

# “Diminishing returns” in the scaling of functional leaf traits across and within species groups

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More than 5,000 measurements from 1,943 plant species were used to explore the scaling relationships among the foliar surface area and the dry, water, and nitrogen/phosphorus mass of mature individual leaves. Although they differed statistically, the exponents for the relationships among these variables were numerically similar among six species groups (ferns, graminoids, forbs, shrubs, trees, and vines) and within 19 individual species. In general, at least one among the many scaling exponents was  $<1.0$ , such that increases in one or more features influencing foliar function (e.g., surface area or living leaf mass) failed to keep pace with increases in mature leaf size. Thus, a general set of scaling relationships exists that negatively affects increases in leaf size. We argue that this set reflects a fundamental property of all plants and helps to explain why annual growth fails to keep pace with increases in total body mass across species.

foliar traits | plant allometry | scaling relations

Size variations in foliar functional traits have received intense recent attention, because leaves are the principal photosynthetic organs of the majority of plant species, because the manner in which foliar traits change within or across species as a function of differences in leaf size can profoundly affect plant growth, reproduction, and ecosystem function, and because standing leaf mass is a critical component in empirical and theoretical plant allometry models (1–14). Surprisingly, however, our knowledge about some very basic size-dependent (scaling) relationships is very incomplete, particularly in terms of how intra- and interspecific differences in mature leaf dry mass ( $M_D$ ) correlate with foliar water mass ( $M_W$ ), surface area (SA), and the nitrogen or phosphorus mass per leaf lamina ( $N_L$  and  $P_L$ , respectively), either within individual species or across taxonomically different species groups sharing the same life forms (and thus presumably similar foliar architectures and other functional traits).

The importance of quantifying size-dependent variations among functional traits is evident from the general scaling relationship  $X = \beta M_D^\alpha$ , where  $X$  represents one among many functional traits influencing the physiological or mechanical functions of leaves (e.g., SA or  $M_W$ ) and where  $\beta$  and  $\alpha$  are, respectively, the elevation and slope of the log-transformed  $X$  vs.  $M_D$  regression curve. Noting that the change in  $X$  with respect to differences in mature leaf  $M_D$  (i.e.,  $\partial X/\partial M_D$ ) equals  $\alpha \beta M_D^{\alpha-1}$ , the magnitude of  $X$  will be independent of intra- or interspecific differences in  $M_D$  when  $\alpha = 1.0$ ; it will increase disproportionately with increasing  $M_D$  when  $\alpha > 1.0$ ; and it will fail to keep pace with intra- or interspecific increases in  $M_D$  when  $\alpha < 1.0$ . Among these three possibilities, the first and second do not *a priori* result in negative consequences as mature leaf mass increases intra- or interspecifically. The first is size-independent and results in a “break even” relationship, whereas the second yields “increasing returns.” In contrast, a relationship governed by  $\alpha < 1.0$  can have negative consequences, because increasing foliar  $M_D$  investments yield “diminishing returns” in terms of gains in surface area.

Such negative consequences do not intrinsically limit maximum leaf size, provided that compensatory, functionally adaptive changes cooccur in other foliar traits. Nevertheless, some scaling relationships may be physically unavoidable. For example, the “materials” that serve as the principal stiffening agents in leaf laminae increase foliar  $M_D$  without contributing directly or substantially to metabolism (e.g., cellulose, lignin, vascular fibers, and sclerenchyma). This phenomenology is demonstrated by the parameter called specific leaf area (SLA) (i.e.,  $SA/M_D$ ) (15, 16). Because  $M_D$  equals the product of SA, leaf thickness  $t$ , and bulk leaf-tissue density  $\rho$ , it follows that  $SLA = SA/M_D = 1/(\rho t)$ . It also follows that  $1/(\rho t)$  will be constant ( $\kappa$ ) for leaves differing in mature leaf size if the scaling exponent for SA vs.  $M_D$  equals 1.0, whereas  $1/(\rho t)$  will decrease with increasing  $M_D$  when  $\alpha < 1.0$ , indicating a size-dependent increase in leaf-tissue bulk density or thickness or both.

This kind of limitation can operate at different levels, e.g., across leaves differing in mature size drawn from different individuals of the same species, or from individuals of diverse species sharing the same life-forms but differing in mature leaf size. In this paper, we demonstrate the existence of “diminishing returns” in both the intra- and interspecific comparisons. Using a recently compiled database composed of  $>5,000$  paired measurements for 1,943 species, drawn from the published and unpublished studies (refs. 17–44 and D. Ackerly, H. Cornelissen, E. Garnier, P. Groom, B. Lamont, M.-L. Navas, J. Overton, H. Poorter, C. Roumet, R. Villar, and C. Vriesendorp, unpublished work), we show that at least one of the exponents governing the relationships among SA,  $M_W$ ,  $N_L$ ,  $P_L$ , and  $M_D$  is statistically less than unity for the majority of 19 individual species, within each of six different functional species groups (ferns, vines, graminoids, forbs, shrubs, and trees), and across all 1,943 species in our data set.

The four foliar traits used to gauge foliar functions (i.e., SA,  $M_W$ ,  $N_L$ , and  $P_L$ ) were selected as indirect measures of photosynthetic and general metabolic capacity, because direct measurements of physiological rates on the majority of the species used in our analyses have not been reported (and are dependent on local ambient conditions that undoubtedly vary among habitats). Nevertheless, prior studies show that lamina surface area is a good measure of the ability to intercept light and that foliar water, nitrogen, and phosphorus mass per leaf lamina are strongly correlated with metabolic capacity (1, 4, 5, 14). Using the scaling relationships among these surrogate measures of

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Abbreviations:  $\alpha$ , slope of SMA curve (“scaling exponent”); C.I., confidence interval; log  $\beta$ , Y intercept of SMA curve (“elevation”);  $M_D$ , dry mass;  $M_W$ , foliar water mass;  $N_L$ , nitrogen mass;  $P_L$ , phosphorus mass; SA, lamina surface area; SLA, specific leaf area.

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**Table 1. Standardized major axis regression slopes and elevations ( $\alpha$  and  $\log \beta$ , respectively) for log–log linear relationships among  $M_D$ ,  $M_W$ , and SA for different species groups**

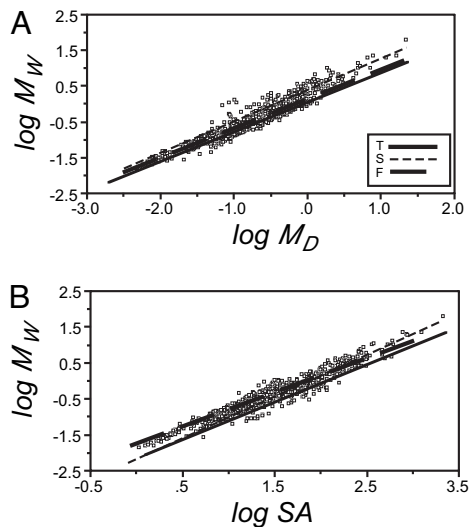
Species group	$\alpha$	95% C.I.s	Log $\beta$	95% C.I.s	$r^2$
Log SA vs. log $M_D$					
Ferns ( $n = 275$ )	0.904	0.880, 0.929	2.02	1.96, 2.09	0.945
Graminoids ( $n = 173$ )	0.933	0.881, 0.985	1.96	1.85, 2.08	0.810
Forbs ( $n = 601$ )	0.989	0.963, 1.02	2.22	2.16, 2.27	0.882
Shrubs ( $n = 1,066$ )	0.978	0.958, 0.999	1.85	1.81, 1.89	0.865
Trees ( $n = 1,038$ )	1.03	1.01, 1.05	2.02	1.99, 2.04	0.887
Vines ( $n = 140$ )	0.836	0.790, 0.883	2.02	1.94, 2.11	0.853
All species ( $n = 3,356$ )	0.979	0.968, 0.990	2.01	1.98, 2.03	0.918
Log $M_W$ vs. log $M_D$					
Forbs ( $n = 120$ )	0.868	0.833, 0.903	0.293	0.218, 0.369	0.822
Shrubs ( $n = 217$ )	0.965	0.926, 1.00	0.398	0.368, 0.427	0.821
Trees ( $n = 329$ )	0.869	0.851, 0.886	0.114	0.090, 0.134	0.919
All species ( $n = 666$ )	0.982	0.964, 1.00	0.299	0.277, 0.320	0.905
Log $M_W$ vs. log SA					
Forbs ( $n = 120$ )	0.997	0.986, 1.01	−1.47	−1.48, −1.45	0.981
Shrubs ( $n = 217$ )	1.22	1.19, 1.26	−2.30	−2.41, −2.19	0.893
Trees ( $n = 329$ )	1.06	1.04, 1.08	−1.60	−1.63, −1.57	0.780
All species ( $n = 666$ )	1.05	1.04, 1.07	−1.92	−1.95, −1.89	0.932

Original units: SA = cm<sup>2</sup>; M = g.

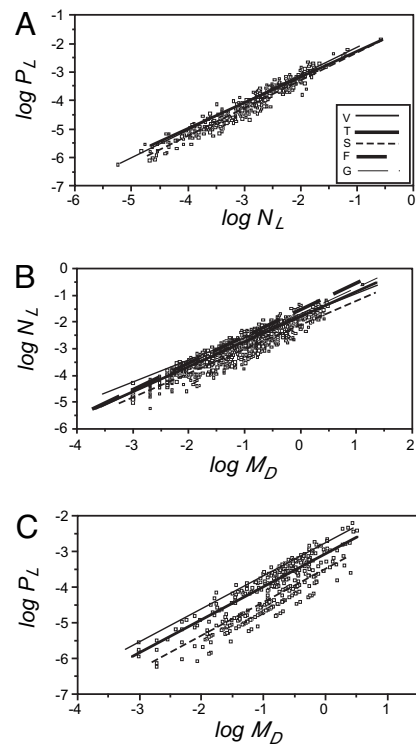
Statistically significant differences in the scaling of  $N_L$  (or  $P_L$ ) with respect to  $M_D$  were observed among groups (Table 2 and Fig. 4 B and C), e.g., the  $\alpha$  values for  $N_L$  vs.  $M_D$  do not differ statistically among graminoids, shrubs, trees, or vines, but the elevations of the  $N_L$  vs.  $M_D$  regression curves for these groups differ statistically (Table 2).

$P_L$  and  $N_L$  were, on average, more tightly correlated with SA than with  $M_D$  (Table 2 and Fig. 5 A and B). Significant differences in the scaling of either  $P_L$  (or  $N_L$ ) with respect to SA were observed among the species groups because of differences in  $\alpha$  (or, if not  $\alpha$ , then  $\log \beta$ ). For example, the  $N_L$  vs. SA relationships for forbs and shrubs shared the same scaling exponents but differed statistically in their elevations (Table 2). Shrubs and vines shared statistically indistinguishable  $P_L$  vs. SA regression curve parameters (Table 2). However, inspection of  $\partial P_L / \partial SA$  vs. SA log–log plots for these two groups shows that

$P_L$  increases more rapidly for vines than shrubs with increasing SA (Fig. 5C). Finally, although the data were insufficient to examine the scaling relationships for foliar nitrogen and phosphorus vs. lamina  $M_W$  for individual species or most species groups,  $N_L$  and  $P_L$  scaled as the 0.952 and 1.00 power of  $M_W$ , respectively, across 144 tree species ( $r^2 = 0.942$  and 0.880, respectively) and the 95% confidence intervals (C.I.s) of both exponents include values <1.00.



**Fig. 3.** Log–log bivariate relationships among  $M_D$ ,  $M_W$ , and SA for forb (F), shrub (S), and tree (T) species groups. Original units: SA = cm<sup>2</sup>; M = g per leaf lamina. Lines are standardized major axis regression curves. See Table 1 for regression statistics.



**Fig. 4.** Log–log bivariate relationships among  $N_L$  and  $P_L$  and leaf  $M_D$  for graminoid (G), forb (F), shrub (S), tree (T), and vine (V) species groups. Original units: SA = cm<sup>2</sup>; M,  $N_L$ , and  $P_L$  = g per leaf lamina. Lines are standardized major axis regression curves. See Table 2 for regression statistics.

**Table 2. Standardized major axis regression slopes and elevations ( $\alpha$  and  $\log \beta$ , respectively) for log–log linear relations among  $N_L$ ,  $P_L$ ,  $M_D$ , and SA across different species-groups**

Species group	$\alpha$	95% C.I.s	Log $\beta$	95% C.I.s	$r^2$
<b>Log <math>N_L</math> vs. log <math>M_D</math></b>					
Graminoids ( $n = 42$ )	0.980	0.949, 1.01	−1.96	−2.02, −1.89	0.981
Forbs ( $n = 141$ )	1.03	1.00, 1.06	−1.22	−1.28, −1.16	0.957
Shrubs ( $n = 312$ )	0.979	0.945, 1.01	−1.43	−1.51, −1.36	0.838
Trees ( $n = 414$ )	0.998	0.978, 1.02	−1.45	−1.48, −1.42	0.917
Vines ( $n = 10$ )	0.897	783, 1.01	−5.12	−1.46, −1.66	0.856
All species ( $n = 919$ )	1.02	1.00, 1.04	−1.27	−1.30, −1.23	0.881
<b>Log <math>P_L</math> vs. log <math>M_D</math></b>					
Shrubs ( $n = 209$ )	1.08	1.01, 1.14	−3.14	−3.25, −3.04	0.690
Trees ( $n = 137$ )	0.950	0.905, 0.996	−2.84	−2.90, −2.79	0.877
Vines ( $n = 6$ )	0.871	0.769, 0.973	−2.87	−3.01, −2.73	0.986
All species ( $n = 352$ )	1.17	1.12, 1.22	−2.84	−2.91, −2.77	0.743
<b>Log <math>N_L</math> vs. log SA</b>					
Graminoids ( $n = 42$ )	1.14	1.08, 1.19	−4.03	−4.08, −3.98	0.951
Forbs ( $n = 141$ )	0.947	0.900, 0.994	−3.49	−3.54, −3.44	0.888
Shrubs ( $n = 312$ )	1.01	0.990, 1.04	−3.29	−3.31, −3.26	0.920
Trees ( $n = 414$ )	0.914	0.896, 0.932	−3.36	−3.38, −3.33	0.927
Vines ( $n = 10$ )	0.953	0.793, 1.11	−3.52	−3.74, −3.31	0.760
All species ( $n = 919$ )	0.988	0.973, 1.00	−1.92	−1.95, −1.89	0.923
<b>Log <math>P_L</math> vs. log SA</b>					
Shrubs ( $n = 209$ )	1.06	1.02, 1.10	−5.06	−5.10, −5.01	0.876
Trees ( $n = 137$ )	0.908	0.874, 0.943	−4.83	−4.90, −4.76	0.925
Vines ( $n = 6$ )	1.15	1.07, 1.24	−5.12	−5.28, −4.97	0.990
All species ( $n = 352$ )	1.02	0.996, 1.05	−5.02	−5.06, −4.98	0.923

Original units:  $N_L$ ,  $P_L$ , and  $M_D$  = g; SA = cm<sup>2</sup>.

## Discussion

Our analyses show that different species and different species groups have foliar allometries that theoretically have functionally negative consequences (gauged indirectly by their effects on tissue nutrient content or the potential to capture light) as mature leaf  $M_D$  increases. We have shown that at least one among the many scaling relationships for the functional traits known to influence the capacity of leaves to intercept sunlight and mechanically support laminae has a scaling exponent less than unity. This finding agrees with a concurrent study showing that (i) leaf area fails to keep pace with leaf  $M_D$  within each of 85 species (R. Milla and P.B.R., unpublished work); (ii) specific leaf area SLA varies among individual species and within species groups sharing the same life-form (15, 16); and (iii) studies reporting strong correlations among functional foliar morphological, anatomical, and stoichiometric traits (1, 5, 6, 9–51), e.g., a single principal component captures 74% of the total variance in six key foliar traits in the Global Plant Trait Network (GLOPNET) database (5).

Specifically, within all but one species group (i.e., trees) and within most of the 19 individual species for which sufficient data were available, the exponent governing SA vs.  $M_D$  is <1.0. Thus, changes in SA fail to keep pace with increasing  $M_D$  such that SLA is neither constant for the majority of the species examined nor within five of the six species groups differing in life form, suggesting that either bulk leaf-tissue density or lamina thickness (or both) increase as mature leaf  $M_D$  increases. Although  $M_D$  allocations for the mechanical support of photosynthetic tissues may come at little cost to plants, our analyses reveal additional constraints on the size of mature leaves. For example, across tree species, although lamina surface area scales isometrically with foliar  $M_D$ , leaf  $N_L$  scales as the 0.952 power of  $M_D$  that in turn scales as the 0.869 power of  $M_D$ . Because  $\alpha < 1.0$  for both of these scaling relationships, increases in  $N_L$  fail to keep pace with increases in leaf water content that, in turn, fails to keep pace with increases in leaf  $M_D$ . It is not unreasonable to assume,

therefore, that the living mass component of leaves (as gauged by either  $N_L$  or  $M_W$ , or both) disproportionately decreases as  $M_D$  increases across these species.

The diminishing returns resulting from scaling relationships such as these might be circumvented by increasing leaf longevity. However, prior studies indicate that the fraction of total  $N_L$  invested in cell wall construction likely disproportionately increases with leaf longevity, resulting in a decline in metabolically active leaf nitrogen content (see ref. 45). Also, our data indicate that no simple “rule” governs the relationship between leaf longevity and the numerical values for the scaling exponent governing SA vs.,  $M_D$ . For example, two “evergreen” species in our data set (*Picea abies* and *Pinus sylvestris*) have numerically and statistically very different SA vs.  $M_D$  scaling exponents (i.e., 0.608 and 0.951, respectively), whereas a deciduous dicot species (*Tilia cordata*) has the numerically lowest scaling exponent among the remaining 17 deciduous species (i.e., 0.468).

We freely acknowledge that the numerical values of scaling exponents are notoriously dependent on the taxonomic or life form composition of any data set. This concern is undoubtedly true for the scaling exponents reported here, because shrub and tree species comprise >60% of the database used in our study. A related concern emerges when comparing intraspecific with interspecific scaling exponents. The allometry determined for leaves differing in size drawn from a single individual plant undoubtedly reflects the phenotypic plasticity of that individual and the particular ambient environmental conditions attending growth and development, whereas the allometry determined for leaves differing in size drawn from numerous conspecifics (which describes the kind of data used in our study) reflects a much broader range of environmental conditions, genotypes, and phenotypic reaction norms.

A conservative interpretation of intra- and interspecific trends is therefore warranted. However, because the allometry observed for the majority of individual species is consistent with that observed for each of six very different functional species



to determine slope or elevation differences agreed with the results of SMATR.

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