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Mojave Applied Ecology Notes Winter 2010

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Native Species Interactions with Red Brome: Suggestions for Burn-Area Revegetation

By Scott Abella

In deserts, native perennial plants often actually facilitate the establishment of exotic annual grasses. One of our focal areas of research is to identify native species for use in revegetation projects that reduce the establishment of exotic annual grasses, or at least do not strongly facilitate exotic species establishment. An initial research effort involving a competition experiment of red brome with native species and a correlational field study of brome distribution among native perennial plants is in press with the journal *Invasive Plant Science and Management*.

**Interactions**

The interactions between native and exotic species occur on a continuum from facilitative to competitive. A growing thrust in invasive species science is differentiating where particular native species occur along this continuum, with practical implications for identifying species that might reduce the invasibility of ecosystems. We used a greenhouse experiment to develop a competitive hierarchy of 27 native species with red brome (*Bromus rubens*), an invasive annual grass in southwestern USA arid lands, and a field study to assess *in situ* responses of brome to native perennial species in the Mojave Desert. Native species most competitive with brome in the competition experiment included the annuals pincushion (*Chaenactis stevioides*) and bristly fiddleneck (*Amsinckia tessellata*) and the perennials eastern Mojave buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), sweetbush (*Bebbia juncea*), and brittlebush (*Encelia farinosa*) that reduced brome biomass to 49 to 70% of its grown-alone amount. There was no clear difference in competitive abilities with brome between annual and perennial natives, and competitiveness was not strongly correlated ($r = 0.15$) with the biomass of native species. In the field, sweetbush and brittlebush supported among the least cover of brome, suggesting congruence of the strong early competitive abilities of these species with *in situ* patterns of brome distribution. At the other extreme, brome attained its highest average cover

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**Article in press: native vegetation not strongly facilitating red brome establishment —**

“One of our focal areas of research is to identify native species for use in revegetation projects that reduce the establishment of exotic annual grasses, or at least do not strongly facilitate exotic species establishment.”
DDFRG has a New Name

Beginning with this issue, the Desert and Dryland Forest Research Group has a new name: we are now the Applied Ecology Research Group (AERG).

Lab Manager’s Corner
By Sara McPherson

The Applied Ecology Research Group (AERG) laboratory and staff office space is housed on the fourth floor of the Science and Engineering building (SEB) on the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) campus. We currently have thirteen biological and ecological researchers as well as numerous undergraduate and graduate students that use eight specifically accommodating research work stations and utilize the climate controlled greenhouse for a wide array of high-profile research projects research.

As 2011 approaches, lab manager Sara McPherson is currently conducting a complete inventory of AERG laboratory equipment and archiving soil samples from multiple projects that range from Lake Mead National Recreation Area, to the Spring Mountains National Recreational Area, to various fire damaged areas throughout southern Nevada. More specifically, to prepare for analysis, each site sample is assigned a tracking number, transferred to a plastic bag and indentified in the soil archiving database accordingly. These project samples are housed in secured laboratory cabinets until they are analyzed and the corresponding paper is published. AERG anticipates archiving and inventorying will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of its long term operational capacity.

The Greenhouse

The UNLV greenhouse is currently being used for various experiments and studies, including a biological crust study and a soil seed bank sample experiment as part of a desert burn seeding study.

For the biological soil study, the biological crusts were salvaged from the Northshore Road area at Lake Mead National Recreation Area prior to the realignment in October 2008 and placed in storage away from moisture and sunlight.
More on Red Brome: Post-Fire Establishment, the Experiments Continue

**Trying to beat the brome: understanding establishment thresholds and choosing competitive native species at Parashant National Monument**

By Cayenne Engel and Scott Abella

Desert fires fueled by exotic grasses like the omnipresent red brome (*Bromus rubens*) can be intense and cause widespread mortality of native vegetation. Native desert scrub communities such as those dominated by blackbrush (*Coleogyne ramosissima*) do not readily reestablish after fire (Abella 2009) and may even become more abundant in the post-burn landscape initiating a fire cycle that occurs at a greater frequency than the recovery time of the long-lived desert perennial community.

Management is therefore driven to intervene in this cycle for at least two reasons. First, fuels must be reduced on desert landscapes infested with exotic annual grasses, or the landscapes will eventually burn, as was demonstrated by the record 2005 fire season when nearly 3% of the entire Mojave Desert burned (Brooks and Matchett 2006). Second, some type of vegetation competitive with the exotic annual grasses must be established, to provide vegetative cover for purposes such as minimizing soil erosion, while hopefully reducing the fire hazard. The reestablishment of native vegetation following fire could be a biotic factor that could aid in preventing the establishment (or re-establishment) of exotic grasses after fire.

We are partnering with the Arizona Strip BLM field office (K. Harcksen) to identify mechanisms by which brome establishment can be hindered. Specifically, we will evaluate which plant species may function as the best species to use in restoration with the goals of post-fire establishment, and actively hindering brome establishment through competition. The primary objectives of this project are to specifically address competitive mechanisms that may limit *Bromus rubens* establishment and reproductive potential, and determine which native species may best produce a competitive environment for *Bromus rubens*. We will approach this by experimentally testing *Bromus rubens* establishment at different levels of light and nutrient availability and testing density-dependent relationships of native species with *Bromus rubens* to address the influence of abundance and identity of native species on *Bromus rubens* biomass.

We are taking an experimental approach to assess the effects of light and nitrogen reduction (which naturally occurs with native perennial plant species) on brome establishment, abundance, and reproductive allocation. To do this, we are establishing 72 experimental plots in the Jacob06 fire in Parashant National Monument and applying five levels of shading, 15, 30, 50, 70, and 90 percent light reduction. Concurrently, we are applying sucrose as a carbon source to reduce the nitrogen availability.

The goal of this initial experiment is to mechanistically address what light reduction level is necessary to hinder *Bromus rubens* establishment. We hypothesize that at low levels of cover brome may be facilitated due to the lower temperatures and higher soil moisture associated with the shading, but as the shading level increases we expect to see detrimental effect due to low light level stress. Nitrogen

See Parashant experiment on page 7

Save the date: UNLV’s Applied Ecology Research Group will give 5 presentations at the upcoming 36th Annual Desert Tortoise Council Symposium to be held at Sam’s Town Hotel and Gaming Hall - 5111 Boulder Highway, Las Vegas, NV 89122.

The conference is Fri. - Sun. Feb.18-20, 2011.

We are not sure which day we will be presenting, so please check the conference schedule once it is posted.
Undergraduate and Graduate Programs in Environmental Science at UNLV

By Scott Abella

The School of Environmental and Public Affairs at UNLV houses B.A. and B.S. degrees in Environmental Studies and M.S. and PhD degrees in Environmental Science. These degrees are flexible, multi-purpose, interdisciplinary programs that can be tailored for both breadth and depth.

In the undergraduate degree, students can strategically use elective courses to focus their program in areas such as but not limited to:

- Ecosystem science and management
- Urban environments and planning
- Environmental economics and policy

These focus areas are not formally designated but can be designed based on the interest of the student and the employable skill sets a student wishes to develop. Minors can be formally declared and are listed in bold with examples of skill sets they can provide: Biology (skills in ecology), Chemistry (environmental chemistry), Geology (soils/geomorphology), Physical Geography (GIS, landscape analysis), Landscape Studies (urban ecology/planning), Recreation (land-use planning), Solar and Renewable Energy (energy planning), Statistics (environmental analysis), Anthropology (cultural resource management), Journalism and Media Studies (environmental journalism), Economics (environmental economics), Sociology (human-environment relations), and Political Science (environmental regulation).

The M.S. graduate program allows up to two formal concentration areas to be declared and can be in areas such as (but not limited to): applied ecology, restoration ecology, environmental resource management, solar and renewable energy, urban environments, watershed management, quantitative environmental analysis, environmental modeling, environmental sociology, and policy and governance.

The PhD program can similarly take advantage of the multi-disciplinary focus and the array of statistics and experimental design courses available at UNLV for a well-rounded program supporting a rigorous dissertation.

Our lab is currently accepting new graduate students who meet admission requirements, are academically engaged to the rigorous extent of committing to publish their graduate research in environmental journals, and are interested in research in applied ecology by developing a mutually beneficial graduate project.

Students can work on a variety of environmental topics, such as this study of plant recovery following wildfire in Red Rock Canyon near Las Vegas.

Students working with our lab are actively supported in presenting and publishing their research for disseminating the findings of environmental research and building their careers.
Red brome
continued from page 1

(19%) below littleleaf ratany (Krameria erecta), significantly
greater than all but three of the
16 species evaluated. Cover of
brome was only weakly related
\( r = 0.19 \) to area of the
perennial canopy, suggesting
that factors other than the sizes
of perennial plants were linked
to differences in brome cover
among species.

Results suggest that (i)
interactions with brome differ
substantially among native
species, (ii) these interactions
are not as closely linked to
biomass production as in more
temperate regions, and (iii)
there is potential for identifying
native species that can reduce
invasion of desert ecosystems.

Interpretive Summary

Identifying native species, for
use in revegetation and plant
community augmentation
projects, capable of reducing
the fitness of invasive species is
a major thrust in invasive
species science and
management. We sought to
identify native species
competitive with Bromus
rubens, an exotic annual grass
increasing fuel loads and
facilitating fires devastating to
resources in southwestern USA
arid lands. In a greenhouse
experiment screening the
competitive abilities of 27
native species, we found that
the native annuals Chaenactis
stevioides and Amsinckia
tessellata and the perennials
Eriogonum fasciculatum, Bebbia
juncea, and Encelia farinosa
mostly strongly competed with
Bromus. In a companion field
assessment of Bromus below
different native perennial plants
in the eastern Mojave Desert,
Bromus cover varied more than
9-fold among 16 species.
Species such as Thamnosma
montana, B. juncea, E.
farinosa, and E. fasciculatum
showed promise in their ability
to support low levels of Bromus
cover, whereas Krameria erecta
seems to facilitate Bromus.
There is potential to develop
lists of species for practitioners
to recommend or avoid using in
desert revegetation projects
based on species’ interactions
with Bromus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>This study: competition</th>
<th>This study: field</th>
<th>Brooks (2009): field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Ambrosia dumosa</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebbia juncea</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleogyne ramosissima</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eriogonum fasciculatum</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hymenoclea salsoa</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krameria erecta</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larrea tridentata</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psorothamnus fremontii</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salazaria mexicana</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thamnosma montana</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of the performance of native perennial species with Bromus rubens in this study compared with Brooks (2009), Mojave Desert, southwestern USA. Species were ranked as poor, medium, or
good in their ability for reducing Bromus biomass (greenhouse competition experiment) and for
supporting low amounts of Bromus in the field (i.e. a ‘good’ rating indicates that Bromus is sparse
below a species’ canopy).

Relationships of native desert plants with red brome (Bromus rubens): toward identifying
invasion-reducing species. Invasive Plant Science and Management (in press).
Greenhouse
continued from page 2

With this study we are examining recovery and rehabilitation of crust species with multiple combinations of treatments: average precipitation vs. above average precipitation, addition of wood shavings to look at effects on surface stability and possibly addition of a carbon source vs. no physical soil stabilizing mechanism, dry application of inoculants (BSC organism clumps) vs. wet slurry application, and a one or a combination of carbohydrate derivatives (D-mannitol, D-glucose, or a combination of both). All treatments are on salvaged native gypsum soils.

What we are hoping to discover is if the addition of a soil stabilizer and the carbohydrate derivatives will improve the recovery and possibly promote growth of biological soil crust organisms after they have been stored for approximately 2 years.

For the Seed Bank study, seed bank samples were collected from 40 plots within burned areas on the north end of the Goodsprings fire, 2005. Half of the plots were aerially seeded with six native perennial plant species: desert needle grass, four-wing saltbush, blackbrush, Nevada joint-fir, California buckwheat, winterfat, antelope bitterbrush, and desert globemallow.

We collected seed bank samples from these sites to augment our annual field data collection aimed at evaluating the seeding effectiveness and post-fire regeneration of these sites. Seed bank samples grown in the greenhouse should result in the germination of species under ideal conditions that may not occur in the field, and allow us to more effectively tell whether seed from seeding efforts are viable in the soil even if they do not appear as recently emerged vegetation at the field sites.
**Parashant experiment**

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Reduction may result in interactive effects with the shading, maybe shifting the level at which shading becomes an effective brome determinant.

The shading experiment will begin in January, 2011. Following the shading experiment, we will initiate greenhouse competition experiments among native annual species and red brome, and in Fall, 2011, we will outplant native perennial species that we anticipate to be good competitors with red brome, such as those found in Abella et al. (2010). We will arrange the outplantings to test density dependant relationships of the native species and brome to provide information about the number of individuals of native perennials that would need to be established in a given area to adequately limit red brome establishment. See the recently published JFS report by Abella et al., where they found that early successional native forb communities, as opposed to middle and late successional or grass dominated communities, best resisted invasion.

**LITERATURE CITED:**


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**A new class at UNLV**

AERG is happy to announce that in the Spring of 2011, UNLV will be offering ENV 794 (Restoration Ecology), which is a graduate student only course. We also regularly offer opportunities for motivated undergraduate students to work with our lab on projects as part of ENV 495 (internship) or ENV 492 (undergraduate research) and 493 (independent study).
Review of 2010 publications and in press articles


PDFs available from http://faculty.unlv.edu/abellas2/