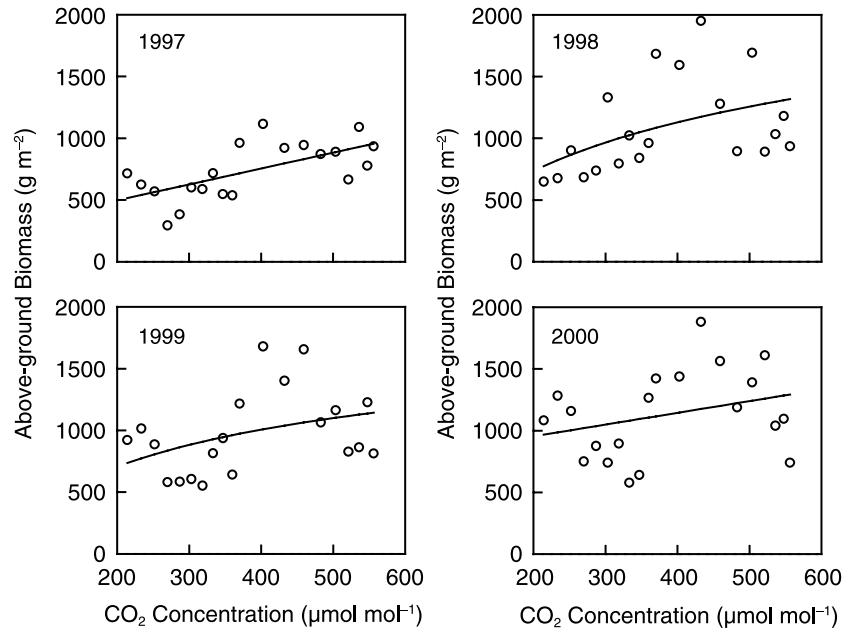
functions (logarithmic and hyperbolic) in 1998 and 1999. There was no relationship between above-ground biomass and CO<sub>2</sub> in 2000 ( $P = 0.20$ ). Although there was considerable scatter in relationships between production and CO<sub>2</sub>, mean responses of biomass to CO<sub>2</sub> often were dramatic. We estimate from regression, for example, that in 1997 above-ground production increased by 86% (from 510 to 949 g m<sup>-2</sup>) as CO<sub>2</sub> rose from 210 to 550  $\mu\text{mol mol}^{-1}$ . Across the full CO<sub>2</sub> gradient, biomass production increased by a mean of between 121 g m<sup>-2</sup> (1999) and 161 g m<sup>-2</sup> (1998) per 100  $\mu\text{mol mol}^{-1}$  increase in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration.

Much of the increase in above-ground biomass during the initial year of CO<sub>2</sub> exposure (1997) occurred in *Bothriochloa* (Fig. 3). As estimated from regression, biomass of the dominant C<sub>4</sub> grass more than doubled with the 210–550  $\mu\text{mol mol}^{-1}$  increase in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration. This increase in *Bothriochloa* biomass accounted for 75% of the stimulation of community biomass by higher CO<sub>2</sub> during 1997. In subsequent years, however, there was no relationship between production of the C<sub>4</sub> grass and CO<sub>2</sub> (not shown;  $P = 0.48, 0.60, \text{ and } 0.48$  in 1998, 1999, and 2000). Biomass of *Bothriochloa* declined precipitously during the 1999 season, by an average of 245 g m<sup>-2</sup> across CO<sub>2</sub> treatments.

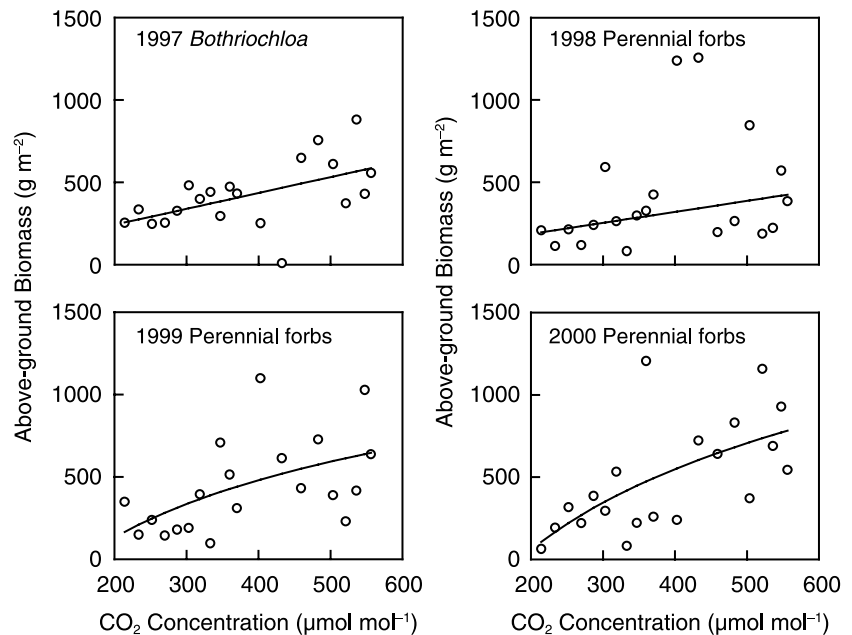
As biomass of the dominant grass declined, above-ground production of perennial forbs (including *Ratibida columnaris*, *Solanum dimidiatum*, and *Solidago canadensis*) increased from an average of 161 g m<sup>-2</sup> in 1997 to greater than 400 g m<sup>-2</sup> in subsequent years (means = 402, 441, 495 g m<sup>-2</sup> in 1998, 1999, and 2000;  $n = 20$ ). Biomass of these C<sub>3</sub> species was not related to CO<sub>2</sub> treatment during 1997 ( $P = 0.39$ ), but increased marginally ( $P = 0.10$ ) at higher CO<sub>2</sub> during 1998 when 2 outlier points were excluded and increased significantly with CO<sub>2</sub> concentration during 1999 ( $P = 0.016$ ) and 2000 ( $P = 0.003$ ; Fig. 3). In each of the final two years of the experiment, CO<sub>2</sub> effects were dramatic. Across the full CO<sub>2</sub> gradient, we estimate from the curvilinear functions fit to biomass-CO<sub>2</sub> relationships that production of perennial forbs increased by a factor of 4 in 1999 and of 7 in 2000. Indeed, forb biomass increased slightly more at higher CO<sub>2</sub> than did total biomass during 1999 and increased during 2000 despite the absence of a CO<sub>2</sub> effect on production of all species combined (Fig. 2). Clearly then, biomass of other species must have declined as CO<sub>2</sub> and forb biomass increased during 1999 and 2000. Much of this decline in biomass occurred in *Bothriochloa* (Fig. 4). During the final 3 yr of the experiment (1998–2000), above-ground biomass of this C<sub>4</sub> grass decreased more at elevated than at subambient concentrations.

### Nitrogen

Nitrogen accumulation of vegetation was estimated for each year from values of peak N of 5 functional groups of species as determined from harvests of 0.1 m<sup>2</sup> plots. In no year did above-ground N accumulation change significantly with CO<sub>2</sub>



**Fig. 2** Relationships between above-ground biomass and the mean daytime  $\text{CO}_2$  concentration to which 4-m<sup>2</sup> grassland plots were exposed for four growing seasons ( $n = 20$ ). Data were fit with a logarithmic function in 1998 (biomass =  $-2282.6 + 569.4 * \ln(\text{CO}_2)$ ,  $r^2 = 0.20$ ,  $P = 0.05$ ), with an hyperbolic function in 1999 (biomass =  $(1746.8 * \text{CO}_2)/(294.4 + \text{CO}_2)$ ,  $r^2 = 0.15$ ,  $P = 0.09$ ) and with linear functions in 1997 (biomass =  $239.14 + 1.29 * \text{CO}_2$ ,  $r^2 = 0.41$ ,  $P = 0.002$ ) and 2000 ( $P = 0.20$ ).

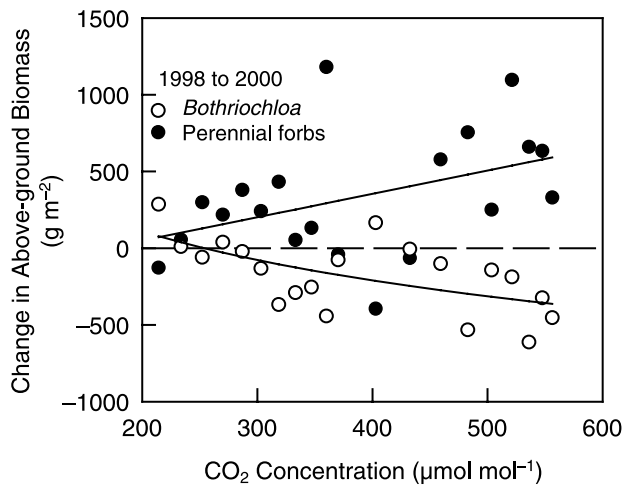


**Fig. 3** Relationships between above-ground biomass production of *Bothriochloa*, the dominant  $\text{C}_4$  grass, and of  $\text{C}_3$  perennial forbs and the mean daytime  $\text{CO}_2$  concentration to which 4-m<sup>2</sup> plots were exposed ( $n = 20$ ). Data were fit with linear functions in 1997 (biomass =  $49.44 + 0.96 * \text{CO}_2$ ,  $r^2 = 0.29$ ,  $P < 0.014$ ) and in 1998 following exclusion of two outlying points (biomass =  $53.0 + 0.67 * \text{CO}_2$ ,  $r^2 = 0.16$ ,  $P = 0.10$ ,  $n = 18$ ) and with logarithmic functions in 1999 (biomass =  $-2540.2 + 504.0 * \ln(\text{CO}_2)$ ,  $r^2 = 0.28$ ,  $P = 0.02$ ) and 2000 (biomass =  $-3695.6 + 708.4 * \ln(\text{CO}_2)$ ,  $r^2 = 0.40$ ,  $P = 0.003$ ). Biomass- $\text{CO}_2$  relationships were not significant for perennial forbs in 1997 ( $P = 0.39$ ) or for *Bothriochloa* in 1998 ( $P = 0.48$ ), 1999 ( $P = 0.60$ ), or 2000 ( $P = 0.48$ ). These data were omitted to improve clarity.

concentration ( $P$  ranged between 0.16 and 0.50; mean N ranged between 7.6 and 15.1 g N m<sup>-2</sup>,  $n = 20$ ).

Carbon dioxide enrichment frequently reduced tissue N concentration, but  $\text{CO}_2$  effects varied among years and functional groups of species. As determined from regression, the N concentration of  $\text{C}_4$  grasses (including *Bothriochloa*) declined by 27% in 1997 and 1998 as  $\text{CO}_2$  concentration increased from 215 to 550  $\mu\text{mol mol}^{-1}$  (Fig. 5). The N concentration of  $\text{C}_4$  grasses as a group did not vary significantly with  $\text{CO}_2$  treatment in either 1999 ( $P = 0.67$ ) or 2000 ( $P = 0.40$ ). Nitrogen concentration of the dominant  $\text{C}_4$  grass *Bothriochloa*

declined slightly more across subambient than superambient  $\text{CO}_2$  concentrations in both 1998 and 1999 (Table 1), but was not significantly related to  $\text{CO}_2$  treatment in 2000 ( $P = 0.89$ ). Across measurements from 1998 and 1999, N concentration of perennial forbs declined more per unit increase in  $\text{CO}_2$  over subambient than superambient concentrations (Fig. 5). The mean decrease in N concentration at subambient  $\text{CO}_2$  was greater by more than an order of magnitude in perennial forbs than  $\text{C}_4$  grasses. There was no relationship between N concentration of perennial forbs and  $\text{CO}_2$  in either 1997 ( $P = 0.86$ ) or 2000 ( $P = 0.92$ ).



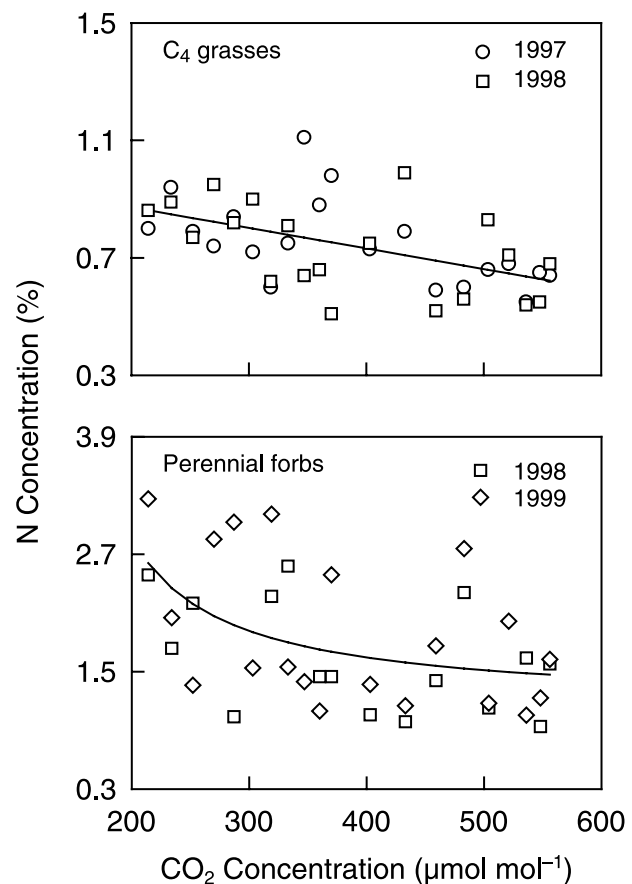
**Fig. 4** Relationships between the change in above-ground biomass production of the  $C_4$  grass *Bothriochloa* and of  $C_3$  perennial forbs during 1998 through 2000 and the mean daytime  $CO_2$  concentration to which  $4\text{-m}^2$  plots were exposed ( $n = 20$ ). Data for perennial forbs were fit with a linear function (biomass =  $-253.58 + 1.52 * CO_2$ ,  $r^2 = 0.18$ ,  $P = 0.06$ ), and data for *Bothriochloa* was fit with a logarithmic function (biomass =  $2562.0 - 462.6 * \ln(CO_2)$ ,  $r^2 = 0.35$ ,  $P = 0.006$ ).

The NUE of vegetation, defined as the ratio of above-ground biomass production to above-ground N content, increased with  $CO_2$  concentration only in 1998 (Table 1;  $P = 0.36$ , 0.16, and 0.29 in 1997, 1999, and 2000). Although higher  $CO_2$  frequently reduced the N concentration of dominant species, heterogeneity in species composition combined with the increased abundance of N-rich forbs at high  $CO_2$  (Fig. 3) eliminated any  $CO_2$  effect on NUE of the plant community during most years.

## Discussion

### Biomass production

Increasing  $CO_2$  from prehistorical to predicted concentrations increased above-ground biomass of the  $C_3/C_4$  grassland studied during the first 3 yr of the experiment, despite the absence of a  $CO_2$  effect on plant N accumulation. Scatter in relationships between biomass and  $CO_2$  limited our ability to define the shape of biomass- $CO_2$  relationships, but the average response of biomass to  $CO_2$  in this intact grassland was similar at subambient and superambient concentrations. As expected, tissue N concentration often declined, but the decrease was not consistent across functional groups of species and varied among years for individual groups and species. Vegetation changed dramatically during the experiment. At the species level, the shift in plant composition and accompanying increase in compositional heterogeneity were not related to  $CO_2$  treatment. Nor did  $CO_2$  treatments change the relative contributions of  $C_3$  and  $C_4$  plants to biomass. But the predominant shift in vegetation during this experiment,



**Fig. 5** The N concentration of above-ground tissues of  $C_4$  grasses and of  $C_3$  perennial forbs at peak biomass as a function of the  $CO_2$  concentration at which plants were grown. Note that scale of the y-axis differs between upper and lower panels. Data from 1997 and 1998 for  $C_4$  grasses were fit with a linear function ( $[N] = 1.0120 - 0.0007 * CO_2$ ,  $r^2 = 0.28$ ,  $P = 0.0004$ ,  $n = 39$ ). Data from 1998 and 1999 for forbs were fit with a hyperbolic function ( $[N] = (1.15 * CO_2) / (CO_2 - 119.29)$ ,  $r^2 = 0.23$ ,  $P = 0.003$ ,  $n = 36$ ). Results of regression analyses on data from individual years are listed in Table 1. Nitrogen concentration did not change significantly with  $CO_2$  concentration in 1999 or 2000 for  $C_4$  grasses (means = 0.85% and 0.79%) or in 1997 or 2000 for perennial forbs (means = 1.45% and 1.54%).

from dominance by the  $C_4$  grass *Bothriochloa* to codominance with  $C_3$  perennial forbs, clearly was amplified by  $CO_2$  enrichment.

The  $350 \mu\text{mol mol}^{-1}$  increase in  $CO_2$  concentration studied here is similar in magnitude to that employed in other  $CO_2$  experiments on grasslands, but proportional increases in biomass during this experiment were larger than typically measured in grasslands. As calculated from regressions, for example, above-ground biomass rose by between 56% and 86% in 1997 through 1999 with the increase in  $CO_2$  from 210 to  $550 \mu\text{mol mol}^{-1}$ . Below-ground production was 50% greater at elevated than subambient concentrations (Gill *et al.*, 2002). Biomass responses to  $CO_2$  enrichment vary from nil in alpine grassland (Schappi & Körner, 1996) to

**Table 1** Results of significant regression analyses between above-ground N and CO<sub>2</sub> over a 200–560 µmol/mol<sup>-1</sup> gradient (*n* = 20)

Year/ parameter	Model type	Slope or a value	Intercept or b value	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>P</i> -value
1997					
[N] C <sub>4</sub> grasses	Linear	-0.0007	1.02	0.30	0.01
1998					
[N] C <sub>4</sub> grasses	Power	6.48	-0.37	0.29	0.01
[N] <i>Bothriochloa</i>	Hyperbolic	0.525	-64.00	0.14	0.05
[N] perennial forbs	Hyperbolic	1.11	-110.82	0.24	0.05
NUE	Linear	0.122	53.43	0.18	0.06
1999					
[N] <i>Bothriochloa</i>	Hyperbolic	0.83	-33.56	0.19	0.03
[N] perennial forbs	Linear	-0.003	3.09	0.21	0.04

Nitrogen use efficiency (NUE) is the ratio of above-ground biomass (determined by summing peak biomasses of 5 functional groups of species) to N content of that biomass. Linear ( $y = ax + b$ ), hyperbolic [ $y = ax/(b + x)$ ], or power [ $y = ax^b$ ] functions were fit to relationships of two parameters [ $y$ ; tissue N concentration (%) and NUE (g biomass g N<sup>-1</sup>)] to CO<sub>2</sub> concentration ( $x$ ; µmol mol<sup>-1</sup>). There were no significant relationships between N and CO<sub>2</sub> in 2000.

increases ranging between about 20% and 50% in annual grassland (Hungate *et al.*, 1997; Shaw *et al.*, 2002), calcareous grassland (Leadley *et al.*, 1999), tallgrass prairie (Owensby *et al.*, 1999), and shortgrass steppe (Morgan *et al.*, 2001). The rather large responses of above-ground biomass to CO<sub>2</sub> during initial years of this experiment apparently derived from large and usually linear increases in leaf and canopy photosynthesis (Anderson *et al.*, 2001; Mielnick *et al.*, 2001) and in leaf water use efficiency over subambient to superambient concentrations (Anderson *et al.*, 2001; Maherali *et al.*, 2002; Polley *et al.*, 2002).

Although constrained by scatter in biomass-CO<sub>2</sub> relationships, our results provide little evidence that above-ground biomass is more responsive to CO<sub>2</sub> at subambient than superambient concentrations. Biomass-CO<sub>2</sub> relationships were slightly curvilinear with greatest increase over subambient concentrations for the grassland community in 1998 and 1999 and for perennial forbs in 1999 and 2000. In other years, however, biomass was better described by a linear function of CO<sub>2</sub> concentration. Experimental evidence that plant production is more responsive to CO<sub>2</sub> at subambient than at superambient concentrations comes mostly from greenhouse or growth chamber studies that typically were of short duration or were conducted under conditions favorable for plant growth (Baker *et al.*, 1990; Allen *et al.*, 1991; Dippery *et al.*, 1995; Grünzweig & Körner, 2001). Conditions in natural and seminatural ecosystems frequently are more demanding of plants and may involve species change or other feedbacks between plants and the environment that dampen plant responses to CO<sub>2</sub> or contribute to temporal variability in CO<sub>2</sub> effects. In the C<sub>3</sub>/C<sub>4</sub> grassland that we studied, biomass response to CO<sub>2</sub> apparently was influenced by one of these feedbacks, vegetation change. Nevertheless, increasing CO<sub>2</sub> from the pre-Industrial to current concentration (270–370 µmol/mol<sup>-1</sup>) elicited a 20–22% increase in above-ground biomass during 1997 and 1998.

Carbon dioxide enrichment increased grassland production despite having no effect on N accumulation in above-ground tissues. Reduced N concentration is a common response to CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment (Cotrufo *et al.*, 1998; Körner, 2000). It is noteworthy therefore that in this experiment responses of N concentration to CO<sub>2</sub> varied among functional groups and years. Responses to CO<sub>2</sub> varied even within an individual species. The N concentration of *Bothriochloa*, for instance, declined as CO<sub>2</sub> increased during the first two years examined, but was not related to CO<sub>2</sub> treatment during a third year. Variability in response obviously complicates prediction and cautions against generalization.

Carbon dioxide enrichment increased biomass during the first 3 yr of this study despite temporal changes in species abundances and despite interannual differences in responses of species or groups of species to CO<sub>2</sub>. Consequently, positive responses of biomass to CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment were determined by different species or by different functional groups of species during different years. Much of the increase in above-ground biomass during 1997 occurred in *Bothriochloa*. By 1999, CO<sub>2</sub> effects on grassland production were determined largely by the positive response of perennial forbs to CO<sub>2</sub>.

### Species composition

Species composition affects the response of plant production to CO<sub>2</sub> (Niklaus *et al.*, 2001; Reich *et al.*, 2001), but CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment, in turn, may influence the contribution of species to community biomass (Leadley *et al.*, 1999; Niklaus *et al.*, 2001). The predominant shift in vegetation during this experiment, greater production of perennial forbs at the expense of C<sub>4</sub> grasses, clearly was amplified by CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment across the full subambient to superambient gradient. Several studies have shown that CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment favors forbs over grasses (Potvin & Vasseur, 1997; Leadley *et al.*, 1999; Owensby *et al.*,



1999; Teyssonneyre *et al.*, 2002), although the trend is not universal (Morgan *et al.*, 2001). Superficially, this increase in forbs is consistent with a long-standing prediction that CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment favors C<sub>3</sub> over C<sub>4</sub> plants by preferentially stimulating photosynthesis and growth of C<sub>3</sub> species. But, relative abundances of C<sub>3</sub> and C<sub>4</sub> species did not respond predictably to CO<sub>2</sub> in this experiment, consistent with results from grassland studies at elevated CO<sub>2</sub> (Owensby *et al.*, 1999; Morgan *et al.*, 2001) but contrary to trends measured in salt marsh (Arp *et al.*, 1993) and in some reconstructed communities at subambient concentrations (Johnson *et al.*, 1993, but see Ward *et al.*, 1999). As evidenced by the increase in *Bothriochloa* biomass during 1997, possession of the C<sub>4</sub> metabolism does not preclude a CO<sub>2</sub> response even to elevated concentrations. Rather than simply reflecting CO<sub>2</sub> effects on C<sub>3</sub>–C<sub>4</sub> balance, the increase in forb production probably was related to differences in plant morphology and growth habit (Bazzaz & McConnaughay, 1992), to release from grazing (Potvin & Vasseur, 1997), to differing sensitivities of grasses and of more deeply rooting forbs to droughts, or to some combination of these and other factors. Above-ground biomass of *Bothriochloa* decreased during 1998, a year with a 6-months drought during mid-season (Polley *et al.*, 2002), and declined precipitously during the drought year of 1999. Xylem potentials were more sensitive to changes in soil water in the grass than in a perennial forb (Polley *et al.*, 2002), suggesting that grasses were especially disadvantaged by drought. Perennial forbs increase in abundance following the release of *Bothriochloa*-dominated grassland from grazing (Wilsey & Polley, 2003). In this grassland as in tallgrass prairie (Owensby *et al.*, 1999), taller growth forms may eventually dominate ungrazed communities at ambient and higher CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations irrespective of physiological sensitivities to CO<sub>2</sub>. That this shift from grasses to forbs was amplified as CO<sub>2</sub> increased indicates that CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment may speed successional changes in the composition of this grassland following release from grazing. Elevating CO<sub>2</sub> above the ambient concentration favored dicots over grasses in the pasture community studied by Potvin & Vasseur (1997), but this CO<sub>2</sub> effect slowed rather than accelerated successional change.

## Conclusions

Our results provide the first evidence in an intact ecosystem for an increase in above-ground production and shift in plant composition over subambient to superambient CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations. Biomass increased despite temporal changes in the responses of biomass and tissue N to CO<sub>2</sub> among species and species groups. Increasing CO<sub>2</sub> accelerated a successional shift in vegetation from the dominant C<sub>4</sub> grass to perennial forbs. The continuous response to CO<sub>2</sub> of above-ground biomass, plant N concentration, and grass–forb relative abundances in this C<sub>3</sub>/C<sub>4</sub> grassland indicates that grasslands may remain sensitive to CO<sub>2</sub> as concentration rises to twice the pre-Industrial level during coming decades.

## Acknowledgements

Ron Whitis maintained CO<sub>2</sub> chambers. Anne Gibson, Katherine Jones, Chris Kolodziejczyk, and Kyle Tiner helped with harvests and processed samples, and Joaquin Sanabria contributed statistical guidance. William Dugas, Richard Gill, Robert Jackson, Hafiz Maherali, and Patricia Mielnick provided helpful comments on the manuscript.

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