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**Soil microbial nutrient constraints along a tropical forest elevation gradient**

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# Soil microbial nutrient constraints along a tropical forest elevation gradient: a belowground test of a biogeochemical paradigm

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## Abstract

Aboveground primary productivity is widely considered to be limited by phosphorus (P) availability in lowland tropical forests and by nitrogen (N) availability in montane tropical forests. However, the extent to which this paradigm applies to belowground processes remains unresolved. We measured indices of soil microbial nutrient status in lowland, sub-montane and montane tropical forests along a natural gradient spanning 3400 m in elevation in the Peruvian Andes. With increasing elevation there were marked increases in soil concentrations of total N, total P, and readily-extractable P, but a decrease in N mineralization determined by in situ resin bags. Microbial carbon (C) and N increased with increasing elevation, but microbial C : N : P ratios were relatively constant, suggesting homeostasis. The activity of hydrolytic enzymes, which are rich in N, decreased with increasing elevation, while the ratios of enzymes involved in the acquisition of N and P increased with increasing elevation, further indicating a shift in the relative demand for N and P by microbial biomass. We conclude that soil microorganisms shift investment in nutrient acquisition from P to N between lowland and montane tropical forests, suggesting that different nutrients regulate soil microbial metabolism and the soil carbon balance in these ecosystems.

## 1 Introduction

Tropical forests have a major influence on the global carbon (C) cycle, being the most productive ecosystems on Earth and containing 34–55 % of the C in forests worldwide (Beer et al., 2010; Pan et al., 2011). The exchange of C between the atmosphere and forests is mediated by the availability of mineral nutrients, so there is widespread interest in understanding how plant or microbial metabolic processes are constrained by the deficiencies of specific “limiting” nutrients (Cleveland et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2011), and how human alteration of these nutrient cycles may impact tropical ecosystems (Hietz et al., 2011; Townsend et al., 2011). Our understanding of nutrient limitation

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(Cleveland and Liptzin, 2007). The consistent amounts of N and P required to build and maintain different cellular structures gives rise to the hypothesis that, under optimal growth conditions, the C:N:P ratio in organisms is constrained, while a limiting resource supply will be reflected in an altered C:N:P ratio (Elser et al., 2003; Redfield, 1958). Elemental stoichiometry within organisms can indicate a growth limiting resource, provided that the elemental composition of the organism is non-homeostatic (passive regulation; elemental composition reflects resource availability) rather than homeostatic (active regulation; fixed elemental composition) (Sterner and Elser, 2002).

The stoichiometry of enzyme activities can provide further indirect evidence of nutrient limitations to microbial C metabolism by indicating investment into resource acquisition (Sinsabaugh et al., 2008). The activities of enzymes involved in nutrient degradation indicate the allocation of microbial resources to the acquisition of specific nutrients, which is often in response to a deficiency of the mineral form of that nutrient (Allison et al., 2010; Sinsabaugh and Moorhead, 1994). For example, deficiencies in soil N or P are reflected by higher activity of *N*-acetyl  $\beta$ -glucosaminidase or phosphomonoesterase, respectively (Allison et al., 2007; Olander and Vitousek, 2000; Sinsabaugh and Moorhead, 1994; Treseder and Vitousek, 2001). A deficiency in soil N can also reduce the activity of enzymes in general, because proteins are rich in N (Allison and Vitousek, 2005; Allison et al., 2010). The activity and stoichiometry of nutrient-degrading enzymes can therefore indicate the relative strength and nature of microbial nutrient demand.

We tested the hypothesis that the nutrient status of the soil microbial biomass switches from greater relative demand for P in lowland tropical forest to greater relative demand for N in montane tropical forest. To do this, we measured soil nutrient availability, soil microbial nutrient stoichiometry, and the activity and stoichiometry of soil enzymes along a 3400 m elevation gradient under tropical forest in the Peruvian Andes. We estimated microbial nutrient status using three approaches. First, we determined soil N and P availability along the gradient. Second, we assessed relative differences in the stoichiometry of C, N and P in the microbial biomass, whereby a greater C-to-





that soils at higher elevation are rarely moisture limited over the seasonal cycle, due in part to limited evapotranspiration and fog deposition within the cloud immersion zone (between 1500 and 3400 m a.s.l.) (van de Weg et al., 2014, 2009; Zimmermann et al., 2010).

The sites are situated predominantly on Paleozoic (~ 450 Ma) meta-sedimentary mudstones, with plutonic intrusions (granite) underlying the sites between 1500 and 2020 m a.s.l. (Carlotto et al., 1996; Clark et al., 2013). The soils at sites above 2520 m have been classified as Umbrisols according to FAO World Reference Base classification (Inceptisols according to USDA Soil Taxonomy). In contrast, the soils from 1000 to 2020 m have been classified as Cambisols (Inceptisols) and the soils at the two lowland sites have been classified as Haplic Allisols (Ultisols) (194 m a.s.l.) and Haplic Cambisols (Inceptisols) (210 m a.s.l.) (Quesada et al., 2010). The soils at higher elevations are shallower and have a deeper organic layer (e.g. 22.8 cm at the 3030 m a.s.l. site compared to 0.7 cm at the 194 m a.s.l. site; Table 1). Further descriptions of the soils (Quesada et al., 2010; Whitaker et al., 2014), climate (Rapp and Silman, 2012), aboveground productivity and floristic composition (Asner et al., 2013; Feeley et al., 2011; Girardin et al., 2010) are reported elsewhere.

## 2.2 Soil sampling and analyses for total nutrients

Soils were sampled in December 2010 from five systematically distributed sub-plots within a 1 ha permanent sample plot at each study site at a standardized 0–10 cm depth. For each sub-plot, soil was removed from a 40 cm × 40 cm area. Soils were sealed in plastic bags and stored at 4 °C for up to 4 weeks until analysis. We expect some seasonal variation in all of our measured soil and microbial properties, largely driven by seasonality of rainfall at low elevation sites (Turner and Wright, 2014). However, because December is in the rainy season for all of these sites (Rapp and Silman, 2012), our assessments were made during a relatively constant period of active decomposition when moisture was not limiting.

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Total C and N were determined on dried (at 105 °C) and ground soil samples using a TruSpec CN Elemental Analyzer (LECO, USA). Total P was determined by ignition (550 °C, 1 h) followed by extraction in 1 M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, with phosphate detection in neutralised extracts at 880 nm by automated molybdate colorimetry using a Lachat Quikchem 8500 (Hach Ltd, Loveland, CO). Soil pH was determined in water in a 1 : 2 soil to solution ratio using a calibrated glass electrode. Bulk density was determined by drying a known volume of soil (taken in a cylinder) for 24 h at 105 °C to constant mass. Gravimetric moisture content at the time of sampling and water holding capacity (in saturated soils) were calculated according to the amount of water remaining in the soil after being left to drain for 12 h (Whitaker et al., 2014).

### 2.3 Soil microbial biomass and extractable nutrients

Soil microbial biomass C and N were measured by fumigation-extraction (Brookes et al., 1985; Vance et al., 1987), using ethanol-free chloroform as the fumigant followed by extraction with potassium sulphate (K<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>). Extracts of fumigated and unfumigated soil were analyzed for extractable organic C using a Shimadzu 5000A TOC analyzer (Shimadzu, Milton Keynes, UK). The extracts were analysed for microbial biomass N by colorimetry on a continuous flow stream autoanalyzer (Bran and Luebbe, Northampton, UK), following oxidation with potassium persulphate (K<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub>), by mixing 1.5 mL filtrate with 4.5 mL of 0.165 M K<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub> then autoclaving for 30 min at 121 °C (Ross, 1992). Microbial C and N were calculated as the difference in the respective nutrient between fumigated and unfumigated extracts, and corrected for unrecovered biomass using *k* factors of 0.35 for microbial C (Sparling et al., 1990) and 0.54 for microbial N (Brookes et al., 1985).

Readily-exchangeable phosphate (extractable P) and microbial biomass P were determined by hexanol fumigation and extraction with anion-exchange membranes (Kouno et al., 1995). Phosphate was recovered from anion-exchange membranes by shaking for 1 h in 50 mL of 0.25 M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, with detection in the acid solution by automated molybdate colorimetry using a Lachat Quikchem 8500 (Hach Ltd, Loveland, CO,

USA). Extractable P was determined on unfumigated samples and microbial P was calculated as the difference between the fumigated and unfumigated samples, with correction for unrecovered biomass using a  $k_p$  factor of 0.4 (Jenkinson et al., 2004).

Nitrogen mineralization was derived by extraction with in situ cation and anion-exchange resins (Templer et al., 2005). We used the resin-bag method to determine extractable  $\text{NH}_4$  and  $\text{NO}_3$  because standard methods of extraction of  $\text{NH}_4$  and  $\text{NO}_3$  from soils (e.g. with KCl) should be performed within 24 h of soils sampling (Turner and Romero, 2009), which was not possible given the remote location of these sites. The remote location of sites also meant we were only able to determine mineralized N in five of the 14 plots, which were distributed across the gradient (210, 1000, 1500, 1750, 3025 m.a.s.l.). Mixed-bed cation/anion exchange resin were placed inside nylon bags (4 g resin in each) and installed at 10 cm soil depth in systematically distributed locations in each 1 ha plot ( $n = 15$ ). Resin bags were deployed for one month during November–December 2011 and stored at room temperature until extraction. Resin bags were shipped to the University of Aberdeen, UK, extracted using 2 M KCl (Templer et al., 2005) and concentrations of  $\text{NH}_4$  and  $\text{NO}_3$  determined colorimetrically using a Burkard SFA2 continuous-flow analyzer (Burkard Scientific Ltd., Uxbridge, UK). Extractable  $\text{NH}_4$  and  $\text{NO}_3$  (total mineralized N) were calculated from the difference between extracted N from resin deployed in the field and resin not deployed (blanks) and expressed as extractable  $\text{NH}_4$ -N and  $\text{NO}_3$ -N per g resin per day.

## 2.4 Soil enzymes

Three enzymes involved in C, N and P cycling were measured using microplate fluorimetric assays with 200  $\mu\text{M}$  methylumbelliferone (MU)-linked substrates as described in Turner and Romero (2010):  $\beta$ -glucosidase (degradation of  $\beta$ -1,4-glycosidic bonds between glucose molecules), *N*-acetyl  $\beta$ -glucosaminidase (degradation of *N*-glycosidic bonds in chitin), and phosphomonoesterase (degradation of monoester-linked simple organic phosphates). The activities of these three enzymes have been used to indicate the stoichiometry of microbial C, N and P nutrition in global ecosystems (Sinsabaugh

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et al., 2008). For each soil sample, five replicate micro-plates were prepared and incubated at 2, 10, 22, 30 and 40 °C respectively for each enzyme, to allow calculation of enzyme activity at mean annual temperature for each site.

For the fluorimetric assays, 2 g soil (dry weight basis) was added to 200 mL of 1 mM  $\text{NaN}_3$  solution and dispersed by stirring on a magnetic stir plate. After 5 min and while stirring, 50  $\mu\text{L}$  aliquots of soil suspension were removed using an 8-channel pipette and dispensed into a 96-well microplate containing 50  $\mu\text{L}$  modified universal buffer solution (Tabatabai, 1994) adjusted to pH 4 (approximately equivalent to soil pH in all sites; Table 1). Each microplate included assay wells (soil solution plus 100  $\mu\text{L}$  MU substrate), blank wells (soil solution plus 100  $\mu\text{L}$  of 1 mM  $\text{NaN}_3$ ) and quench wells (soil solution plus 100  $\mu\text{L}$  MU standard). A further control plate was prepared with the MU substrates and standards with no soil solution to determine fluorescence from substrates and quenching by soil solution in assay plates. There were eight analytical replicate wells for each assay. Microplates were incubated at each specified temperature in the range 2, 10, 20, 30 and 40 °C for a time period of approximately 4, 3, 2, 1.5 and 1 h(s), respectively. Following incubation, 50  $\mu\text{L}$  of 0.5 M NaOH was added to terminate the reaction and plates were immediately analyzed on a Fluostar Optima spectrofluorometer (BMG Labtech, Offenburg, Germany) with excitation at 360 nm and emission at 450 nm.

## 2.5 Calculations and statistics

### 2.5.1 The stoichiometry of enzyme activities and microbial biomass

Enzyme activities were expressed on the basis of soil organic C, to allow for direct comparisons among our sites with widely different bulk density and organic C concentrations. Enzyme activities were determined at standard temperatures (2, 10, 20, 30 and 40 °C) and calculated for the mean annual temperature at each site (Table 1) by fitting a linear model of activity vs. assay temperature. Hydrolytic enzyme activities, determined using MU substrates, were expressed in  $\text{nmolMUgC}^{-1}\text{min}^{-1}$ . We determined ratios of C, N and P degrading enzymes to detect relative differences in N

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and P limitations to microbial activity between the sites (Sinsabaugh et al., 2008). Enzyme activity ratios for C : N, C : P and N : P were determined, where C =  $\beta$ -glucosidase, N = *N*-acetyl  $\beta$ -glucosaminidase and P = phosphomonoesterase. Microbial C, N and P and their elemental ratios were expressed as molar values ( $\text{mmol kg}^{-1}$ ), which allowed

The indirect assessment of microbial nutrient demand according to variation in enzyme activity requires the assumption that substrate availability is the major influence on variation in enzyme activity, rather than mean annual temperature, soil moisture, soil physical structure and plant community composition. This assumption is supported by our data and elsewhere in the literature (Sinsabaugh et al., 2008) (see Supplement for further discussion).

Changes in soil properties and enzyme activities with elevation were analysed using one-way ANOVA, with “elevation” as the factor and “soil properties” or “enzyme activities” as the response variable. Further effects of elevation on soil properties, enzyme activities and enzyme ratios were examined using linear models with soil property, microbial ratio or enzyme activity/ratio as the response variable and elevation as the predictive variable.

To account for the variability along the transect in organic horizon depth and parent material, which may have confounding influences on microbial nutrient cycling, we further examined the effects of elevation on microbial and enzymatic elemental ratios among sites where organic horizon only was sampled (1500–3400 m) and among sites on constant parent material (sites on Paleozoic shales-slates; 2020–3400 m). Pair-wise comparisons were performed using Tukey post-hoc analyses. Correlations among normally distributed soil properties and enzyme activities were examined using Spearman’s correlations. Data were log-transformed when model residuals were non-normally distributed. Significant interactions were determined at  $p \leq 0.05$ . All statistical analyses were performed using R version 2.15 (R Development Core Team, 2012).

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Soil carbon and nutrients

Total soil C, N and P concentrations all increased with elevation across all sites (Fig. 1, Table 2; total C and N:  $p \leq 0.001$ ; total P:  $p = 0.05$ ). Total C ranged from 1.70 % (at 220 m.a.s.l.) to 46.54 % (at 3030 m.a.s.l.), total N ranged from 0.35 % (at 194 m.a.s.l.) to 2.49 % (at 3400 m.a.s.l.) and total P ranged from 0.18 mg g<sup>-1</sup> (210 m.a.s.l.) to 1.44 mg g<sup>-1</sup> (1750 m.a.s.l.). The increase in C was relatively greater than for N or P, resulting in increased C : N (ranging from 6.7 to 19.6) and C : P ratios (ranging from 49 to 521) with elevation (Figs. 1 and 2; Table 2). Similarly, the increase in total N was relatively greater than the increase in total P, resulting in increased N : P ratios with elevation (ranging from 6.7 to 28.2) (Figs. 1 and 2). Ratios of C : N, C : P and N : P increased significantly with elevation ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , respectively), although with higher variation for C : P and N : P than C : N (Fig. 2). Total soil C and N across all sites were closely correlated ( $R^2 = 0.93$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in contrast to marginal relationships between total C and P ( $R^2 = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and total N and P ( $R^2 = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) (Fig. 1). Soil pH ranged from 3.8 to 4.6 among sites, but did not vary significantly with elevation (Table 2).

There were major contrasts in the concentrations of total mineralized N and extractable PO<sub>4</sub> with elevation (Table 2, Fig. 3). Mineralized NO<sub>3</sub> decreased with elevation ( $p < 0.001$ ) from 24.21 μg N g resin<sup>-1</sup> d<sup>-1</sup> (210 m.a.s.l.) to 0.33 μg N g resin<sup>-1</sup> d<sup>-1</sup> (1750 m.a.s.l.), whereas mineralized NH<sub>4</sub> increased with elevation ( $p < 0.01$ ). However, total mineralized N (NO<sub>3</sub> + NH<sub>4</sub>) decreased with elevation ( $R^2 = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Fig. 3). In contrast, extractable PO<sub>4</sub> increased with elevation ( $p < 0.001$ ) from 0.7 mg P kg<sup>-1</sup> (at 1000 m.a.s.l.) to 223.5 mg P kg<sup>-1</sup> (at 3400 m.a.s.l.) (Table 2; Fig. 3).

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## 3.2 Soil microbial nutrients and C : N : P ratios

Soil microbial C, N and P all increased with elevation and ranged ten-fold among sites (Table 3), which approximately corresponded with the increase in organic matter and soil C with elevation (Table 2). The increase was linear and highly significant for microbial C ( $R^2 = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and microbial N ( $R^2 = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), but not for microbial P ( $R^2 = 0.16$ ,  $p = 0.18$ ), which peaked in mid-elevation sites (1850, 2020 m.a.s.l.). Microbial C and N were closely correlated among all sites ( $R^2 = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in contrast to the less well constrained relationships between microbial C and microbial P ( $R^2 = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and microbial N and microbial P ( $R^2 = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (Fig. 1).

Despite the large differences in microbial nutrients, ratios of microbial C:N, C:P and N:P did not vary with elevation across the entire transect ( $R^2 = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.51$ ;  $R^2 = 0.07$ ,  $p = 0.39$ ;  $R^2 < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.77$ ) (Table 3; Fig. 2). However, among sites where only organic horizons were sampled, there was a slight increase in microbial C : N and N : P ratios with elevation, and a greater increase for microbial C : P (Table 4). Similarly, among sites on the same parent material there was an elevation-related increase in microbial C : P (Table 4).

## 3.3 Enzyme activities

All enzyme activities decreased significantly with elevation, when determined at standard assay temperature ( $p < 0.001$  for all comparisons; Fig. S1 for activity determined at assay temperatures 10 and 30 °C) and when determined at the mean annual temperature for each site (Fig. 4). To determine enzyme activity at the site mean annual temperature we used linear models of enzyme activity against assay temperature; all of the 42 models (for 3 enzymes and 13 sites) were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) and the average  $R^2$  of all fitted models was 0.80 (SE = 0.01,  $n = 39$ ; Table S1). After accounting for differences in soil C content among sites, enzyme activities decreased approximately 100-fold with elevation (Fig. 4). The largest decline in enzyme activity with elevation was for

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phosphomonoesterase and the smallest decline was for *N*-acetyl  $\beta$ -glucosaminidase (Fig. 4; note log scale for enzyme activity).

The enzymatic C:P and N:P ratios increased with elevation (Fig. 5), but not for C:N. The relatively large decrease in phosphomonoesterase activity with elevation compared to other enzymes was reflected by increasing ratios for enzymatic C:P ( $R^2 = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and N:P ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) but not for C:N ( $R^2 = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.13$ ) (Fig. 5). Among sites where only the organic horizon was sampled the pattern of an elevation-related increase for enzymatic C:P and N:P, but not C:N, was also observed (Table 4). Among sites on constant parent material, there was an elevation-related increase for enzymatic N:P and a marginal increase for enzymatic C:P (Table 4).

## 4 Discussion

It has been proposed that tropical forest elevation gradients are gradients of nutrient limitation to plant productivity, with P-limitation prevalent in lowland forests (Vitousek and Sanford, 1986) and N-limitation prevalent in montane forests (Tanner et al., 1998). The major drivers of this shift are considered to be differences in soil nutrient availability along elevation gradients, caused by changes in rates of soil weathering and turnover, and temperature constraints on decomposition and biological N fixation (Hedin et al., 2009; Reed et al., 2011; Tanner et al., 1998). Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that soil microbial processes are constrained by N and P in the same manner, which is supported for some lowland (Cleveland et al., 2002; Turner and Wright, 2014) and montane tropical forests sites (Corre et al., 2010; Cusack et al., 2011a). Our findings from a 3400 m tropical forest elevation gradient in the Peruvian Andes provide evidence that this paradigm also applies to soil microorganisms, with a gradual transition in investment into nutrient acquisition from P to N between lowland and montane tropical forests.

Evidence that relative microbial investment in nutrient acquisition shifts from P towards N along a tropical elevation gradient can be inferred from differences in nutrient

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tion of organic matter, is predominantly constrained by P in lowland forests but by N in montane forests. Despite these constraints, our results suggest that the microbial biomass is relatively homeostatic with respect to nutrients, given the major changes in N and P availability along the elevation gradient. Extrapolating our findings to other sites requires careful consideration of the multiple factors that influence nutrient availability and co-vary with elevation, including differences in parent material and rainfall. Nevertheless these results have important implications for C cycling in tropical ecosystems, because nutrient constraints are important factors in determining how these ecosystems respond to perturbations in climate, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and nutrient enrichment.

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**Table 1.** Summary of site characteristics along the elevation gradient, spanning lowland rain-forest (194–210 m.a.s.l.), premontane (1000 m.a.s.l.), lower montane (1500–2020 m.a.s.l.) and upper montane cloud forest (2520–3400 m.a.s.l.) (Aragao et al., 2009; Asner et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2013; Girardin et al., 2010; Quesada et al., 2010). na = data not available.

Site name	Site code	Elevation (m.a.s.l.)	Lat	Long	Mean annual temp (°C)	Annual precipitation (mm yr <sup>-1</sup> )	Soil organic horizon (cm)	Aspect (deg)	Slope (deg)	Parent material	Soil classification
Explorer's Inn plot 4 (TP4)	TAM-06	194	-12.839	-69.296	26.4	2730	1	169.4	4	Holocene alluvial terrace	Haplic Alisol
Explorer's Inn plot 3 (TP3)	TAM-05	210	-12.830	-69.271	26.4	3199	2	186.2	6.9	Pleistocene alluvial terrace	Haplic Cambisol
Villa Carmen	VC	1000	-12.866	-71.401	20.7 ± 0.02	3087	4	na	na	na	na
San Pedro 2	SPD-2	1500	-13.049	-71.537	17.4 ± 1.5	2631	16	143.5	39	Plutonic intrusion (granite)	Cambisol
San Pedro 1	SPD-1	1750	-13.047	-71.543	15.8 ± 1.3	2631	10	141.9	40.1	Plutonic intrusion (granite)	Cambisol
Trocha Union 8	TRU-08	1850	-13.071	-71.555	16.0 ± 1.3	2472	16	137.0	41.8	Plutonic intrusion (granite)	Cambisol
Trocha Union 7	TRU-07	2020	-13.074	-71.559	14.9 ± 1.1	1827	17	na	na	Paleozoic shales-slates/ Granite intrusion	Cambisol
Trocha Union 5	TRU-05	2520	-13.094	-71.574	12.1 ± 1.0	na	14	na	na	Paleozoic shales-slates	na
Trocha Union 4	TRU-04	2720	-13.107	-71.589	11.1 ± 1.0	2318	21	189.8	28.6	Paleozoic shales-slates	Umbrisol
Trocha Union 3	TRU-03	3020	-13.109	-71.600	9.5 ± 1.0	1776	17	129.3	37.6	Paleozoic shales-slates	Umbrisol
Wayqecha	WAY-01	3025	-13.190	-71.587	11.1 ± 1.2	1706	23	na	na	Paleozoic shales-slates	Umbrisol
Trocha Union 2	TRU-02	3200	-13.111	-71.604	8.9 ± 1.0	na	12	na	na	Paleozoic shales-slates	Umbrisol
Trocha Union 1	TRU-01	3400	-13.114	-71.607	7.7 ± 1.1	2555	14	144.3	34.3	Paleozoic shales-slates	Umbrisol

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**Table 2.** Soil nutrients and pH along the elevation gradient. Linear model results (elevation ~ property) are given at the bottom of the table. Values are means with 1 SE ( $n = 5$ ).

Site code	elevation (m a.s.l.)	Total C (%)	Total N (%)	Total P (mg P g <sup>-1</sup> )	Total C : N	Total C : P	Total N : P	Resin NO <sub>3</sub> (μg N g <sup>-1</sup> d <sup>-1</sup> )	Resin NH <sub>4</sub> (μg N g <sup>-1</sup> d <sup>-1</sup> )	Extractable PO <sub>4</sub> (mg P kg <sup>-1</sup> )	Soil pH
TAM-06	194	2.38 (0.32)	0.35 (0.03)	0.49 (0.07)	6.7	48.6	7.1	–	–	3.3 (0.8)	4.6 (0.1)
TAM-05	210	1.70 (0.25)	0.23 (0.03)	0.18 (0.03)	7.1	94.4	12.8	24.21 (2.94)	3.38 (0.45)	2.7 (0.2)	3.8 (0.1)
VC	1000	16.2 (1.6)	1.34 (0.12)	0.73 (0.05)	11.5	222.3	18.4	14.25 (1.94)	9.64 (1.23)	0.7 (0.1)	3.8 (0.1)
SPD-2	1500	10.3 (1.8)	0.91 (0.12)	1.36 (0.37)	11.2	76.0	6.7	14.11 (3.22)	13.06 (0.68)	44.7 (20.1)	4.0 (0.1)
SPD-1	1750	26.0 (10.0)	1.56 (0.50)	1.44 (0.09)	14.7	180.3	10.8	0.33 (0.08)	13.91 (1.02)	19.0 (3.0)	3.9 (0.1)
TRU-08	1850	31.1 (4.6)	1.86 (0.21)	0.76 (0.06)	16.5	409.2	24.5	–	–	14.4 (3.7)	3.9 (0.1)
TRU-07	2020	37.0 (4.8)	2.00 (0.24)	0.71 (0.10)	18.6	520.6	28.2	–	–	16.3 (4.7)	4.0 (0.1)
TRU-05	2520	25.8 (5.7)	1.73 (0.34)	0.98 (0.14)	14.7	263.6	17.7	–	–	53.1 (8.6)	3.9 (0.1)
TRU-04	2720	28.6 (5.0)	1.64 (0.25)	0.87 (0.19)	17.0	329.0	18.9	–	–	56.0 (12.8)	3.9 (0.1)
TRU-03	3020	27.1 (5.5)	1.57 (0.21)	0.92 (0.13)	16.6	294.6	17.1	–	–	59.7 (20.7)	3.8 (0.1)
WAY-01	3025	46.5 (2.1)	2.39 (0.12)	1.09 (0.08)	19.6	427.0	21.9	0.47 (0.21)	11.87 (0.88)	82.0 (23.3)	4.1 (0.1)
TRU-02	3200	44.8 (1.8)	2.42 (0.20)	0.91 (0.02)	18.9	492.6	26.6	–	–	72.8 (12.9)	4.1 (0.7)
TRU-01	3400	42.1 (3.1)	2.49 (0.17)	1.09 (0.09)	17.0	386.1	22.9	–	–	223.5 (33.0)	4.0 (0.2)
$R^2$		0.79	0.80	0.30	0.80	0.55	0.38	0.73	0.12	0.51	0.13
$F$		40.76	42.98	4.61	45.21	13.27	6.75	154.92	8.06	11.3	1.66
$p$		< 0.001	< 0.001	0.05	< 0.001	< 0.01	0.03	< 0.001	< 0.01	< 0.01	0.22

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**Table 3.** Carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus and their ratios in soil microbial biomass along the elevation gradient. Linear model results (elevation ~ property) are given at the bottom of the table. Values are means with 1 SE ( $n = 5$ ).

Site code	Elevation (m.a.s.l.)	Microbial C (mmol kg <sup>-1</sup> )	Microbial N (mmol kg <sup>-1</sup> )	Microbial P (mmol kg <sup>-1</sup> )	Microbial C : N	Microbial C : P	Microbial N : P
TAM-06	194	32.1 (3.5)	2.6 (0.9)	1.18 (0.24)	31.1 (20.1)	33.7 (9.1)	2.9 (1.1)
TAM-05	210	20.5 (3.3)	2.2 (0.7)	1.40 (0.28)	13.8 (5.1)	21.5 (8.9)	2.6 (1.5)
VC	1000	13.8 (2.2)	8.9 (0.9)	0.94 (0.10)	1.6 (0.2)	16.2 (3.9)	10.1 (1.7)
SPD-2	1500	66.2 (9.8)	11.6 (1.2)	7.50 (1.26)	5.9 (0.8)	11.5 (4.4)	1.8 (0.5)
SPD-1	1750	103.7 (35.4)	18.9 (7.7)	7.98 (1.78)	6.1 (0.9)	18.1 (7.4)	2.8 (0.9)
TRU-08	1850	159.3 (27.7)	21.9 (6.7)	11.26 (0.47)	8.7 (1.8)	13.9 (2.0)	1.9 (0.6)
TRU-07	2020	138.6 (17.5)	21.1 (3.9)	11.89 (0.69)	6.9 (0.9)	11.6 (1.8)	1.8 (0.4)
TRU-05	2520	94.2 (14.9)	16.2 (4.7)	8.37 (0.70)	10.9 (4.8)	11.5 (1.8)	2.0 (0.6)
TRU-04	2720	98.5 (32.8)	13.2 (4.9)	5.87 (1.00)	7.8 (0.7)	23.9 (12.5)	3.2 (1.8)
TRU-03	3020	114.8 (12.3)	16.0 (3.5)	5.74 (0.95)	10.4 (4.2)	22.9 (5.0)	3.3 (1.0)
WAY-01	3025	188.4 (26.7)	26.6 (2.9)	8.81 (1.04)	7.1 (0.8)	24.0 (6.5)	3.4 (0.9)
TRU-02	3200	114.3 (17.0)	7.0 (1.7)	5.85 (0.71)	22.9 (7.1)	20.4 (3.0)	0.9 (0.3)
TRU-01	3400	151.5 (18.8)	17.1 (4.8)	2.71 (0.45)	11.1 (2.4)	62.4 (10.7)	6.5 (1.6)
	$R^2$	0.61	0.35	0.16	0.04	0.07	< 0.01
	$F$	16.95	5.88	2.06	0.46	0.80	0.09
	$p$	< 0.01	< 0.05	0.18	0.51	0.39	0.77

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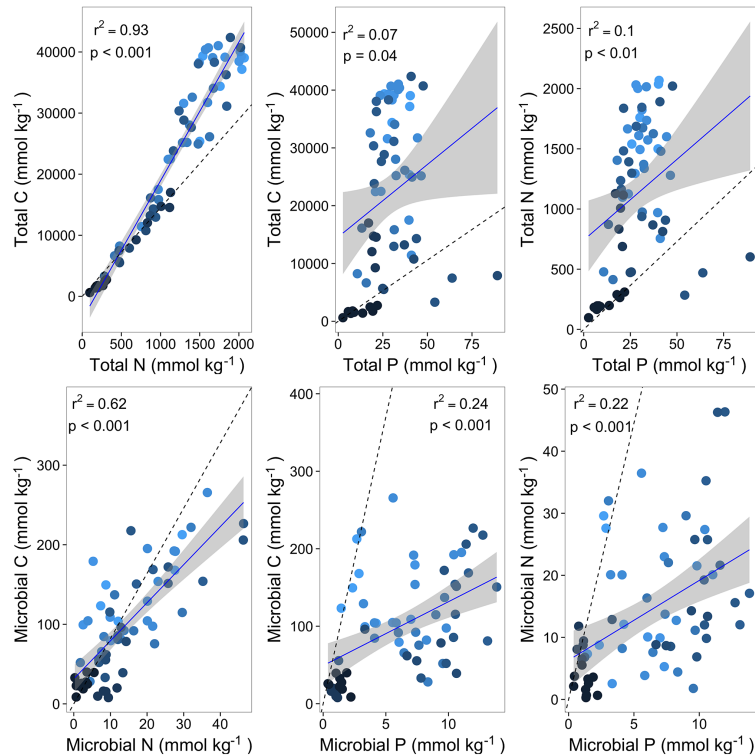
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**Table 4.** Relationships between elevation and microbial and enzymatic carbon (C), nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) ratios, in organic soils only (sites 1500–3400 m a.s.l.) and in soils on constant parent material (sites 2020–3400 m a.s.l.). The relationships between elevation and microbial and enzymatic carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus ratios for all sites across the gradient are shown in Figs. 3 and 5, respectively. Significant relationships are in bold ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

		Microbial C : N	Microbial C : P	Microbial N : P	Enzymatic C : N	Enzymatic C : P	Enzymatic N : P
1500–3400 m	Constant organic horizon						
	Slope	<b>28</b>	<b>576</b>	<b>78</b>	-142	<b>730</b>	<b>990</b>
	$R^2$	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.22</b>	<b>0.07</b>	-0.02	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.15</b>
	$F$	<b>5.70</b>	<b>14.33</b>	<b>4.63</b>	0.13	<b>5.82</b>	<b>9.52</b>
	$p$	<b>0.02</b>	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>	<b>0.04</b>	0.72	<b>0.02</b>	<b>&lt; 0.01</b>
2020–3400 m	Constant parent material						
	Slope	12	<b>10</b>	49	-212	427	<b>757</b>
	$R^2$	0.06	<b>0.28</b>	0.10	0.02	0.11	<b>0.25</b>
	$F$	1.97	<b>12.30</b>	3.51	0.56	3.97	<b>11.02</b>
	$p$	0.17	<b>0.001</b>	0.07	0.46	0.055	<b>&lt; 0.01</b>

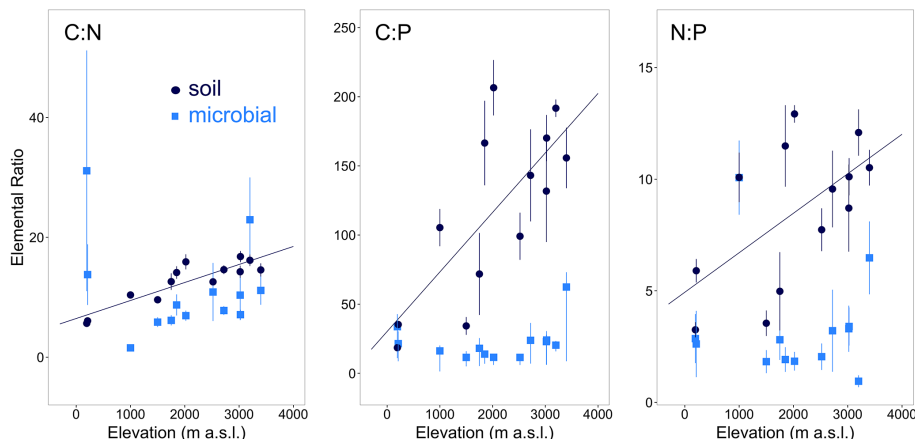


**Figure 1.** The stoichiometry of total soil C, N and P, and soil microbial C, N and P (molar ratios). The points are coloured according to the elevation gradient (194–3400 m.a.s.l.), with darker points for lower elevation sites and lighter points for higher elevation sites. The solid lines are linear regressions between total and microbial elements (model parameters are reported in the top-left of each panel). The shaded areas represent  $\pm 1$  SE. The dashed lines represent the stoichiometric scaling between C : N : P from a recent global meta-analysis of forests (212 : 15 : 1 in soils and 74 : 9 : 1 in microbial biomass) (Cleveland and Liptzin, 2007).



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**Figure 2.** The relationships between soil and microbial C:N:P stoichiometry with elevation (194–3400 m a.s.l.). Total soil C:N, C:P and N:P all significantly varied with elevation ( $R^2 = 0.45, 0.36, 0.28$ , respectively  $p < 0.05$ ; see Table 2). Microbial C:P, C:N and N:P ratios did not vary with elevation. Values are means with 1 SE ( $n = 5$  replicates, which represents the spatial variation within a 1 ha plot).

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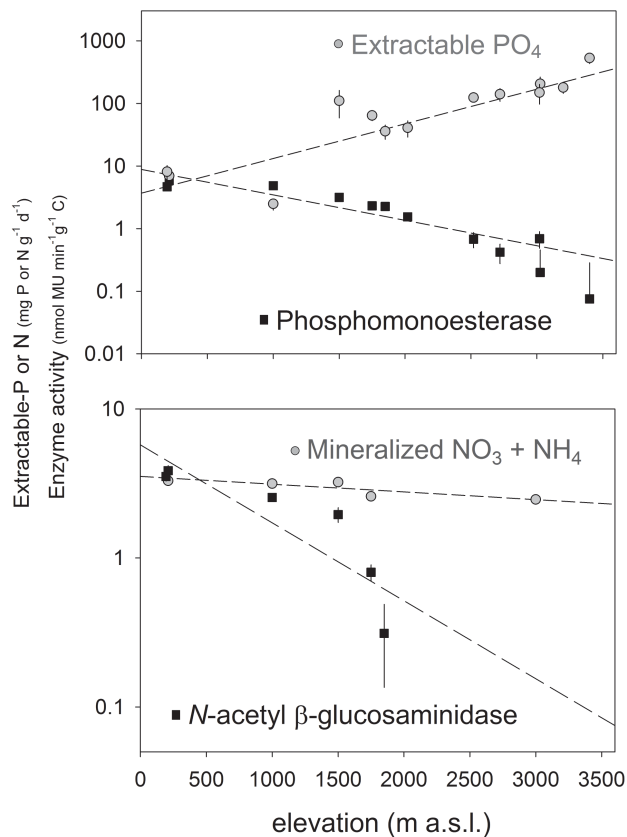
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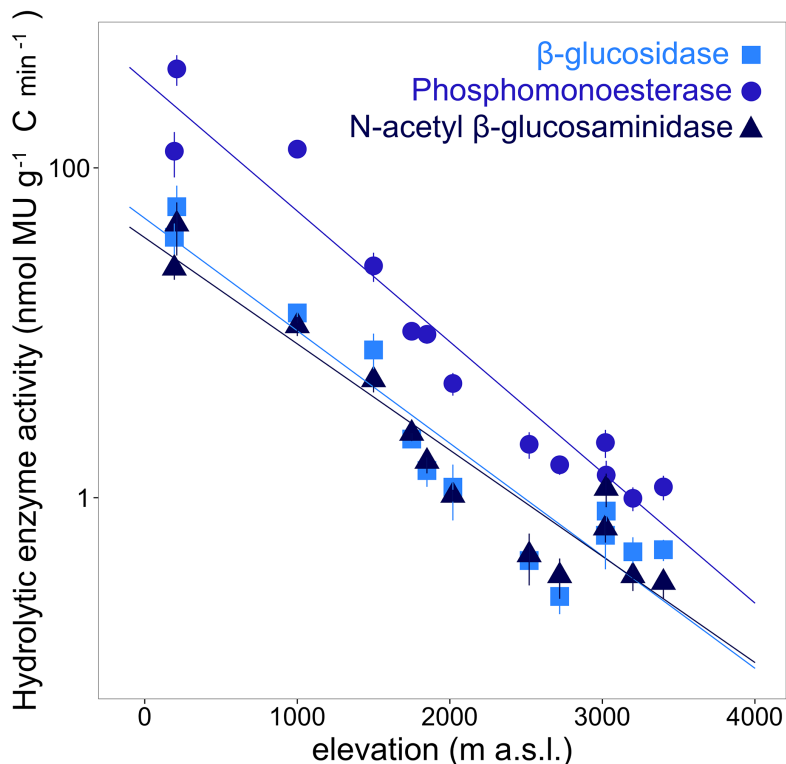
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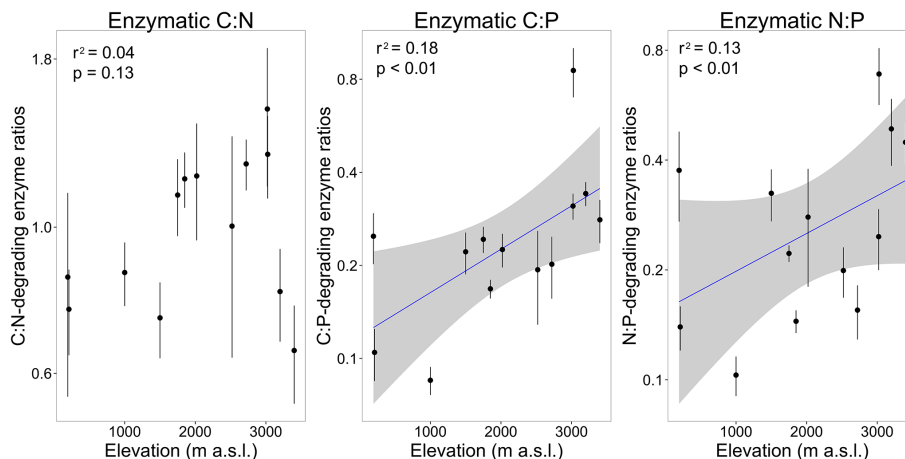
**Figure 3.** The decline in phosphomonoesterase activity and incline in resin-extractable P with elevation; and the decline in *N*-acetyl β-glucosaminidase activity and decline in total mineralized N (NO<sub>3</sub> + NH<sub>4</sub>) with elevation. The decline and incline of all properties with elevation were significant. Spearman correlation coefficients are reported in Table 4. Values are means with 1 SE ( $n = 5$ ).



**Figure 4.** Maximum potential enzyme activities ( $V_{max}$ ) of C ( $\beta$ -glucosidase) N (*N*-acetyl  $\beta$ -glucosaminidase) and P (phosphomonoesterase) – degrading enzymes for 13 sites at elevations ranging from 194 to 3400 m, determined at the mean annual temperature (MAT) for each site (Table 1). Enzyme activity at MAT was determined using linear regression of temperature and maximum potential enzyme activities determined at 2, 10, 22 and 30 °C (Table S1). Values are means with 1 SE ( $n = 5$  replicates, which represents the spatial variation within a 1 ha plot).

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**Figure 5.** The stoichiometry of C ( $\beta$ -glucosidase), N (*N*-acetyl  $\beta$ -glucosaminidase) and P (phosphomonoesterase) – degrading enzyme activity along a tropical forest 3400 m elevation gradient. Enzymes activities were determined at the mean annual temperature for each site. Linear models (including all 13 sites) explained the variation in enzymatic ratios with elevation for C:P<sub>en</sub> ( $R^2 = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and N:P<sub>en</sub> ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but not C:N<sub>en</sub> ( $R^2 = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.13$ ). Values are means with 1 SE ( $n = 5$ ).

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