

1 **Phosphorus availability and arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi limit soil C cycling and**
2 **influence plant responses to elevated CO₂ conditions.**

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9 **Abstract**

10 Enhanced soil organic matter (SOM) decomposition and organic phosphorus (P) cycling may
11 help sustain plant productivity under elevated CO₂ (eCO₂) and P-limiting conditions. P-
12 acquisition by arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi and their impacts on SOM decomposition
13 may become even more relevant in these conditions. Yet, experimental evidence of the
14 interactive effect of AM fungi and P availability influencing altered SOM cycling under
15 eCO₂ is scarce and the mechanisms of this control are poorly understood. Here, we performed
16 a pot experiment manipulating P availability, AM fungal presence and atmospheric CO₂
17 levels and assessed their impacts on soil C cycling and plant growth. Plants were grown in
18 chambers with a continuous ¹³C-input that allowed differentiation between plant- and SOM-
19 derived fractions of respired CO₂ (R), dissolved organic C (DOC) and microbial biomass
20 (MBC) as relevant C pools in the soil C cycle. We hypothesised that under low P availability,
21 increases in SOM cycling may support sustained plant growth under eCO₂ and that AM fungi
22 would intensify this effect. We found the impacts of CO₂ enrichment and P availability on
23 soil C cycling were generally independent of each other with higher root biomass and slight
24 increases in soil C cycling under eCO₂ occurring regardless of the P treatment. Contrary to
25 our hypotheses, soil C cycling was enhanced with P addition suggesting that low P conditions

26 were limiting soil C cycling. eCO₂ conditions increased the fraction of SOM-derived DOC
27 pointing to increased SOM decomposition with eCO₂. Finally, AM fungi increased microbial
28 biomass under eCO₂ conditions and low-P without enhanced soil C cycling, probably due to
29 competitive interactions with free-living microorganisms over nutrients. Our findings in this
30 plant-soil system suggest that, contrary to what has been reported for N-limited systems, the
31 impacts of eCO₂ and P availability on soil C cycling are independent of each other.
32 **Keywords:** Elevated CO₂, Soil organic matter, decomposition, isotopic natural abundance,
33 phosphorus limitation, fertilisation effect, mycorrhizal fungi, carbon pools.

34 1. Introduction

35 The effect of increased atmospheric CO₂ concentrations on plant productivity and its
36 potential impacts on soil carbon (C) are regulated by nutrient availability (Ainsworth and
37 Long, 2004; Finzi et al., 2011; Reich et al., 2014; Terrer et al., 2019). Higher plant
38 productivity and increases in soil C with elevated CO₂ (eCO₂) have been observed when
39 combined with nutrient addition (De Graaff et al., 2006; Dieleman et al., 2010; Hungate et
40 al., 2009; Maroco et al., 2002; Piñeiro et al., 2017; van Groenigen et al., 2006). In the
41 absence of external nutrient supplies, higher soil organic matter (SOM) decomposition under
42 eCO₂ contributes to meet plant nutrient demands with negative impacts on soil C (Carrillo et
43 al., 2014; Drake et al., 2011; Finzi et al., 2006; Hoosbeek et al., 2004; Phillips et al., 2012;
44 Reich et al., 2006). However, a pre-existent nutrient limitation may constrain productivity
45 responses to eCO₂ (Ellsworth et al., 2017; Reed et al., 2015; Reich et al., 2006), potentially
46 preventing any changes in soil C. The current understanding about nutrient availability
47 regulating eCO₂ impacts on C cycling has been obtained mainly from northern hemisphere
48 systems, where nitrogen (N) often constrains ecosystem productivity. But the impacts of
49 eCO₂ on soil C may be dependent on what the most limiting nutrient is (Dijkstra et al., 2013).
50 Phosphorus-limited tropical and subtropical ecosystems are relevant C sinks that cover a vast
51 area (Keenan et al., 2015; Pan et al., 2011; Soepadmo, 1993) and although the role of P
52 availability regulating the impact of eCO₂ on soil C storage is broadly recognised (Goll et al.,
53 2012; Reed et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2017; Vitousek et al., 2010), the mechanisms of this
54 control are poorly understood (Ellsworth et al., 2017; Norby et al., 2015; Terrer et al., 2019).

55 Opposite to N, soil P cycling is less coupled to soil C dynamics because P mobilisation is
56 not necessarily linked with SOM decomposition. P cycling can be divided into inorganic and
57 organic sub-cycles (Liu and Chen, 2008; Mullen, 2005). In the inorganic sub-cycle,
58 mobilisation of inorganic P occurs via biochemical mechanisms without SOM mineralisation

59 nor CO₂ production, thus C and P cycles are not coupled. In the organic P sub-cycle, C and P
60 cycles are more coupled and P mineralisation occurs via biological mechanisms that lead to
61 SOM decomposition and CO₂ production (McGill and Cole, 1981; Sharma et al., 2013; Tate,
62 1984). Most P is made available via inorganic P mobilisation, particularly with P sufficiency.
63 But in low-P systems, mineral P sources are depleted and P derived from rock weathering is
64 minimal (Goll et al., 2012; Reed et al., 2011). Therefore, the majority of P acquisition occurs
65 via internal recycling of organic P sources (Fox et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2003; Reed et al.,
66 2011) involving SOM decomposition and CO₂ production. Most of the research on the effects
67 of eCO₂ on soil P availability are focused on its impacts on inorganic P cycling via
68 biochemical P mobilisation mechanisms. For example, higher microbial P enzymatic activity
69 is reported with eCO₂ (Hasegawa et al., 2016; Kelley et al., 2011; Moorhead and Linkins,
70 1997; Souza et al., 2017) as well as higher production of organic acids and siderophores
71 involved in P mobilisation (Fransson and Johansson, 2010; Högy et al., 2010; Tarnawski and
72 Aragno, 2006; Watt and Evans, 1999). Moreover, increases in fine root production and
73 changes in pH and soil moisture with eCO₂ can indirectly enhance inorganic P cycling in
74 soils (Dijkstra et al., 2012; Hasegawa et al., 2016; Jin et al., 2015). It is likely that organic P
75 cycling is also affected by eCO₂ due to the influence of eCO₂ on ecosystem stoichiometry
76 (Gifford et al., 2000; Loladze, 2014, 2002) but experimental evidence for this is scarce. A
77 better understanding about how eCO₂ and P availability influence soil C cycling is important
78 to better predict changes in global soil C due to eCO₂ (Finzi et al., 2011; Goll et al., 2012;
79 Yang et al., 2016).

80 In low-P conditions, organic P cycling may help sustain plant productivity under eCO₂ at
81 the expense of higher SOM decomposition. A study by Jing et al, (2017) demonstrated that
82 inputs of labile C led to higher SOM decomposition in low-P soils mediated by altered
83 microbial community composition and increases in microbial biomass. Thus, as C allocation

84 belowground increases with eCO₂ (Canadell et al., 1995; Cotrufo and Gorissen, 1997; Pausch
85 and Kuzyakov, 2018), the higher labile C availability, increased microbial biomass and
86 activity and higher SOM decomposition may allow for a sustained nutrient release for plant
87 uptake and growth in low-P soils. However, evidence from field experiments exposed to
88 eCO₂ suggests that under P-limiting conditions, changes in soil C cycling are minor or
89 undetected (Castañeda-Gómez et al., 2020; Dijkstra et al., 2013; Drake et al., 2016) and that
90 the CO₂ fertilization effect is reduced or not observed (Conroy et al., 1992; Deng et al., 2015;
91 Ellsworth et al., 2017; Goll et al., 2012; Peñuelas et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). Thus, if P
92 availability becomes limiting, ecosystem productivity and microbial-mediated SOM
93 decomposition may be hampered, preventing further changes in soil C cycling. Soil microbial
94 communities play a key role in SOM decomposition and both biological and biochemical P
95 mineralisation and mobilisation. Moreover, the responses of SOM decomposition and C
96 stabilisation to P availability have been found to be largely mediated by changes in
97 saprotrophic microbial community composition and activity (Fang et al., 2019; Feng and
98 Zhu, 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Soong et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2021) and by symbiotic fungi
99 such as arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi (Xu et al., 2018). Yet the role of saprotrophic and
100 mycorrhizal fungi altering SOM decomposition under eCO₂ conditions and low-P availability
101 is poorly understood.

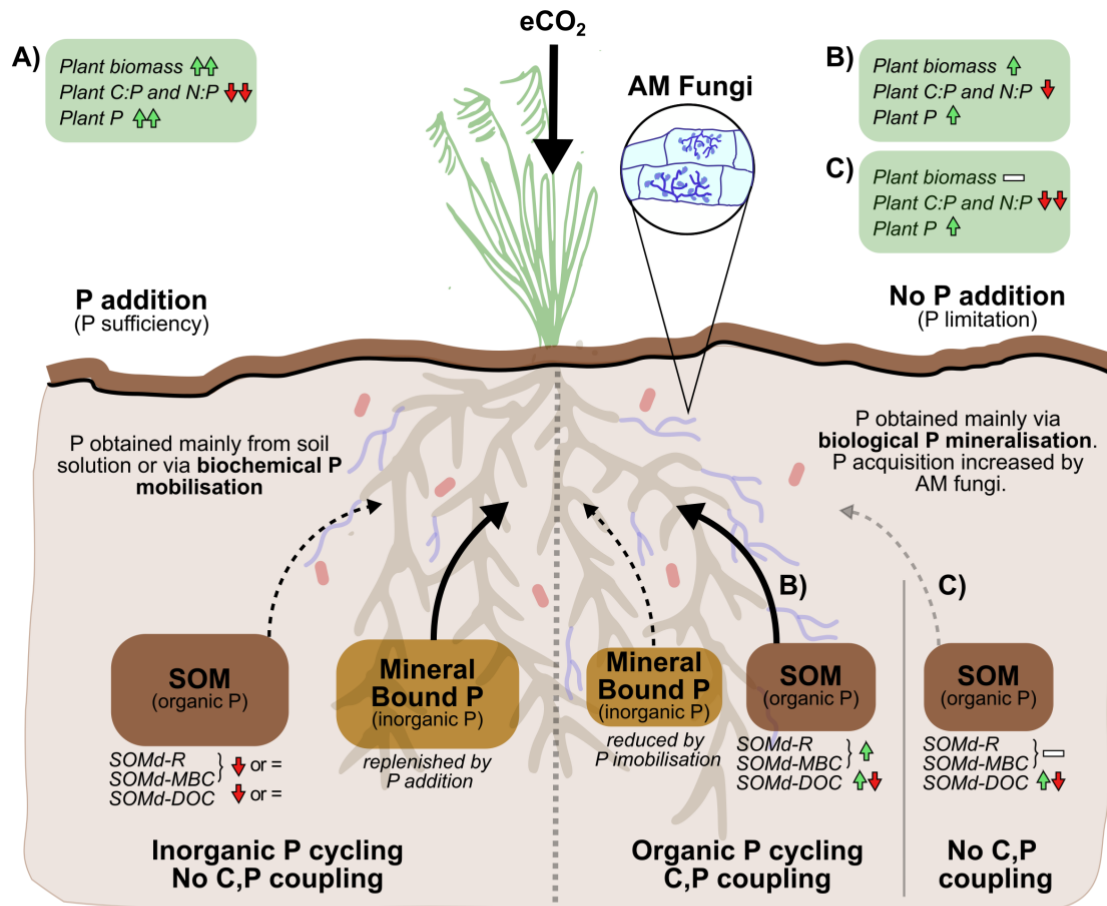
102 AM fungi are known to greatly contribute to P mobilisation under eCO₂ conditions,
103 especially in ecosystems with low soil P availability (Delucia et al., 1997; Matamala and
104 Schlesinger, 2000; Terrer et al., 2016) where AM fungi tend to be more abundant (Treseder
105 and Cross, 2006). AM fungi also alleviate P limitation conditions for plants (Soka and
106 Ritchie, 2014; Willis et al., 2013) possibly via excretion of P hydrolytic enzymes (Joner et
107 al., 2000; Sato et al., 2015) and certainly via uptake of inorganic nutrients from the soil
108 solution (Javot et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2011). They have also been linked with increased

109 SOM decomposition and changes in soil C cycling with climate change (Carrillo et al., 2015;
110 Cheng et al., 2012; Talbot et al., 2008; Wei et al., 2019). Higher C transfer to AM fungi
111 under eCO₂ enhances AM fungi growth and activity (Mohan et al., 2014) and so their
112 contribution to plant P acquisition in P-limited ecosystems may be enhanced with eCO₂
113 (Cavagnaro et al., 2011). On the other hand, AM fungi can also suppress eCO₂-mediated
114 increases in plant growth due to increased P immobilisation in AM fungal biomass and
115 increased competition over P with saprotrophic communities (Jin et al., 2015) that can
116 simultaneously decrease AM fungi-mediated SOM decomposition (Talbot et al., 2008). If P
117 availability is low, the role of AM fungi mobilising P and promoting plant growth may be
118 constrained due to P-limitation (Treseder and Allen, 2002), which might further regulate
119 impacts of eCO₂ on ecosystem productivity in P-limited ecosystems. Due to the significant
120 role of AM fungi on P and SOM dynamics, predictions of altered soil C stocks under eCO₂
121 require an understanding how eCO₂ can change AM fungal activity, their impact on
122 saprotrophic communities and plant responses to eCO₂, particularly under P limitation.

123 In this study, we explored the role of P availability and AM fungi mediating responses of
124 SOM decomposition and plant productivity to eCO₂. We did this by manipulating P
125 availability, AM fungal presence and atmospheric CO₂ levels in a pot experiment. An
126 Australian native grass species (*Microlaena stipoides*) with the ability to grow in a wide
127 range of P availability conditions and forming arbuscular mycorrhizal associations (Clark et
128 al., 2014; Hill et al., 2010) was grown in chambers that allowed the continuous isotopic
129 labelling of plant tissues so we could directly assess changes in SOM-derived C in different C
130 pools: respired CO₂ (R; the product of decomposition), dissolved organic C (DOC;
131 considered an active pool of C) and microbial biomass C (MBC; the agent of SOM
132 decomposition). This approach allowed for a holistic assessment of the impact of eCO₂, P
133 availability and AM fungal presence on soil C cycling and plant growth. Changes in

134 saprotrophic communities were also measured (using phospholipid fatty acids) in relation to
135 eCO₂ conditions, P treatment and AM fungal presence. These responses, along with nutrient
136 contents in plant tissues and soil extracts (dissolved nutrients), were collected to enhance
137 result interpretations.

138 We hypothesised that for plants grown under eCO₂ and enhanced P availability –
139 achieved by P addition – a fertilisation effect would be observed as increased plant biomass
140 without changes in SOM decomposition (**Figure 1A**) since P addition will allow for plant
141 requirements to be met under eCO₂. Contrarily, if P is low, an eCO₂ fertilisation effect would
142 only occur with increases in SOM decomposition, evidenced as higher SOM-derived respired
143 CO₂, MB and MB (**Figure 1B**). Alternatively, we hypothesised that no fertilisation effect
144 would be observed if soil C and P cycling are decoupled in this experimental system (**Figure**
145 **1C**). The presence of AM fungi would increase SOM decomposition as a mechanism to
146 obtain P from SOM via changes in saprotrophic communities. This effect will be observed in
147 the different C pools, particularly with low P conditions and eCO₂ since both low P
148 availability and eCO₂ promote AM fungal colonisation rates and activity.



A) The eCO₂ fertilisation effect occurs **without increases in SOM decomposition**. Increased P availability is achieved via biochemical P mineralisation. The role of AM fungi is less important since plant P requirements are met and because P addition decreases AM fungi root colonisation.

B) The eCO₂ fertilisation effect occurs **contingent to increases in SOM decomposition** as a mechanism to sustain P supply to plants. However, **C)** this effect can be hampered if P is immobilised in plant and MB. High AM fungi colonisation contributes to increased plant P acquisition.

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Figure 1 Conceptual framework and expected responses of measured variables in the experiment

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(green arrow: increase; red arrow: decrease; -: no effect). Increases in plant biomass under eCO₂

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conditions are dependent on nutrient availability. In low phosphorus (P) soils, **A)** P addition (left side)

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will support an increase in plant biomass with eCO₂ (fertilisation effect) without major impacts in soil

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organic matter-derived (SOMd) C pools: R, respired CO₂; MB, microbial biomass; DOC, dissolved

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organic C. Without P addition (right side), **B)** P acquisition may be more reliant on organic P cycling

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(coupled C and P cycles) with enhancements in plant biomass with eCO₂ only observed if SOM

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decomposition and biological P mineralisation increase. Immobilisation of P by plants, AM fungi and

158

microbial biomass becomes relevant in this scenario further increasing SOM decomposition **C)** If P

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availability is too low, becoming limiting, increased P immobilisation and higher P competition will

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decrease the impact on SOM decomposition and plant biomass.

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2. Materials and methods

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We set up a factorial experiment with three factors: **phosphorus (P) treatment:** P

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addition (+P)/control; **AM fungi:** Active AM inoculum (AM)/Non-mycorrhizal (Sterile AM

165 inoculum, NM) and **CO₂**: ambient (400 ppm - aCO₂) and elevated (640 ppm - eCO₂) for a
166 total of 8 treatment combinations with 4 replicates each (+P/AM/aCO₂; +P/AM/eCO₂;
167 +P/NM/aCO₂; +P/NM/eCO₂; control/AM/aCO₂; control /AM/eCO₂; control /NM/aCO₂;
168 control /NM/eCO₂; n=32, **Figure SI 1A**). Plants of *Microlaena stipoides* (Labill.) R.Br., a
169 native Australian C₃ grass with a broad P range, were grown from seed in 125mm pots
170 containing around 500 g of dry soil. Plants were grown in growth chambers for twelve weeks
171 and soil water content was kept between 15 and 20 % gravimetric content by addition of
172 MilliQ water as needed every 2-3 days.

173 **2.1. Soil characteristics and treatment preparation**

174 Soil was collected from a Cumberland plain natural woodland in Western Sydney
175 (33°37'01'' S, 150°44'26'' E, 20 m.a.s.l) near the *Eucalyptus* Free-Air CO₂ experiment
176 (EucFACE). Soil at this site is an aeric podsol, slightly acidic (pH 5.38 ± 0.02 at 0-10 cm)
177 (Ross et al., 2020), with a N content of 677 mg Kg⁻¹, low total C (1.8%, 0-15 cm), and P
178 content (76.28 mg Kg⁻¹) (Hasegawa et al., 2016). Previous studies have demonstrated that
179 both the vegetation (Crous et al., 2015) and soil fauna (Nielsen et al., 2015) are limited by P
180 within this ecosystem. Soil was sieved (to 2 mm) and sterilised (gamma irradiated, 50 kGy)
181 to remove viable AM fungal propagules. To reintroduce a homogenous microbial community
182 to all pots, excluding AM fungi, we prepared a microbial inoculum. For this, approx. 3 Kg of
183 freshly collected soil from a nearby grassland was mixed with water in a 1:3 proportion by
184 volume and the suspension passed through a 20 µm mesh sieve to remove AM fungal spores
185 (Brundett and Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, 1995). Prior to
186 potting, the filtrate was added to the sterile soil at a rate of 50 mL filtrate per Kg soil. The soil
187 was incubated for a week at room temperature, mixing it daily.

188 The soil was then divided into four subsets based on whether they were to receive
189 additional P and AM fungal inoculum. For the former, triple super phosphate (Richgro, super

190 phosphate fertiliser supplement 9.1% P w/w) was added in a rate of 0.4 g/kg dry soil. The
191 triple super phosphate powder was weighed, diluted and sprayed into the soil while low P
192 treatments received MilliQ water only. The soil was then thoroughly mixed and left to settle
193 for a day. Next, AM fungi treatments were created by applying AM fungal inoculum in a
194 1:10 AM fungi inoculum:soil with non-mycorrhizal controls produced by autoclaving the live
195 AM inoculum (121 °C, two hours) and applying it to the soil in the same manner (**See**
196 **supplementary information for AM inoculum production**). Once the four types of soils
197 were prepared, soil was added to pots and five surface sterilised *M. stipoides* seeds (30 %
198 H₂O₂ for 10 minutes followed washing) were sown per pot. Pots were randomly split and
199 placed in aCO₂ and eCO₂ chambers. After two weeks of growth, pots were thinned to one
200 plant per pot. Unplanted pots (n=16) with the different P and CO₂ treatments (+P/NM/aCO₂;
201 +P/NM/eCO₂; control/NM/aCO₂; control/NM/eCO₂ n=4 each), were included to estimate
202 effects on SOM decomposition in the absence of plants and AM fungi (**Figure SI 1A**).
203 Unplanted pots were all prepared using soil with sterile AM inoculum and were kept under
204 the same conditions as the planted pots for the duration of the experiment.

205 **2.2. Growth Chambers set up**

206 The growth chambers (six in total, three per CO₂ treatment) were modified using the
207 approach of Cheng and Dijkstra (2007) to achieve a continuous ¹³C- labelling of plant tissues
208 in both aCO₂ and eCO₂ treatments. The chambers were adapted to take an influx of naturally
209 ¹³C-depleted CO₂ ($\delta^{13}\text{C} = -31.7 \text{‰} \pm 1.2$) delivered during the photoperiod, combined with a
210 scrubbing system made of a soda lime-filled PVC tube (72 L) that allowed continuous supply
211 of CO₂-free air (**Figure SI 1B**). Chambers were adjusted to a 16h/8h photoperiod with 25
212 °C/18 °C, 60 % relative humidity, and light intensity of 900 $\mu\text{mol}/\text{m}^2\text{s}^{-1}$. The chamber
213 atmosphere was sampled frequently to confirm depletion in ¹³C. Air samples from the
214 chambers were extracted via a pump system into a tedlar bag (Tedlar® SCV Gas Sampling

215 Bag) and analysed for $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ in a PICARRO G2201i isotopic CO_2/CH_4 analyser (Picarro Inc.,
216 Santa Clara, CA, USA). To avoid plant-uptake of ^{13}C from outside the chambers, watering
217 and all other manipulations were performed during the night period aided by green light.

218 **2.3. Harvest and sample processing**

219 **Gas sampling of the plant-soil system**

220 After twelve weeks of growth, we quantified rates of total respired CO_2 (R) and its C
221 isotopic composition as described by Carrillo et al., (2015, 2014). Briefly, pots were placed
222 on an elevated platform inside a water filled tray and covered with a PVC chamber (45 cm H
223 x 15 cm D) adapted with an air-tight rubber stopper for air sampling. Free- CO_2 air was
224 circulated for 2 hours using an aquarium pump connected to a CO_2 scrubber (50 cm H x 4 cm
225 D PVC tubing filled with soda lime). After 2 hours of scrubbing, an air sample was taken to
226 determine baseline CO_2 concentrations using a 7890A gas chromatograph with a G1888
227 network headspace sampler (Agilent Technologies, USA). Later, the CO_2 scrubbers were
228 removed and the pump reconnected to the PVC chamber to allow for air circulation while
229 pots were incubated. After two to three hours of incubation, a gas sample was collected in an
230 airtight gas collection bag (Tedlar® PVDF, 1L) using an aquarium pump system and
231 analysed for its C isotopic composition.

232 **Plant and soil harvest**

233 One day after gas sampling, pots were destructively harvested. Aboveground biomass
234 was cut and roots separated from the soil and washed. Plant aboveground biomass, roots and
235 a subsample of fresh soil were oven dried at 60 °C for measurements of dry plant biomass,
236 soil gravimetric water content and total nutrients. A fresh soil subsample was stored at -20 °C
237 for microbial community analyses and the remaining fresh soil was used for assessments of
238 dissolved nutrients and microbial biomass.

239 **Plant, soil nutrients and microbial biomass C and N**

240 Two sub-samples of soil were weighed. Dissolved nutrients in soil were extracted
241 from the first subsample with a 0.05M K₂SO₄ solution in a 4:1 solution to soil ratio, shaking
242 at 180 rpm for an hour. Samples were filtered through a Whatman # 42 filter paper and
243 frozen (-20°C) until analyses. The second subsample was fumigated for 5 days with
244 chloroform and then nutrients were extracted as for unfumigated samples. The fumigated and
245 unfumigated extracts were analysed for total dissolved organic C and N (Shimadzu® TN,
246 TOC-L, Japan) and microbial biomass C and N calculated by subtracting fumigated and
247 unfumigated samples (Vance et al., 1987). The volume left of these K₂SO₄ extractions was
248 used to obtain the isotopic composition of DOC and microbial biomass (see section below).
249 Phosphates were extracted following the Bray 1-P method for acidic soils, in a 1:7
250 solution:soil ratio using a 0.03M NH₄F solution in 0.025 M hydrochloride (HCl) adjusted pH
251 to 2.6 ± 0.05 with HCl (Rayment et al., 2010). Samples were manually shaken for 60s and
252 immediately poured over a Whatman # 42 filter paper. Collected extracts were analysed by
253 colorimetry (AQ2 Discrete Analyser, SEAL Analytical, Mequon, WI, USA).

254 Total P and N were determined from ground oven-dried soil and root samples. Total P
255 concentration was analysed by an X-ray fluorescence spectrometer (PANalytical, epsilon 3.
256 10Kv, 0.9mA. Lelyweg, Almelo, Netherlands) while total C and N from soil, roots and soil
257 extracts were analysed along their isotopic composition.

258 **2.4. Respired, dissolved organic C (DOC) and microbial biomass isotopic** 259 **composition and partitioning**

260 Gas samples from plant-soil system incubations were analysed in a PICARRO analyser
261 (G2201i; Picarro, Santa Clara, CA, USA. Precision values below 0.16‰) for the δ¹³C and
262 CO₂ concentration of the total respired CO₂ (R). For the isotopic composition of the DOC and
263 microbial biomass C (MBC), fumigated (*f*) and unfumigated (*uf*) soil K₂SO₄ extracts were
264 oven dried at 60°C. The dried extracts were scraped and weighed for analysis on a Thermo

265 GC-C-IRMS system (Trace GC Ultra gas chromatograph, Thermo Electron Corp., Milan,
266 Italy; coupled to a Delta V Advantage isotope ratio mass spectrometer through a GC/C-III);
267 University of California, Davis Campus, USA). The $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of unfumigated soil extracts was
268 used as the isotopic composition of the DOC while $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of MBC ($\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{MBC}}$) were calculated
269 from $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values of both fumigated (*f*) and unfumigated (*uf*) extractions (**See supplementary**
270 **information for calculations of the isotopic composition of the microbial biomass**).
271 Samples of dried soil were also analysed on the Thermo GC-C-IRMS system for C, N and
272 $\delta^{13}\text{C}$.

273 To calculate the fractions of SOM-derived C in the total respired CO_2 (R), dissolved
274 organic C (DOC) and microbial biomass C (MBC) we used isotopic partitioning as:
275 $\text{SOM.C}_{R,DOC,MBC} = (\delta^{13}\text{C}_{R,DOC,MBC} - \delta^{13}\text{C}_p) / (\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{control}} - \delta^{13}\text{C}_p)$. Where $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{R,DOC,MBC}$ were the
276 $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of either the CO_2 measured in the total respired CO_2 (R), dissolved organic C (DOC) or
277 microbial biomass C (MBC)) from each pot; $\delta^{13}\text{C}_p$ is the isotopic ratio of the plant source
278 averaged across P treatments per CO_2 condition (root biomass at aCO_2 $\delta^{13}\text{C} = -40.01 \pm 0.08$
279 and eCO_2 $\delta^{13}\text{C} = -43.20 \pm 0.04$) and $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{control}}$ is the average $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ of the native SOM source
280 obtained from the dried bulk soil across CO_2 and P conditions ($\delta^{13}\text{C} = -25.31 \pm 0.02$). The
281 fractions of plant-derived C were obtained by subtracting SOM-derived fractions from the
282 unit. Measured total respired CO_2 rates, DOC and MBC were partitioned into SOM-derived
283 and plant-derived, using these fractions to obtain the mass of the SOM derived R, MBC and
284 DOC pools. In this study, we focus only on the SOM-derived C pools and fractions.

285 **2.5. Microbial community analysis: Phospholipid-derived fatty acids (PLFA) and** 286 **Neutral lipid-derived fatty acids (NLFA)**

287 Soil PLFAs were extracted to assess the overall microbial communities while the
288 16:1 ω 5c NLFA was used as an indicator of arbuscular mycorrhizal (AM) fungi presence and

289 abundance (Olsson, 1999). Freeze-dried soil from planted pots (n=32) were extracted
290 following the protocol by Buyer & Sasser (2012) with modifications by Castañeda-Gómez et
291 al. (2020) (**See supplementary information for PLFA and NLFA analyses**). Functional
292 groups were defined as shown in **Table SI 1**. Fungal to bacterial ratio (F:B) was calculated
293 by dividing fungal PLFAs (not including AM fungi) by the sum of bacterial PLFAs. The sum
294 of individual lipids was used as an indicator of the size of the community ($\mu\text{g PLFA g}^{-1}$ dry
295 soil).

296 **2.6. Statistical analyses**

297 The effect of CO₂ condition, AM fungi treatment and P addition and their interactions on
298 the response variables was analysed with a linear model fitted with the function “lm” from
299 the stats package in R version 3.3.2 (R Core Team 2016). This approach was used instead of
300 a mixed effects modelling approach since pots were moved among chambers with the same
301 CO₂ treatment so it was not possible to estimate a random effect associated with each
302 chamber. The normality of the residuals of each model was inspected to check the
303 appropriateness of the fit and transformations were performed when needed. Statistical
304 significance was determined performing an ANOVA (Analyses of variance) with the
305 “Anova” function (“car” package, Fox et al. 2017). Multiple mean comparisons were
306 performed using the Tukey test using the “glht” function (“multcomp” package, Hothorn et
307 al. 2017). As soil moisture can affect soil respiration measurements, we tested for
308 correlations between soil moisture and the total respired CO₂, SOMd- respired CO₂ fraction
309 and total mass of SOMd- respired CO₂. For response variables with a significant correlation
310 with moisture, a 3-way ANCOVA was performed with soil moisture as covariate, to account
311 for the variability brought by the slightly different moisture contents at the time of CO₂
312 sampling. The homogeneity of the regression slopes, normality of residuals and homogeneity

313 of variances was tested when performing the ANCOVA. Significance levels were: ≤ 0.1 (.), \leq
314 0.05 (*), ≤ 0.01 (**), ≤ 0.001 (***).

315 Microbial communities were analysed as the PLFA-based total microbial biomass (sum
316 of all individual lipids, in $\mu\text{g PLFA g}^{-1}$ dry soil), as absolute microbial abundance (reflecting
317 the size or biomass of the community, in $\mu\text{g PLFA g}^{-1}$ dry soil) and as relative abundance (in
318 percentage, reflecting microbial community composition) of the different microbial groups
319 and as individual lipids. To visualise significant three-way interactions of experimental
320 factors in the abundance of microbial groups from the ANOVA, the “emmip” function from
321 the “emmeans” package (Lenth et al., 2020) was used to show the estimated marginal means
322 from the fitted linear model.

323 **3. Results**

324 ***3.1. Influence of elevated CO₂, P availability and AM fungi on SOM decomposition*** 325 ***and C pools***

326 Higher SOM-C losses under eCO₂ were expected for control P conditions (low P) and
327 particularly when AM fungi were inoculated (**Figure 1**). However, we found that in general,
328 there was not a significant interactive impact of the three experimental factors on the respired
329 CO₂, microbial biomass C (MBC) and dissolved organic C (DOC) as initially expected.
330 Instead, we found that the interaction of AM and P treatments was relevant determining the
331 fate of these soil C pools, regardless of eCO₂. AM and P treatments significantly affected the
332 total respired CO₂ (**Figure 2**), which decreased with P addition but only for the NM treatment
333 ($P < 0.05$, Tukey’s multiple comparison). However, we did not find any significant effects of
334 CO₂ conditions, AM or P treatments on the SOM-derived respired CO₂ (**Figure 2**). On the
335 other hand, most of the microbial biomass C (MBC) was derived from SOM (above 80%,
336 **Table SI 2**) and while neither the total microbial biomass C nor the SOM-derived MBC
337 (**Figure 2**) were affected by the experimental factors, the C sources used by the microbial

338 biomass were affected by the interaction between AM and P treatment (**Table SI 2**). The
339 fraction of MBC derived from SOM marginally increased by 6% with P addition in NM
340 treatments ($P=0.1$, Tukey's multiple comparison. **Table SI 2**). Similar to the MBC pool, most
341 of the DOC was derived from SOM (above 80%, **Table SI 2**) and both the total DOC and
342 SOM-derived DOC were affected by the interaction between AM and P treatments (**Figure**
343 **2**) with P addition significantly increasing the SOM-derived DOC in NM treatment ($P=0.001$,
344 Tukey's multiple comparison). Finally, although not evidenced in the total DOC or SOM-
345 derived DOC, the fraction of DOM-derived DOC significantly increased with eCO_2 (**Table**
346 **SI 2**).

347

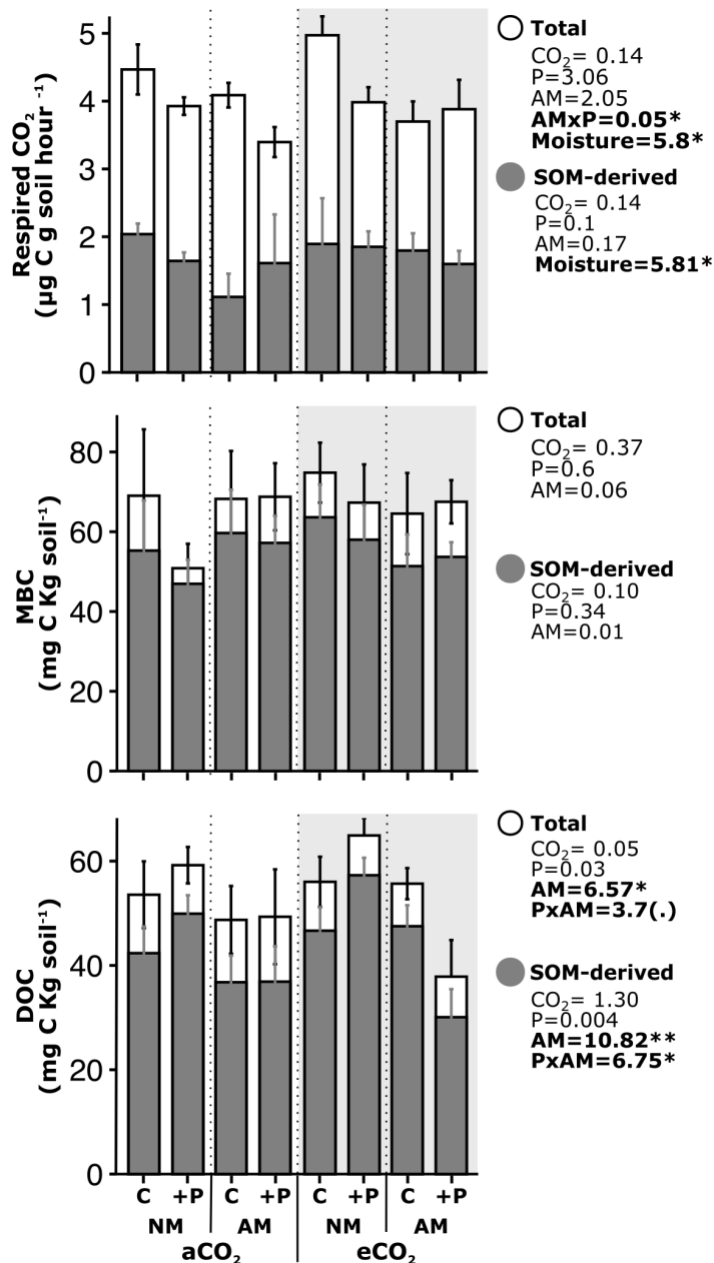


Figure 2. Mean values (\pm standard error, $n=4$) of the total (white) and SOM-derived (grey) respired CO₂, microbial biomass C (MBC) and dissolved organic C (DOC) per CO₂ condition, AM fungi and P addition treatment (C: control and +P: P addition). CO₂ conditions are shown on light grey (elevated) and white (ambient) backgrounds. $F_{(1,24)}$ values of ANCOVAs (for respired CO₂) and ANOVAs from linear model for response variables displayed on the right. Significance levels: ≤ 0.1 (.), ≤ 0.05 (*), ≤ 0.01 (**), ≤ 0.001 (***). Only significant interactions of the treatments displayed.

381

382

3.2. Soil nutrient responses to elevated CO₂, P availability and AM fungi

383

We expected eCO₂ to increase C and nutrient availability, P addition to increase soil P,

384

and AM fungi to decrease soil P and N due to higher nutrient acquisition and immobilisation

385

by the fungal biomass. These expectations were partially supported with our observations.

386

eCO₂ increased total soil N, but only for control P pots while dissolved N marginally

387

decreased with eCO₂ for AM pots (**Table 1**). Total soil P was unaffected by eCO₂ conditions

388

while soil dissolved P significantly decreased with eCO₂ conditions, particularly for control P

389 and AM pots (**Table 1**). P addition increased total soil P while AM decreased total P and
 390 dissolved N (**Table 1**). Finally, we detected lower dissolved C:N with P addition for AM pots
 391 but higher dissolved C:N for AM pots with eCO₂ (**Figure 3**). Dissolved C:P decreased with P
 392 addition for pots under eCO₂ conditions while it increased with eCO₂ for AM pots (**Figure 3**).
 393 **Table 1** Soil nutrients (total and dissolved (ppm)) per CO₂ condition, AM fungi and P addition
 394 treatment. Dissolved nutrients as: DOC – total dissolved organic Carbon, TN – total nitrogen and
 395 phosphates (PO₄). Mean values (± standard error, n=4) followed by the same letter are not significantly
 396 different (p≤ 0.05, Tukey multiple comparison test), no letters indicate non-significant effect of the
 397 treatments. AM: Arbuscular mycorrhizal and NM: non-mycorrhizal. Below, ANOVA results from
 398 linear model (lm) for response variables (× natural log transformed). F_(1,24) values displayed with
 399 significance levels: ≤ 0.1(.), ≤ 0.05(*), ≤ 0.01 (**), ≤ 0.001(***)
 400

			Total		Dissolved	
			Soil N	Soil P	TN×	PO ₄ ×
		control	347.2(9.5)a	166(20)a	4.2(0.4)	2.49(0.8)ab
	NM	+P	558.2(39.7)ab	268(10)b	4.2(0.5)	1.25(0.1)ab
		control	472.9(23.5)a	167(12)a	3.6(0.6)	3.86(0.3)b
aCO ₂	AM	+P	526.1(60.7)ab	207(32)a	4.8(1.0)	2.75(0.6)ab
		control	665.0(116.4)b	155(26)a	4.4(0.1)	1.08(0.1)a
	NM	+P	425.1(63.0)ab	238(21)b	4.5(0.5)	3.40(0.8)ab
		control	633.7(103.9)b	132(10)a	3.7(0.2)	1.09(0.1)a
eCO ₂	AM	+P	643.0(70.3)ab	195(11)a	3.0(0.8)	1.00(0.1)a
		CO ₂	5.46*	2.52	1.74	8.84**
		P	0.03	28.01***	0.16	0.0001
		AM	2.00	5.41*	6.58*	0.08
		CO ₂ xP	6.25*	0.003	0.60	7.64*
		CO ₂ xAM	0.22	0.02	3.64(.)	11.45**
		AMxP	0.21	2.30	0.15	3.46
		PxAMxCO ₂	4.23(.)	0.56	1.22	2.90

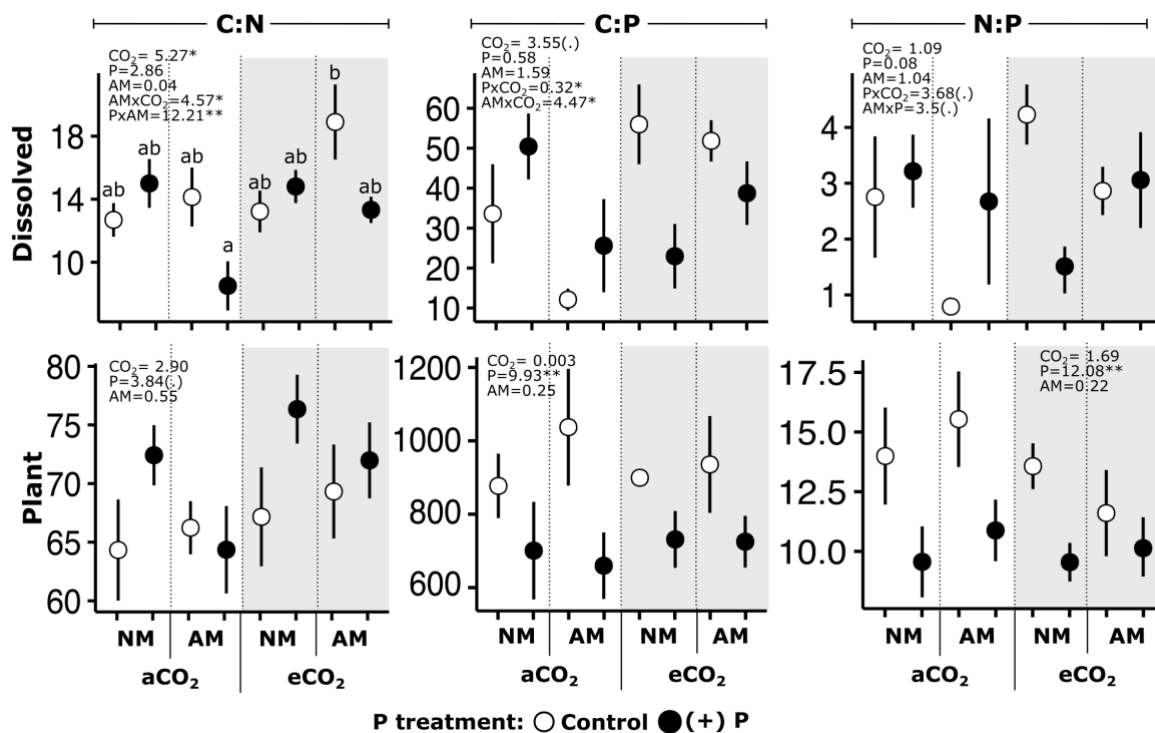
401

402 **3.3. Plant responses to elevated CO₂, P availability and AM fungi**

403 We expected that plant biomass would increase with eCO₂ when P availability was high,
 404 and be unresponsive to eCO₂ when P availability was low unless AM fungi were present,
 405 supporting further plant growth by increasing SOM decomposition and P uptake (**Figure 1**).
 406 We did not observe a significant impact of eCO₂ on aboveground plant biomass regardless of
 407 the P and AM treatments. However, eCO₂ effects increased root biomass when AM fungi
 408 were present, regardless of the P treatment (**Table 2**). Increases in plant biomass with P
 409 addition were not observed either, but we expected to see increases in plant P concentrations
 410 in response to P addition and decreases in plant C-to-nutrient ratios with eCO₂ as an

411 indication of nutrient resorption and higher nutrient immobilisation, which would be
 412 particularly important in low P conditions. Supporting our predictions, we observed
 413 increases in plant P concentration as well as the plant P pool in both shoot and roots with P
 414 addition (**Table 2**). As a consequence, plant C:P and N:P significantly decreased with P
 415 addition (**Figure 3**). However, C-to-nutrient ratios in plant tissues were not strongly affected
 416 by eCO₂ and no clear evidence for increased P immobilisation under eCO₂ was found. On the
 417 other hand, plant N increased with AM presence but only under eCO₂ (**Table 2**). Finally,
 418 higher plant C:N was observed with eCO₂, whereas plant C:N increased with P addition for
 419 NM pots (**Figure 3**).

420



421

422 **Figure 3.** Mean values (\pm standard error, n=4) of mass nutrient ratios (columns) in plant and soil
 423 solution (dissolved) per treatment. eCO₂ conditions shown as grey areas and P treatment as
 424 white(control) or black (+P) circles. NM (non-mycorrhizal). $F_{(1,24)}$ values of ANOVAs from linear
 425 model for response variables displayed. Significance levels: ≤ 0.1 (.), ≤ 0.05 (*), ≤ 0.01 (**), \leq
 426 0.001 (***); only significant interactions of the treatments displayed. Treatments with different letters
 427 are significantly different ($p \leq 0.05$, Tukey multiple comparison test).

428

429

430

431 **Table 2** Plant biomass (shoot and roots), nutrient contents and plant P and N pools (plant P and N
 432 content per unit of shoot and root biomass) per CO₂ condition, AM fungi and P addition treatment.
 433 NM (non-mycorrhizal). Mean values (\pm standard error, n=4) followed by the same letter are not
 434 significantly different ($p \leq 0.05$, Tukey multiple comparison test), no letters indicate non-significant
 435 effect of the treatments. Below, results of the ANOVA from linear model (lm) for response variables
 436 (\times log transformed). $F_{(1,24)}$ values displayed with significance levels: ≤ 0.1 (.), ≤ 0.05 (*), ≤ 0.01 (**), \leq
 437 0.001(***).

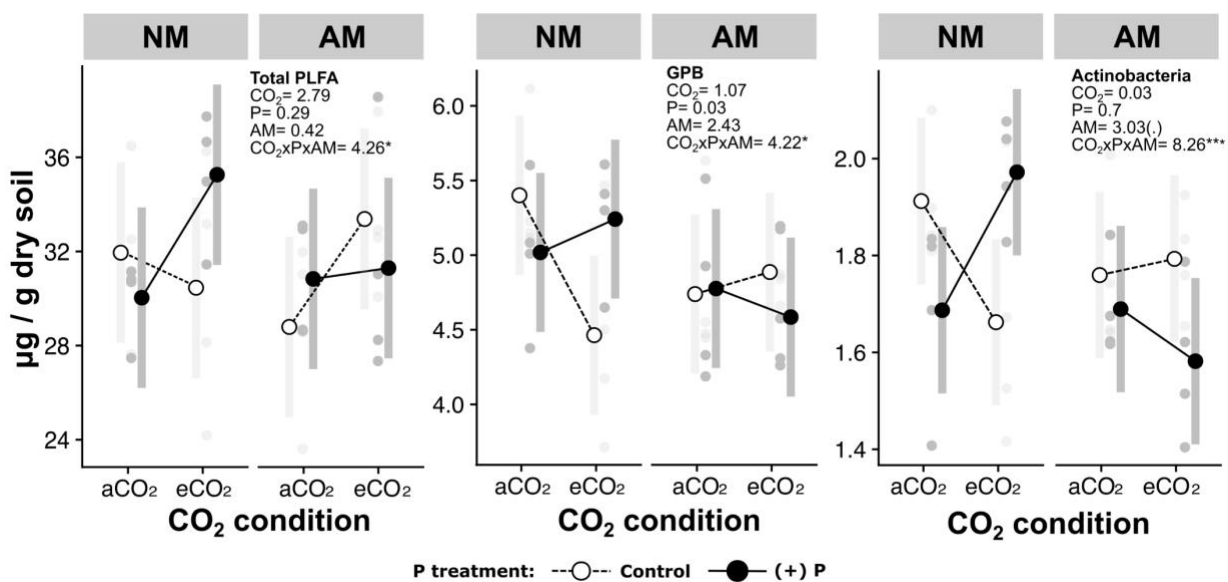
		Biomass		Nutrient Concentration			
		Shoot	Root	Plant C	Plant N \times	Plant P	
		g		g/Kg			
aCO ₂	NM	control	2.7(0.2)	2.1(0.08)ab	356.9(30.2)	5.5(0.2)	0.45(0.07) a
		+P	2.8(0.3)	2.0(0.3)ab	380.6(14.6)	5.3(0.1)	0.59(0.09) b
aCO ₂	AM	control	2.8(0.1)	1.7(0.3)a	395.0(11.5)	6.0(0.4)	0.41(0.07) a
		+P	4.3(1.2)	1.8(0.3)a	400.8(6.4)	6.2(0.4)	0.64(0.08) b
eCO ₂	NM	control	3.2(0.5)	1.7(0.2)ab	391.6(8.9)	5.9(0.3)	0.44(0.01) a
		+P	3.2(0.4)	2.1(0.2)ab	390.1(8.5)	5.1(0.2)	0.55(0.06) b
eCO ₂	AM	control	3.4(0.3)	2.4(0.4)b	376.1(16.1)	5.5(0.2)	0.44(0.09) a
		+P	3.6(0.3)	2.4(0.3)b	382.7(14.8)	5.3(0.2)	0.55(0.09) b
		CO ₂	0.3516	2.1	0.03	2.48	0.19
		P	1.0574	0.2835	0.65	2.52	8.87**
		AM	2.1422	0.1943	0.61	2.35	0.03
		CO ₂ xP	0.9543	0.4923	0.29	1.13	0.54
		CO ₂ xAM	0.4513	5.1081*	3.49(.)	5.22*	0.03
		AMxP	1.241	0.4535	0.06	2.81	0.08
		PxAMxCO ₂	0.758	1.0528	0.33	0.04	0.08
		P pool		N pool			
		Shoot P	Root P	Shoot N \times	Root N		
		mg					
aCO ₂	NM	control	1.2(0.2) a	0.89(0.14) a	15.14(0.87)	11.64(0.65)	
		+P	1.6(0.2) b	1.25(0.35) b	14.46(1.48)	10.52(1.34)	
aCO ₂	AM	control	1.2(0.2) a	0.66(0.04) a	16.75(1.13)	10.09(0.99)	
		+P	3.0(1.1) b	1.06(0.06) b	19.38(2.22)	13.84(2.15)	
eCO ₂	NM	control	1.4(0.2) a	0.72(0.06) a	19.29(3.75)	9.85(1.44)	
		+P	1.8(0.3) b	1.23(0.22) b	16.59(3.05)	11.25(1.37)	
eCO ₂	AM	control	1.5(0.3) a	0.99(0.10) a	18.97(2.59)	13.27(2.04)	
		+P	2.0(0.3) b	1.22(0.03) b	18.89(1.23)	12.46(1.68)	
		CO ₂	0.03	0.40	1.65	0.03	
		P	5.62*	10.98**	0.08	0.55	
		AM	1.50	0.11	2.60	2.19	
		CO ₂ xP	1.08	0.002	0.32	0.22	
		CO ₂ xAM	0.67	2.25	0.35	0.43	
		AMxP	1.24	0.28	1.10	0.38	
		PxAMxCO ₂	0.91	0.49	0.01	2.67	

438

439 3.4. Microbial communities including AM

440 AM fungi presence and abundance was assessed with the 16:1 ω 5c neutral lipid, which
 441 was high in AM-inoculated pots lacking additional P. However, P addition reduced the
 442 concentration of the AM fungal lipid in soil to a level approaching the uninoculated pots
 443 (AMxP: $F_{(1,24)} = 6.28$, $P < 0.001$ **Table SI 2**). We assessed the biomass and composition of

444 the microbial community as we expected that AM fungi would alter soil saprotrophic
 445 communities as a mechanisms to enhance SOM decomposition under low P conditions. We
 446 observed a significant increase in microbial biomass with AM fungi in low P (control pots)
 447 and eCO₂ conditions. The increase in microbial biomass in these conditions was particularly
 448 due to the response of Gram positive bacteria and Actinobacteria (**Figure 4**). Gram negative
 449 bacteria and fungi significantly increased with eCO₂ while protozoa increased with eCO₂ only
 450 for NM pots (**Figure SI 2**).



451 **Figure 4.** Estimated marginal means with original data (grey circles) and confidence intervals
 452 (grey bars) of the total microbial biomass, GPB (Gram positive bacteria) and actinobacteria
 453 (µg/g dry soil) from fitted lineal models per experimental treatments. P treatment as white
 454 circles and dashed lines (control) or black circles and solid lines (+P) for estimated means,
 455 and as light grey (control) and dark grey (+P) for original data. NM: non-mycorrhizal.
 456 ANOVA results displayed with significance levels: ≤ 0.1(.), ≤ 0.05(*), ≤ 0.01 (**), ≤
 457 0.001(***); only significant interactions of the treatments displayed. Grey circles are the
 458 original data input for the models.

459

460 4. Discussion

461 Our experiment investigated whether, under low P conditions, increased SOM
 462 decomposition and organic P cycling would allow for a sustained plant fertilisation effect
 463 with eCO₂. We expected to observe increases in plant biomass under eCO₂ conditions and
 464 low P availability paired with higher SOM derived C pools (SOM derived respired CO₂,

465 MBC, DOC), with further enhancements of SOM decomposition when AM fungi were
466 inoculated due to the role of this symbiotic fungi on P acquisition. We did not find strong
467 evidence suggesting that increases in soil C cycling with low P availability supported plant
468 growth under eCO₂. Instead, we found that the impacts of CO₂ enrichment and P availability
469 on plant growth and soil C cycling were generally independent of each other with increases in
470 root biomass and soil C cycling under eCO₂ occurring regardless of the P treatment. Contrary
471 to our hypotheses (**Figure 1**), soil C cycling was enhanced with P addition, suggesting that
472 low P conditions were limiting soil C cycling. On the other hand, root biomass increased with
473 eCO₂ conditions and AM presence, while microbial biomass increased with eCO₂ in AM-
474 inoculated pots and control P conditions mainly due to the response of Gram positive bacteria
475 and Actinobacteria. Taken together, our findings in this plant-soil system demonstrate that C
476 and P biogeochemical cycles may not become coupled to sustain an eCO₂ fertilisation effect
477 but instead, that low soil P will limit C cycling responses to eCO₂ with AM potentially
478 outcompeting saprotrophic communities for nutrients and hampering SOM decomposition.

479 The CO₂ fertilization effect is modulated by the interaction of mycorrhizal associations
480 and nutrient availability (Terrer et al., 2019, 2016; Treseder, 2004). In this study, although
481 the increases in root biomass under eCO₂ conditions occurred when AM fungi were present,
482 this effect occurred regardless of P availability. The CO₂ fertilization effect is a product of
483 higher plant photosynthetic activity leading to excess C in plant tissues leading to increased
484 growth. In this study, we observed a marginally higher plant C:N ratio with eCO₂ (**Figure 3**)
485 but no significant increases in plant biomass. The observed additional assimilated C was
486 potentially allocated belowground, driving the detected increases in root biomass and AM
487 fungi growth and activity (Cheng and Johnson, 1998; Mohan et al., 2014; Treseder, 2004).
488 The presence of AM fungi has been previously reported to increase root biomass with eCO₂
489 (Baslam et al., 2012; Dong et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2016) and root biomass responses to eCO₂

490 may not be necessarily affected by low P conditions (Jiang et al., 2020). It is hypothesised
491 that the positive feedback of eCO₂ and AM fungi on plant growth is mediated by the nutrient
492 uptake role of these symbiotic fungi (Alberton et al., 2005). While P availability has been
493 found to drive the CO₂ fertilization effect on ectomycorrhizal plants, the response of
494 arbuscular mycorrhizal plants to eCO₂ seems to be more dependent on soil N availability
495 (Terrer et al., 2019). Although we did not find that P availability mediated increases in root
496 biomass with eCO₂ and AM fungal presence, we observed that AM fungi marginally
497 increased plant N contents in the aboveground biomass (**Table 2**), as well as decreased
498 dissolved N and P in soil with eCO₂ (**Table 1**) and plant C:N with P addition (**Figure 3**), all
499 of this indicating that AM fungi might have promoted N uptake when P was added and
500 facilitated the observed increases in root biomass.

501 We hypothesised that higher SOM decomposition would occur with low P availability
502 as organic P cycling and biological P mobilisation mechanisms are crucial when mineral P
503 sources are depleted (Reed et al., 2011). Contrary to our expectations, we found that P
504 addition enhanced soil C cycling. Increases in SOM decomposition with P addition in P-
505 limited systems have been previously reported (Cleveland et al., 2006) and can be explained
506 by the higher affinity of P to mineral surfaces and the consequent release of labile C that
507 promotes microbial activity (Mori et al., 2018). We expected that AM fungi presence would
508 further enhance SOM decomposition in low P conditions (**Figure 1**). Labile C funnelled via
509 AM fungi to the saprotrophic community may enhance soil microbial community activity and
510 promote SOM decomposition (Frey, 2019). Although we observed higher microbial biomass
511 under eCO₂ and AM presence in control P conditions, we suggest that the lack of significant
512 increases in SOM decomposition in these conditions may be due to higher competition
513 between AM fungi and saprotrophic communities that might have limited enhanced soil C
514 cycling (Zhou et al., 2019). The changes in plant C:N, soil dissolved C:N, total soil C:N with

515 AM fungi explained above further support the idea that AM fungi might outcompete
516 saprotrophic microbes in N and P uptake. Finally, we detected a decrease in SOM
517 decomposition with P addition and AM-inoculated pots (**Figure 2**), but caution must be taken
518 when interpreting this result since P addition also significantly reduced AM fungi presence
519 and thus, it cannot be claimed that the reduction in SOM decomposition with P addition in
520 AM pots is due to AM fungi presence.

521 We expected that SOM decomposition and, thus, organic P cycling would increase with
522 eCO₂ particularly under low P conditions as a mechanism to sustain plant nutrient demands
523 (**Figure 1**). Our results show evidence for increased C cycling with CO₂ enrichment,
524 particularly for the fraction of SOM-derived DOC, but this effect was not dependent on P
525 availability. Increases in DOC with eCO₂ have been previously attributed to increases in C
526 allocation belowground and higher rhizodeposition (Drake et al., 2011; Freeman et al., 2004;
527 Lukac et al., 2003; Phillips et al., 2011) but it can also be due to increased SOM
528 decomposition (Hagedorn et al., 2008, 2002). Our isotopic analyses allowed us to detect that
529 increases in DOC under eCO₂ in this system were due to enhanced SOM decomposition
530 given the observed increase in SOM-derived DOC fraction (**Table SI 2**). The DOC made
531 available via SOM decomposition can be either incorporated in the microbial biomass or lost
532 via leaching. We did not observed changes in the SOM-derived MBC with eCO₂ and thus the
533 extra DOC was likely not incorporated in the microbial biomass but rather lost via leaching
534 (Kindler et al., 2011). On the other hand, only marginally higher soil respiration with eCO₂
535 was found in the present study which can be due to the low diffusivity of CO₂ from soils,
536 particularly with high soil moisture (Davidson et al., 2000; Hashimoto and Komatsu, 2006;
537 Maier and Schack-Kirchner, 2014). In our experiment, volumetric soil water content was on
538 average 23% for planted pots, which is slightly above the expected (12-21%) soil water

539 holding capacity for a soil with sandy to loamy texture as the one used for this experiment
540 (Datta et al., 2017; Easton and Bock, 2016).

541 We observed higher P concentrations in plant tissues but this was not accompanied by
542 increases in biomass under any CO₂ condition. Higher P concentration in plant tissues
543 without increases in biomass can occur due to a P luxury consumption of plants, where
544 higher P immobilisation is not necessarily related to increases in growth (Brar and Tolleson,
545 1975). Lack of responses to P addition in biomass (Nie et al., 2009) and abundance
546 (Robinson et al., 1993) for *Microlaena stipoides* have been observed before and attributed to
547 a nutrient accumulation strategy of this grass species, the time and frequency of fertilizer
548 additions and the low response that Australian native grasses typically have to fertilizer
549 application. In this study, only one addition of P as triple superphosphate was done at the
550 start of this experiment. Australian native grasses are less responsive to fertilizer addition
551 during establishment (Nie et al., 2009), which explains the lack of biomass effects of *M.*
552 *stipoides* in this experiment. Also, triple superphosphate is highly soluble in water and
553 becomes rapidly available for plant uptake (Mullins et al., 1995) by the first week of
554 application (Ghosal and Chakraborty, 2012). Hence, increases in P concentrations in plant
555 tissues occurred at the beginning of the experiment when AM fungi had not fully colonised
556 the roots and so, their role in soil C transformations and plant P uptake were less relevant.

557 Current understanding of the impacts of eCO₂ on plant productivity with low nutrient
558 conditions have focused on N-limited ecosystems. Higher SOM decomposition under eCO₂
559 when N availability is low occurs as a mechanism to sustain nutrient supply and plant
560 growth, with mycorrhizal fungi aiding to deliver the mined nutrients to the plants. For P-
561 limited ecosystems however, low P availability generally constrains ecosystem responses to
562 CO₂ enrichment (Ellsworth et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2015; Reich et al.,
563 2006) and the role of AM fungi mediating plant and soil C responses to eCO₂ with low P

564 availability is not fully clear. Thanks to the detailed measurement of soil C cycling as changes
565 in total C pools, SOM-derived fractions and total mass of SOM-derived C pools, we show
566 that the impacts of CO₂ enrichment and P availability on plant growth and soil C cycling
567 were independent of each other and are not likely to become coupled with eCO₂ conditions.
568 We also demonstrate that although AM fungi may contribute to increases in microbial
569 biomass with eCO₂ and low-P conditions, this effect may not translate into enhanced SOM
570 decomposition due to increased nutrient competition that may limit saprotrophic
571 communities. Our findings highlight that ecosystem responses to eCO₂ with P limitation are
572 different from those reported for N-limited systems and therefore, inferences of the behaviour
573 of P-limited ecosystems based on current knowledge about N-limited ecosystems are not
574 ideal. Moreover, our results also contribute to the current gap in knowledge regarding the
575 impacts of soil C cycling with low P availability exposed to eCO₂ conditions.

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581 sample processing.

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