

Biodiversity and ecosystem functioning in soil

Abstract

We review the current knowledge on biodiversity in soils, its role in ecosystem processes, its importance for human purposes, and its resilience against stress and disturbance. The number of existing species is vastly higher than the number described, even in the macroscopically visible taxa, and biogeographical syntheses are largely lacking. A major effort in taxonomy and the training of a new generation of systematists is imperative. This effort has to be focussed on the groups of soil organisms that, to the best of our knowledge, play key roles in ecosystem functioning. To identify such groups, spheres of influence (SOI) of soil biota - such as the root biota, the shredders of organic matter and the soil bioturbators - are recognized that presumably control ecosystem processes, for example, through interactions with plants. Within those SOI, functional groups of soil organisms are recognized. Research questions of the highest urgency are the assignment of species to functional groups and determining the redundancy of species within functional groups. These priorities follow from the need to address the extent of any loss of functioning in soils, associated with intensive agriculture, forest disturbance, pollution of the environment, and global environmental change. The soil biota considered at present to be most at risk are species-poor functional groups among macrofaunal shredders of organic matter, bioturbators of soil, specialized bacteria like nitrifiers and nitrogen fixers, and fungiforming mycorrhizas. An experimental approach in addressing these research priorities is needed, using long-term and large-scale field experiments and modern methods of geostatistics and geographic information systems.