Towards linking freshwater plants and ecosystems via functional biogeography

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A B S T R A C T

Functional biogeography has advanced the field of functional ecology into a more spatially—predictive science. However, freshwater plants are still underrepresented in these trait—based advancements. Here, we argue that there is a need for developing a functional biogeographical framework for freshwater plants and initiate global mapping efforts focusing on the form and function of freshwater plants. Specific attention should be given to (1) the placement of freshwater plants in the global plant trait space and show how this placement links to global trait—environment relationships; (2) the theoretical framework for major structural trait—trait correlations based on the physical constraints in aquatic ecosystems; (3) the evolutionary and environmental drivers underly the global distribution of inter— and intra—specific variation in different life forms; and (4) the level of equilibrium between spatial and temporal trait—environment relationships in freshwater plants. By putting freshwater plants in the context of these spatial aspects, we could advance our understanding of freshwater plant adaptations and responses to environmental gradients, and thereby facilitate predicting the consequences of global changes for freshwater ecosystem functions and services.

Functional biogeography relates to the diversity of organismal forms and functions and puts these into a spatial—explicit context by linking responses of small and large—scale patterns of biodiversity to the environment (Viollé et al., 2014). The emergence of functional biogeography has advanced the field of functional ecology into a more predictive science across biogeographical contexts and gradients ( van Bodegom et al., 2014; Maire et al., 2015). In terrestrial systems, functional plant traits are now integrated into Earth system models (Wullschleger et al., 2014), accessible at high spatial resolutions in every corner of the world (Butler et al., 2017; Moreno-Martínez et al., 2018). These studies demonstrated the inherent potential of bridging plant forms and functions with georeferenced distributions for the ongoing exploration of large—scale ecological phenomena in our changing world. As a result of this unprecedented data collection effort, a new theoretical macroecological framework of plant traits is now emerging to help us understand how plants perform and adapt to environmental factors, and affect ecosystem functioning across organizational levels (Diaz et al., 2016; Kattge et al., 2020).

Although freshwater plants are not ignored (Moor et al., 2017), they are widely underrepresented in these trait—based advancements, and little attention has been given to understand the unique adaptations required for freshwater plant growth and persistence across geographical scales, e.g., bicarbonate uptake characters of freshwater plants as an alternative carbon source in water across catchments (Iversen et al., 2019). Therefore, we need to include freshwater plants in the context of functional biogeography, and initiate global mapping efforts focusing on the form and function of freshwater plants to achieve a better understanding of their global distribution patterns, ecological adaptive strategies, and how global change impacts freshwater systems via species functional responses.

In the slipstream of documenting global patterns of species richness and species’ distributions, functional biogeography has emerged as a promising field bridging the link between biodiversity gradients and biogeochemical cycles, via ecosystem functional properties (Reichstein et al., 2014) and stoichiometry (Tian et al., 2019), thereby providing the framework for underlying mechanisms driving ecosystem services and
functions (Viole et al., 2014). Within plants alone, empirical studies on global trait—environment relationships have outlined correlations between specific functional traits and global biochemical gradients such as water, nutrients, and energy (Reich and Oleksyn, 2004; Wright et al., 2004). Understanding such continuous relationships between functional traits and environmental drivers has pushed the field of functional biogeography into a predictive and applied science within the past decade. For example, by spatially modelling the balance of leaf energy inputs and outputs, the impacts of climate change have been used to predict changes in leaf size across the globe (Wright et al., 2017), and the relationships between bioclimatic drivers and functional trait variations have been used to predict the global vegetation distribution patterns under current and future climate regime (van Bodegom et al., 2014).

A key component in the advancement of functional biogeography within plant ecology has been the focus on selective functional traits (e.g., specific leaf area, leaf nitrogen content or plant size) linked to individual performance via their effects on growth, reproduction and survival (Viole et al., 2007; Gibert et al., 2016). Although freshwater plants are considered in the global synthesis of functional plant traits (Díaz et al., 2016), documenting macroecological correlations between these traits and the environment for aquatic species are still lacking. Of the c. 3420 freshwater plant species listed by Murphy et al. (2019), only 15% has data on plant height in TRY (the world’s largest plant trait data portal). This is in stark contrast to the 54% coverage of plant height for the 46,085 species used to quantify the global plant trait space (Díaz et al., 2016). Such discrepancies become even greater when considering species with a predominantly submerged (8%) or free-floating (12%) life form. Recent reviews on the macroecology and functional traits of freshwater plant highlight that not only are freshwater plants largely absent in the global synthesis, but our knowledge within the group largely stems from studies in Europe and North America, and also rarely utilize the strength of continuous or experimentally quantified traits (Dalla Vecchia et al., 2020; Alahuhta et al., 2021).

Documenting and understanding the global trait space of freshwater plants goes beyond closing a knowledge gap. Freshwater plants, and wetland plants in general, have developed a suite of traits reflecting adaptations to a unique environment in terms of oxygen availability, nutrient cycles, pH and redox potential (Colmer and Voesenek, 2009; Pan et al., 2019). For example, the presence of leaf gas film counter-balances the low diffusion rate of molecules in water and improves O₂ and CO₂ exchange between submerged leaves and the surroundings (Colmer and Pedersen, 2008). Furthermore, many freshwater plants have developed aerenchyma formation (enlarged gas spaces within the plant tissue), supporting gas exchanges between roots and aboveground tissues (Evans, 2004). Invasive plant species have triggered an irreversible hysteretic phenomenon in inland waters, excluding native species from their original functional space (Bolpagni, 2021), predicting potential invasion fronts via functional trait matching with local faunas could provide important insights into future spreads of invasive species and thereby support local ecosystem management. The interactions between above—mentioned freshwater adaptation traits and traits associated with the leaf economics spectrum and plant growth will be key in understanding the underlying mechanisms driving large—scale plant trait patterns in freshwater ecosystems (Moor et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2019; Fig. 1). In bivariate trait relationships between leaf nitrogen, leaf phosphorus, and leaf dry mass per area, plants living in freshwater ecosystems generally detached from terrestrial predictions at the acquisition end of the leaf economic spectrum, showing higher leaf nitrogen/phosphorus and faster photosynthetic rates (Pan et al., 2020). However, we do not know if such trait—trait deviations are caused by limited functional niche space, affecting the potential trait variation in freshwater environments, or if they reflect a trade—off linked to traits unique for freshwater plants.

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Fig. 1. The functional biogeography of freshwater plants is the outcome of the interplay between biogeography, functional traits related to the leaf economics spectrum and general plant structure, and freshwater adaptive traits. Each box highlights some of the important functional traits and biogeographical aspects in trait-space distributions in freshwater plants and plants in general. These components structure the functional biogeography directly or indirectly via complex linkages between trait-environment relationships and trait-trait associations (including facilitation and trade-offs, whose effects on trait expression are hypothesised to be modulated by species-driven changes in microhabitat conditions and resource limitation). Across functional and environmental gradients, variation within the trait space of freshwater plants will align or deviate from the terrestrial prediction. Understanding such discrepancies will be key in the development of a spatial framework of freshwater plant functions. The lower panels exemplify discrepancies (blue points) and alignments (yellow points) in bivariate leaf economic trait relationships between freshwater and terrestrial plants at the inter-specific level. Each point in the three scatter plots is a leaf from a freshwater plant species and the dotted line represent the predicted trait-trait relationship in terrestrial plants. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article) (Data from Pan et al., 2020).
CRediT authorship contribution statement

All authors contributed equally to the framing of the research questions, conducting the literature search, writing the manuscript, and creating the figure.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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