Nitrogen gas emissions from stormwater retention basins during wet weather events in the Phoenix Metropolitan area: an additional ecosystem service?

E.K. Larson1 and N. B. Grimm1,2
1School of Life Sciences and 2Global Institute of Sustainability, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ

Do retention basins improve stormwater quality?

- Stormwater runoff is known to carry high levels of metals and nutrients such as nitrogen (N).
- Retention basins collect local runoff and potentially concentrate these pollutants in the soil and infiltrating water.
- However, plants and microbes have the ability to transform and remove nutrients from the water.
- Denitrification, a microbial process, permanently removes nitrate (NO₃⁻) from the system, while producing the gases N₂ and N₂O.

We wanted to assess the ability of two types of retention basins, one xeriscaped and one grassy, to remove NO₃⁻ from incoming storm runoff.

Tapping fire hydrants to flood basins

We simulated a 1” storm in each basin with water from nearby hydrants. Water was directed into a pool to slow it down, and then through hoses to the basin. We pre-treated the basin with a heavy N isotope (¹⁵N in NO₃⁻) to trace the fate of the N added. Samples were then taken throughout the day to assess water concentrations and gas losses (see photos below).

Water nitrate concentrations indicate NO₃⁻ removal, especially in grassy basins (Figure 1)

Gas emissions from basins via denitrification are a small portion of NO₃⁻ removal (Figure 2)

Overall N₂O emissions from any process are significantly higher in xeric basins and grassy basins (Figure 3)

Basins are ameliorating NO₃⁻ inputs, but potentially producing considerable amounts of N₂O, a greenhouse gas

Incoming data will allow complete analysis via a full mass-balance approach

Trade-offs between aesthetics, recreation, water use, and stormwater improvements can be assessed for each basin design

Figure 1: Expected vs. actual mass of NO₃⁻ by time for Grassy (A) and Xeric (B) basins. Green arrows indicate when the last water was delivered. In the case of B, a “slug” of NO₃ was added with the last volume of water.

Figure 2: N₂O emissions via denitrification during basin flooding. Except for a couple outliers, the grassy and xeric basins produced similar, though comparatively small, amounts of N₂O. Note the change in units on the y-axis when compared to Figure 1.

Figure 3: Overall N₂O emissions over 24 hours from any process by basin design. Data calculated from gas fluxes in chambers after water has receded and then extrapolated to 24 hours.

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Photo credits: Vince Palermo