Temperature-dependent Influence of Fungi on Seed Mortality Suggests Difference in Seed Bank Persistence of Sahara Mustard between California and Arizona

Max Li  University of Arizona, School of Natural Resources and the Environment
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Sahara mustard (*Brassica tournefortii*) invades the big desert

- A winter annual species native to the Mediterranean and the Middle East
- Has invaded most of the Sonoran and Mojave Desert
- Has reduced diversity of native desert winter annual plants and the arthropod communities associated with them

Barrows et al. 2009, VanTassel et al. 2013, *Biological Invasions*
A soft spot of the troublesome invader

• Short-lived seed bank in southwestern Arizona
  • High germination rate
  • High mortality of seeds that didn’t germinate
    Li & Chesson 2018 *Evolutionary Ecology Research*

• Most degraded seeds are likely consumed by pathogens

• Summer monsoon is absent over its native range
  • Are mustard seeds vulnerable to fungi active in the summer?
Research questions

• What soil-borne fungi may kill Sahara mustard seeds?

• Are they only targeting Sahara mustard seeds?

• Under what conditions (summer vs. winter) will fungi kill the seeds?
Methods: 1. *A hunt for the fungi*

- Collect Sahara mustard seeds in Tucson soil
- Surface sterilize seeds
- Separate viable and degraded seeds
- Mash each pool and make a series of dilutions
- Isolate fungi from these dilutions
Methods: 2. Knowing the fungi

- Group them into 43 strains
- DNA sequencing (ITS rDNA – partial LSU rDNA)
- All 43 strains are genetically different, belong to 7 orders
Methods: 3. Letting the fungi loose on seeds

- Grow 18 strains in Petri dishes
- Inoculate seeds of Sahara mustard and *Plantago ovata*
- Two temperature regimes
  - Summer: 25°C - 37°C
  - Winter: 10°C - 21°C
- 5 replicates of each treatment
- Wait for 13-16 days
- Check seeds under microscopes
Fungi kill seeds only in the summer temperature
Fungi affect summer and winter germination

A. Effects on seed germination

- Plant Species
  - B. tournefortii
  - P. ovata

- Temperature
  - Summer
  - Winter

Changes in germination fraction

Germination fraction in controls
Reduction of seed bank can be plant host-specific

Seed bank loss = seed mortality + summer germination
Implications

Seed mortality occurs only in summer temperatures

- Summer rainfalls may be important for depleting Sahara mustard seed banks
- Regions with less summer rain (e.g. southern California) may host stronger seed banks of Sahara mustard
Implications

• Some fungi may target Sahara mustard seeds specifically, and can be candidates for biological control
  • *Fusarium* sp.

• Others may affect seeds of Sahara mustard and native species evenly
  • *Talaromyces* sp.
Questions?

Max Li
max.liyue@gmail.com

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