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Alternative states and positive feedbacks in restoration ecology

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in developing better predictive tools and a broader conceptual framework to guide the restoration of degraded land. Traditionally, restoration efforts have focused on re-establishing historical disturbance regimes or abiotic conditions, relying on successional processes to guide the recovery of biotic communities. However, strong feedbacks between biotic factors and the physical environment can alter the efficacy of these successional-based management efforts. Recent experimental work indicates that some degraded systems are resilient to traditional restoration efforts owing to constraints such as changes in landscape connectivity and organization, loss of native species pools, shifts in species dominance, trophic interactions and/or invasion by exotics, and concomitant effects on biogeochemical processes. Models of alternative ecosystem states that incorporate system thresholds and feedbacks are now being applied to the dynamics of recovery in degraded systems and are suggesting ways in which restoration can identify, prioritize and address these constraints.



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