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Grazing Exclusion Effect on Soil and Vegetation Properties in Imam Kandi Rangelands, Iran

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Most of the rangeland of Urmia in Iran is degraded and will require considerable reclamation to achieve a desirable state. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of 14 years of grazing exclusion on vegetation and soil properties in Imam Kandi rangelands. Sampling in both grazing exclosure and grazed areas were conducted using a systematic randomized sampling method. Six 100-m long transects were randomly located in each area and ten 1 x 1 m sampling plots were located along each transect. Within each plot, species presence, canopy cover, species yield, and plant densities were measured. Soil cores were taken in the center of each vegetation sampling plot at 0–30 cm and 30–60 cm depths. Organic matter, nitrogen content, the amounts of phosphorus and potassium, electrical conductivity ($E_{C_e}$), pH, the percentage of CaCO₃, and soil texture were determined for each sample. Results indicate differences in plant canopy cover, species composition, and yield between the grazing exclosure and the control site. All plant growth forms at the exclusion site differed from those at the grazed site. Biomass of perennial grasses, perennial forbs and annual forbs was greater at the exclusion site than at the grazed site, and biomass of annual grasses and shrubs at the control site was greater than at the exclusion site. Overall grazing exclosure site improved the vegetation composition and soil quality parameters $E_{C_e}$, pH, organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium content relative to the grazed site.

Keywords grazing exclusion, soil properties, vegetation properties

Rangelands comprise 45% of 165 million hectares in Iran. Due to excessive exploitation, palatable species have declined over time and been replaced by less desirable and sometimes toxic species (Peganum harmala L., Avena sativa L., Cenchrus ciliaris L., Sorghum spp., etc.) (Azarnivand & Zare Chahoki, 2008). In many areas, desirable species have disappeared and soil is exposed to wind and water erosion (Mesdaghi, 2007).

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Numerous studies have shown that overgrazing of rangeland strongly degrades soil’s physical, chemical, and biological properties, causing dramatic changes in vegetation and nutrient cycling (Lindsay & Cunningham, 2009), and permanent decline of land productivity and ecosystem degradation (Su et al., 2004). Results have also shown that with increasing duration of exclusion, calcium and potassium levels increase, with the lowest values seen under continuous grazing, while sodium concentration, electrical conductivity (ECe), and pH show a decreasing trend with increasing exclusion duration (Jeddi & Chaieb, 2010).

The vegetation on degraded rangelands in the studied area is dominated by invasive, thorny, or toxic plants, and the size and number of vegetation patches are reduced and often eliminated (Perveen & Hussain, 2007). To prevent this continuing degradation on these rangelands, it is essential to conduct restoration operations to improve the vegetation and stabilize the soil surface to reduce wind and water erosion and improve ecosystem functions (Moghaddam, 2007).

The main goal of restoration is to achieve a plant community that stabilizes the soil surface against water and wind erosion and is nutritious and productive for animal production and resilient for grazing (Mesdaghi, 2007). This usually involves reclamation operations (Jeddi & Chaieb, 2010) such as excluding livestock grazing and planting indigenous trees, shrubs, and grasses to improve productivity and ecological function in the area (Tefera, 2001) and improve the quality and quantity of forage and livestock products. Additional but more costly operations include livestock management, mechanical operations (cultivation, pitting, counter furrow, flooding), biological enhancement (planting of native and alien rangeland seeds, fertilization, fire), and livestock facilities (Holechek et al., 1989).

We tested the following hypothesis: grazing exclosure results in: (i) increase in fertility status of soil, cover percentage, yield, and litter percentage; (ii) a shift from grasses and annual forbs to grasses and perennial forbs; (iii) improvement of both soil and vegetation properties in the region; and (iv) more rapid vegetation changes than soil changes.

Generally, most studies in the region have evaluated the soil and vegetation changes separately in response to management and reclamation operations. In this study, we determine the effect of grazing exclusion on yield, cover percentage of growth forms of the vegetation, and changes in soil fertility on Imam Kandi rangelands.

**Method and Materials**

The Imam Kandi basin is located in West Azerbaijan province within the political limits of Urmia town, Iran. The study area is located at 37° 48' 40'' S to 37° 51' 9'' N and 45° 3' 42.5'' W to 44° 59' 47'' E. The average altitude is 1539 m ranging from 2230 m to 1280 m and the catchment area is 14.2 square kilometers with average slope of 28.6°. This region has a cold semi-arid climate with mean long-term rainfall of 386 mm. Mean annual temperature is 11.3°C. The regional soil type is classified as Typic Haploxerept.

The 8.4 ha Imam Kandi grazing exclosure was established in 1996. To ensure grazing exclusion from livestock and wild animals such as rabbits, a 50 x 50 mm sized mesh fence was used. In order to evaluate the effect of grazing exclusion on vegetation and soil properties after 14 years of grazing exclosure, and a grazed control site was selected in the region in summer 2010. The exclosure and control sites were in close proximity and were located in the same homogeneous ecological units.
Dominant grazing animal in the region is sheep and grazing intensity in the rangeland is considered to be high.

Sampling in each area was conducted using a systematic randomized method. Six 100-m long transects were randomly located in each area and ten 1 m² plots (n = 120) were placed at equal distances along each transect (n = 12). Within each plot we determined the species present, canopy cover percentage, plant species yield and density, percentage of ground covered by litter, and percentage of bare ground. Canopy cover percentage, yield, and growth forms (perennial grasses, annual grasses, perennial forbs, annual forbs, and shrubs) were determined separately in each plot. Yield was estimated by clipping at the end of the flowering phase of dominant species. Grasses were clipped at 1 cm height before weighing while forbs were clipped at basal height and shrubs were clipped to remove current season’s growth.

Plot size and number of plots were determined using the minimal area method (Kent & Coker, 1999) and a flexible systematic model (Smartt, 1987). The plants were weighed after drying and separated into growth form before calculation of biomass in kg per hectare for each study site. Canopy cover percentage for each plot was estimated per species (Moghaddam, 2007). Plant species’ density per square meter was calculated by counting the number of each plant in each plot.

Soil sampling was conducted in the center of vegetation plots. In both grazing exclusion and control sites two randomly selected plots per vegetation transect were sampled by taking cores at depths of 0–30 cm and 30–60 cm. A composite sample was made for each transect, giving a total of 24 samples. The soil samples for each depth per site were analyzed in the laboratory of the department of Natural Resources, Tehran University. The samples were passed through a two millimeter sieve before analyzing for organic matter (Walkley & Black, 1934), total nitrogen content using Kjeldal (Bremmer & Mulvaney, 1982), the amount of available phosphorus by P-Olsen (Olsen & Sommers, 1982), potassium (Boltz & Howel, 1978), ECₑ and pH, carbonate calcium equivalent (CCE) percentage (Sparks, 1996), and soil texture (sand, clay and silt percent), using the hydrometer method (Gee & Bauder, 1982).

Data were tested for normality before statistical analysis using the Anderson Darling test (Steel & Torrie, 1980). Differences between vegetation and soil properties of the grazing exclosure treatment and control were analyzed using the t-test in a completely randomized design with SPSS software. Significance was assessed at 5% probability level unless otherwise noted.

Principal component analysis (PCA) was performed on the normalized data sets to determine which factor(s) of soil and vegetation could explain the differences between grazing exclosure and control sites (Hotelling, 1933; Deb et al., 2008).

Results

Results indicate differences in canopy cover percent and biomass yield between the grazing exclusion and control sites. The mean canopy cover percent and biomass yield of the unpalatable vegetation class is significantly less at the exclusion site.

Means and t-test mean comparisons of growth form properties at the exclusion and control sites are presented in Table 1. Independent t-test results show that all growth forms at the exclusion treatment were different from those of the control treatment (P < 0.01). Cover of perennial grasses, perennial forbs, and annual forbs increased in exclusion treatment relative to the control treatment while cover of
annual grasses and shrubs in the control treatment were greater than in the exclusion treatment ($P < 0.01$).

Table 2 shows the mean values of soil properties in the grazing exclosure and grazed control treatments in the 0–30 and 3–60 cm depths. Multivariate analysis of variance shows that soil properties differed between both sites and soil depths and there was an interaction between grazing treatment and soil depth ($P < 0.01$).

Results showed that grazing exclosure influenced EC$_e$, pH, organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium content, but not CaCO$_3$ content. Soil depth had a significant effect on pH, EC$_e$, lime, organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium content. There was an interaction between treatment and soil depth.

**Table 2.** Means and independent t-test results of mean comparison of growth forms properties in exclusion site with control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Growth form</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Yield (kg/ha)</th>
<th>Canopy cover (%)</th>
<th>Density (m$^{-2}$)</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perennial grasses</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>270.95</td>
<td>27.11</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>64.62</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>11.32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual grasses</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>56.14</td>
<td>10.52</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>72.75</td>
<td>11.34</td>
<td>12.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perennial forbs</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>157.85</td>
<td>21.46</td>
<td>14.31</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>48.97</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual forbs</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>87.20</td>
<td>7.29</td>
<td>14.74</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>38.22</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>10.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrubs</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>36.73</td>
<td>7.68</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>59.31</td>
<td>10.07</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Means differ if they have a different letter at $p < 0.01$.

**Significant difference at one percent level.**

annual grasses and shrubs in the control treatment were greater than in the exclusion treatment ($P < 0.01$).

Table 2 shows the mean values of soil properties in the grazing exclosure and grazed control treatments in the 0–30 and 3–60 cm depths. Multivariate analysis of variance shows that soil properties differed between both sites and soil depths and there was an interaction between grazing treatment and soil depth ($P < 0.01$).

Results showed that grazing exclosure influenced EC$_e$, pH, organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium content, but not CaCO$_3$ content. Soil depth had a significant effect on pH, EC$_e$, lime, organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium content. There was an interaction between treatment and soil depth.

**Table 2.** Means and standard errors of soil properties in exclusion and control site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Grazed control</th>
<th>Exclusion</th>
<th>Grazed control</th>
<th>Exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pH</td>
<td>7.84 ± 0.02a</td>
<td>7.60 ± 0.04c</td>
<td>7.71 ± 0.04b</td>
<td>7.42 ± 0.02d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC$_e$ (dS/m)</td>
<td>0.23 ± 0.01d</td>
<td>0.25 ± 0.01c</td>
<td>0.29 ± 0.01b</td>
<td>0.33 ± 0.01a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium Carbonate Equivalent (CCE) (%)</td>
<td>8.30 ± 0.30a</td>
<td>11.25 ± 0.31a</td>
<td>6.01 ± 0.32b</td>
<td>2.28 ± 0.27c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic matter (%)</td>
<td>1.17 ± 0.04d</td>
<td>1.71 ± 0.06c</td>
<td>2.09 ± 0.06b</td>
<td>2.89 ± 0.09a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitrogen (%)</td>
<td>0.02 ± 0.00d</td>
<td>0.06 ± 0.01c</td>
<td>0.13 ± 0.00b</td>
<td>0.21 ± 0.01a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phosphorous (ppm)</td>
<td>2.08 ± 0.11d</td>
<td>3.84 ± 0.10c</td>
<td>6.85 ± 0.28b</td>
<td>12.96 ± 0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potassium (ppm)</td>
<td>103.66 ± 3.57c</td>
<td>79.80 ± 4.49d</td>
<td>190.7 ± 7.7b</td>
<td>339.4 ± 19.9a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand (%)</td>
<td>73.22 ± 2.27c</td>
<td>68.60 ± 2.55d</td>
<td>75.75 ± 1.71a</td>
<td>74.91 ± 1.75b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay (%)</td>
<td>16.96 ± 2.55b</td>
<td>17.14 ± 1.38a</td>
<td>12.08 ± 1.37d</td>
<td>13.75 ± 1.14c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silt (%)</td>
<td>9.81 ± 1.16d</td>
<td>14.25 ± 1.98a</td>
<td>12.16 ± 0.47b</td>
<td>11.33 ± 0.88c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil texture</td>
<td>Sandy loam</td>
<td>Sandy loam</td>
<td>Sandy loam</td>
<td>Sandy loam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Means differ if they have a different letter at $p < 0.01$. 

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with CaCO₃, phosphorus, and potassium content (P < 0.01). However, there were no treatment × soil depth differences between exclosure and grazing on ECₑ, pH, organic matter, and nitrogen content.

Results of PCA yielded two principal components with eigenvalues >1, explaining more than 92% of the total variance between the two studied sites. Eigenvalue gives a measure of the significance of the Principal Component (PC); the PCs with the highest eigenvalues are the most significant (Shrestha & Kazama, 2007). Results of PCA showed that the first component is related to vegetation properties and the second component to soil properties with grazing exclosure accounting for 84% of the differences in vegetation properties and only 8% of the differences in soil properties due to grazing exclusion.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that grazing exclusion has a positive and significant impact on vegetation and soil properties in the area. These results are consistent with the findings of Teague et al. (2011).

Vegetation

Grazing exclusion significantly increased the canopy cover percent, yield of forage, density, and percentage cover of litter compared with the control site, which is in agreement with other published works on grazing exclosure showing the increase in biomass (Oba et al., 2001) and litter percent (Burke et al., 1998). Yates et al. (2000) stated that increased vegetation in the exclusion could be due to soil conditions improvement (temperature, moisture, and nutrient cycling). Canopy cover percent, density, and yield of perennial grasses under exclusion increased compared with the control site and animals perform scarification of the soil by trampling in this treatment. Reeder and Schuman (2002) reported that exclusion increased the growth of perennial grasses, canopy cover, and plant density.

The restoration of the desirable species has also been achieved by reduction of animal numbers (sheep, goats, cattle, and wild animals), application of appropriate grazing systems, complete grazing exclusion and water resources development (Teague et al., 2011). Excessive grazing causes the removal of biomass from rangeland ecosystems that reduce soil organic matter and nutrients content. As soil is the sole supplier of nutrients for plant growth, this has a long-term negative feedback on rangeland forage production. In addition, when removed nutrients are not returned to the soil by animals it will cause a reduction in the quality of forage, which will negatively impact livestock production (Moghaddam, 2007).

Soil Properties

Reduction of soil pH due to exclusion could result from high vegetation biomass or dense root system and high soil organic matter, due to more active microorganism metabolism in the rhizosphere (David et al., 2004), organic acids secretion from the roots and large amounts of CO₂ released from roots and micro-organisms (Hinsinger et al., 2003), increased leaching, and decreases in carbonate calcium equivalent (CCE) percentage. With increasing organic matter content, more mineral and organic acids are produced with carbonic acid being the most abundant.
Although this is a weak acid, its continuous production in soil with high root density causes lime dissolution and leaching from soil. Dissolving the CaCO$_3$ causes pH reduction (Al-Seekh et al., 2009). Therefore, soil pH reduction compared with control site could be related to high root biomass and organic matter accumulation and metabolism of hyperactive microorganisms in rhizosphere in regions where reclamation has been conducted. This affects the lower depth of soil resulting in lower pH. Somda et al. (1997) reported that urine pH of ruminants is about 8.4 to 8.6; therefore, animal urine accumulation may have contributed to increased pH in the control area. In addition, the high organic matter of the surface layer in conjunction with lower pH than the deeper soil is consistent with the findings of Eldridge and Robson (1997).

The EC increase in the grazing exclusion treatment could be due to increasing soil cation exchange capability (Abdallah et al., 2008). Due to increasing vegetation canopy cover percentage and denser vegetation cover with grazing exclusion, organic matter is enhanced and pH is lowered. Improvement in soil structure, a decrease in runoff, and increased water infiltration could cause a reduction in CCE in the surface soil depths due to dissolving by pH reduction. The increased CCE in deeper soil layers could be attributed to its dissolving from upper soil layers and accumulation deeper in the soil profile, with high amounts of CaCO$_3$ in the parent material.

Organic matter at both soil depths increased in the grazing exclosure compared with the control. These results are in agreement with the findings of Teague et al. (2011). Grazing exclosure soils have more dense grasses cover, more organic matter and available water, more plant roots and better aeration than grazed soils with less cover (Mesdaghi, 2007). Excessive grazing that degrades the vegetation has a negative effect on soil physical properties and soil fertility (Mikola et al., 2001). Heavy grazing due to excessive reduction of vegetative cover, and changes in plant growth form and animal trampling affect the amount of soil nutrients (Steffens et al., 2008).

Vegetation cover strongly influences soil nitrogen content. Soils having good plant cover, aerial biomass and high root biomass usually have more organic matter and nitrogen (Foth et al., 1997). Therefore, where grazing is excluded, vegetation cover and root volume in soil result in an increase in nitrogen content compared with the grazed area. Heavy grazing results in a reduction of plant residues in soil which affects the supply of nitrogen and phosphorous (Fernández-Lugo et al., 2009). Changes in the number of plant species and form with grazing exclusion relative to grazed treatments result in differences in root type and volume, leading to changes in soil chemical properties (Foth et al., 1997). This is probably why the PCAs indicated that exclusion from grazing had a much greater influence on changing vegetation than changing soil properties. Burke et al. (1998) indicate that it takes a long time under consistent, improved vegetation management to improve soil properties.

Grazing exclusion caused phosphorous levels to increase in the upper and lower layer of soil compared with the control. This is likely due to the fact that rangeland vegetation exploits phosphorous from lower depths so when vegetation cover and biomass are restored with grazing exclosure phosphorous accessed at deeper soil depths is brought to the surface and accumulates at the soil surface (Azarnivand & Zare Chahoki, 2011).

Exclusion also increased the mean potassium concentration in the upper soil layer compared to the grazed control site. This is likely due to an increase in potassium transfer by plants to the upper soil layers accessed from deeper soil layers compared to the control as discussed above for phosphorous. The increase in potassium
amount is also likely due to the increased vegetation and litter cover and improved soil properties in the exclusion treatment. As lowering of pH results in higher potassium levels (Foth et al., 1997; Somda et al., 1997), the lower pH levels in the exclusion treatment likely contributed to an increase in potassium.

**Conclusion**

Our findings illustrate that grazing exclosure enhances vegetation recovery of annual and perennial grasses, and enhances soil physical and chemical properties in this environment. This indicates that it is possible to improve Imam Kandi rangeland. To do so, range managers should focus on getting local stock permit holders to establish grazing exclosures in degraded portions of the rangeland they graze to improve the vegetation and soil to enhance productivity and restore natural resources.

The observed variations in vegetation and soil properties via PCA analyses indicate that the vegetation is more sensitive than soil to changing management strategies in this semi-arid rangeland. This is likely due to the fact that changes in vegetation strongly influence soil properties and that in dry environments it takes a long time under consistent, improved vegetation management to improve soil properties (Burke et al., 1998). Yong-Zhong et al. (2005) also found that although soil restoration is a slow process the vegetation can recover rapidly after removal of livestock on overgrazed rangeland.

Further studies are needed to develop management protocols that would provide growing season exclusion of grazing from a different portion of the entire grazing management area each year to improve the vegetation and soil health for the whole area as indicated by Müller et al. (2007) to enhance sustainability.

**References**


