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Dryland mechanisms could widely control ecosystem functioning in a drier and warmer world

José M. Grünzweig [1✉], Hans J. De Boeck[2], Ana Rey [3], Maria J. Santos [4], Ori Adam [5], Michael Bahn [6], Jayne Belnap[7], Gaby Deckmyn[2], Stefan C. Dekker [8], Omar Flores [2,3], Daniel Gliksman [9,10], David Helman [11,12], Kevin R. Hultine [13], Lingli Liu [14], Ehud Meron [15,16], Yaron Michael[11], Efrat Sheffer [1], Heather L. Throop [17], Omer Tzuk [15,19] and Dan Yakir [18]

Responses of terrestrial ecosystems to climate change have been explored in many regions worldwide. While continued drying and warming may alter process rates and deteriorate the state and performance of ecosystems, it could also lead to more fundamental changes in the mechanisms governing ecosystem functioning. Here we argue that climate change will induce unprecedented shifts in these mechanisms in historically wetter climatic zones, towards mechanisms currently prevalent in dry regions, which we refer to as 'dryland mechanisms'. We discuss 12 dryland mechanisms affecting multiple processes of ecosystem functioning, including vegetation development, water flow, energy budget, carbon and nutrient cycling, plant production and organic matter decomposition. We then examine mostly rare examples of the operation of these mechanisms in non-dryland regions where they have been considered irrelevant at present. Current and future climate trends could force microclimatic conditions across thresholds and lead to the emergence of dryland mechanisms and their increasing control over ecosystem functioning in many biomes on Earth.

Most regions on Earth are warmer at present than in past decades and centuries[1], and many regions are experiencing a drying trend[2,3] as a result of decreased precipitation, increased variance in precipitation (less frequent, but more intense events) and/or higher evaporative demand[4]. More climate extremes, including prolonged droughts and heatwaves, have recently occurred across the globe[1,5] (Glossary, Supplementary Table 1 and Supplementary Fig. 1). Moreover, human activity has been shown to exacerbate naturally-occurring droughts[6]. A further increase in the spatial extent, duration and occurrence of extreme droughts is projected for many regions during the twenty-first century[1,7–9], with the exact outcome of the projections being dependent on the complexity of the modelled land, atmosphere and plant feedbacks[10–12]. Drying is expected even at high elevation and in cold regions because of warming-induced earlier snowmelt[13,14].

Drought and heatwaves have a range of negative impacts on ecosystems, including widespread tree mortality, decreased terrestrial primary production, depressed crop yields, reduced carbon sequestration, species replacement, and loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services[15–19]. However, severe climate change may not only deteriorate the state and performance of ecosystems, but could also lead to unprecedented shifts in the type of mechanisms that govern ecosystem functioning, from mechanisms traditionally studied in mesic, humid and cold systems, to a set of mechanisms so far considered absent or irrelevant in most biomes on Earth. Currently, these mechanisms operate primarily in drylands, which cover 37–46% of the global land area (Fig. 1a and Supplementary Table 1). Climate change can modify environments to a level where such 'dryland mechanisms' (Table 1 and Supplementary Table 1) may become relevant in many regions worldwide, including regions currently not limited by water (non-dryland regions). Dryland mechanisms play a fundamental role in explaining model–field data mismatches in dry areas when predictions are based on the traditionally-studied mechanisms in non-water limited ecosystems. For example, decomposition of plant detritus (litter) and subsequent release of nitrogen in dryland ecosystems were faster than expected and could not be predicted by traditional models of decay, where microbial degradation depends on rainwater availability[20,21]. Not until the inclusion of photochemical degradation, an abiotic dryland mechanism (see below and Table 1),

[1]Institute of Plant Sciences and Genetics in Agriculture, the Robert H. Smith Faculty of Agriculture, Food and Environment, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Rehovot, Israel. [2]Plants and Ecosystems, Department of Biology, Universiteit Antwerpen, Wilrijk, Belgium. [3]Department of Biogeography and Global Change, National Museum of Natural History, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), Madrid, Spain. [4]Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland. [5]The Fredy and Nadine Herrmann Institute of Earth Sciences, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel. [6]Department of Ecology, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria. [7]US Geological Survey, Southwest Biological Science Center, Moab, UT, USA. [8]Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands. [9]Institute for Hydrology and Meteorology, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Technische Universität Dresden, Tharandt, Germany. [10]Institute of Geography, Technische Universität Dresden, Dresden, Germany. [11]Institute of Environmental Sciences, the Robert H. Smith Faculty of Agriculture, Food and Environment, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Rehovot, Israel. [12]Advanced School for Environmental Studies, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel. [13]Department of Research, Conservation and Collections, Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix, AZ, USA. [14]State Key Laboratory of Vegetation and Environmental Change, Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Xiangshan, Beijing, China. [15]Department of Physics, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel. [16]Department of Solar Energy and Environmental Physics, Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Sede Boqer Campus, Israel. [17]School of Earth and Space Exploration, and School of Life Sciences, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA. [18]Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel. [19]Present address: Department of Industrial Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, Tel-Aviv University, Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel. ✉e-mail: jose.gruenzweig@mail.huji.ac.il
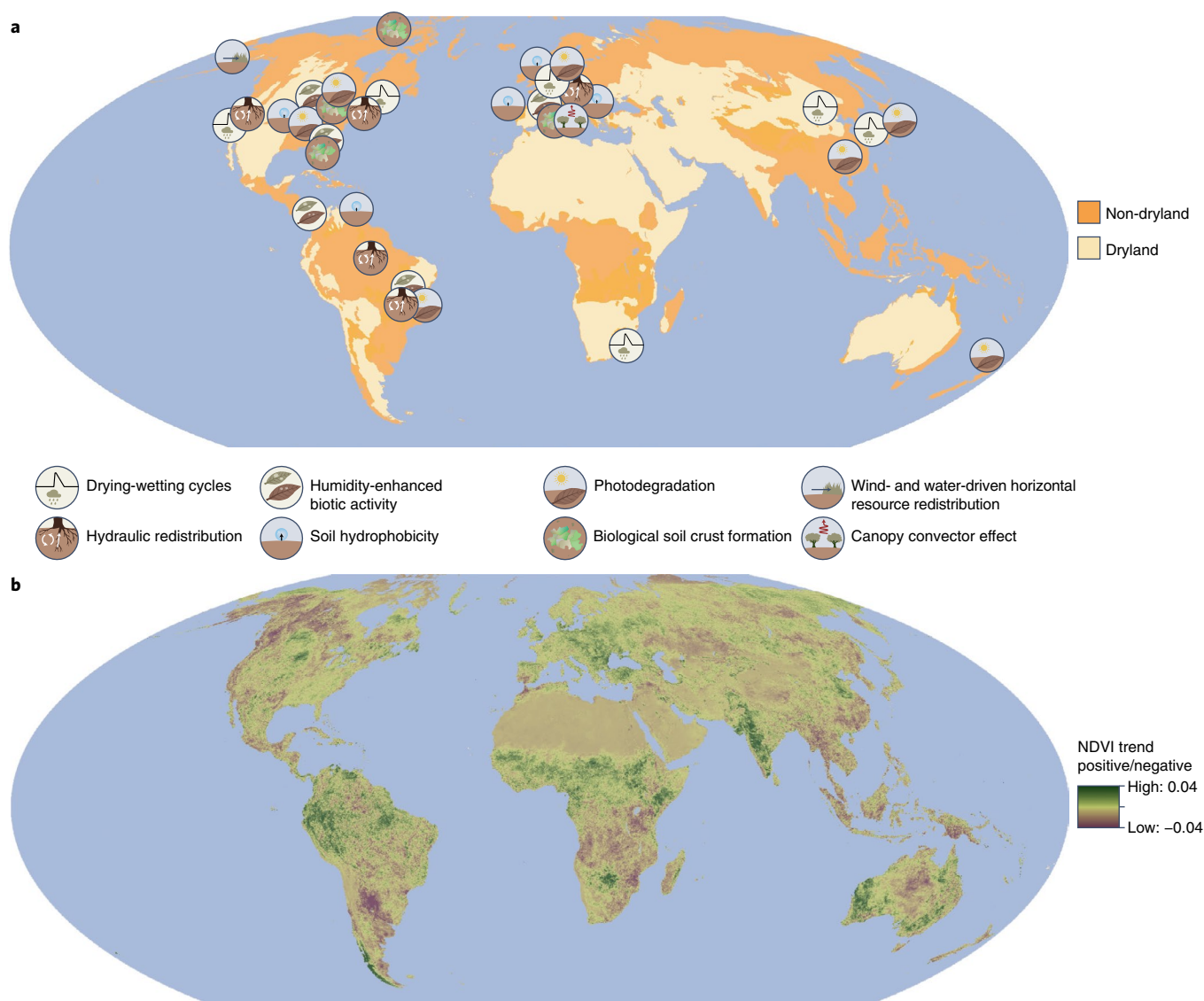
Fig. 1 | Global representation of dryland and non-dryland regions, and of recent trends in vegetation cover. **a**, Dryland and non-dryland regions (Glossary in Supplementary Table 1; the map is based on data from https://datadownload.unep-wcmc.org/datasets). Icons of dryland mechanisms were added to approximate geographical locations of selected reports on dryland mechanisms operating in non-dryland regions. **b**, Linear trends in greening (increase in normalized difference vegetation index, NDVI) and browning (decrease in NDVI) between 1982 and 2008 (change in NDVI per year based on AVHRR GIMMS data; reproduced with permission from ref. [156], Wiley). **b** is also available in grey scale (Supplementary Fig. 5).

could decomposition and nitrogen cycling be accurately described by a prominent process-based biogeochemical model[22–24].

In this Perspective, we present evidence suggesting that dryland mechanisms may already occur to a moderate extent in historically non-water-limited regions and that they will emerge to a much larger extent in many more regions in the future. We summarize the current literature, analyse published data from remote sensing and climate model ensembles, and provide outcomes of simulations of two published models to illustrate the operation of some of these mechanisms in non-water-limited regions. Responses of dryland ecosystems to intensified aridity have recently been related to thresholds beyond which productivity, soil fertility and vegetation cover degrade markedly[25]. We go beyond such responses of ecosystem attributes in drylands, and focus on emergent mechanisms of ecosystem functioning in historically non-water-limited biomes, many of which are increasingly exposed to rising temperatures, higher evaporative demand, and increasing frequency, duration and intensity of drought events and heatwaves. Notably, activation of most dryland mechanisms in non-dryland regions does not require their transformation into drylands (although such trajectories have been projected for several regions by some[2,26], but not all studies[27]). With this Perspective, we aim to provoke the scientific community to consider the unprecedented changes in ecosystem functioning that might occur as dryland mechanisms emerge elsewhere, to more accurately predict ecosystem responses to climate change.

Dryland mechanisms and evidence in non-water-limited biomes

On the basis of extensive literature reviews, we have selected 12 mechanisms affecting numerous ecosystem processes in dryland vegetation and soils from patch-to-landscape scales (Table 1). These mechanisms are controlled by microclimatic drivers, such as intense solar radiation, high surface temperatures, large contributions of non-rainfall water sources to moisture availability, rain pulses and

Table 1 | Selected mechanisms of ecosystem functioning currently operating primarily in drylands (dryland mechanisms), but projected to emerge in various other regions

Dryland mechanism	Precondition (P), driver (D), modulator (M)	Immediate consequences	Affected functions	Reports outside drylands	Likelihood	Impor-tance	Direction	Metrics for monitoring
Patch-to-mosaic scales, fast-responding								
Drying-wetting cycles	P: soil drought D: rain pulse M: soil texture, vegetation density	Ecological pulse responses to sudden soil and plant rehydration	Plant production, plant/microbe/animal activity, OM decay, nutrient cycling, trace gas emission	Temperate, boreal-transition; forest, grassland, wetland	•••	•••	↓	Organism activity, soil trace gas emissions (for example CO_2, N_2O, CH_4)
Hydraulic redistribution	D: soil water potential gradient M: rooting depth (vegetation type and density)	Transient soil rehydration	Plant production, nutrient uptake, OM decay, carbon cycle, water use, species composition	Temperate, tropical; natural, agriculture; regions with dry periods	•••	•••	↓	Reverse sap flow in roots, nocturnal increases in soil moisture
Humidity-enhanced biotic activity	P: drought D: fog, dew, water vapour (non-rainfall water)	Increased soil, litter and plant moisture	Plant activity, microbial degradation of OM, water use	Temperate; salt marsh, wetland, grassland	•••	•••	↓	CO_2 emission (litter/topsoil OM; dark), RH, T_a
Soil hydrophobicity	D: drought, heat M: hydrophobic soil organic compounds	Low soil moisture	Plant production, root water access, OM decay, soil erosion, plant mortality	Temperate, tropical; agriculture; burnt areas	•••	•••	↑	Depth profile of soil moisture, rainfall
Photochemical degradation	D: solar radiation M: vegetation cover	Increased energy uptake by OM	OM decay, trace gas emission, ROS production	Temperate, tropical; grassland, forest, bog	•••	••	↓	OM mass loss, trace gas emission at sun exposure
Thermal degradation	D: heat M: vegetation cover	Increased energy uptake by OM	OM decay, trace gas emission	No known reports	••	••	↓	Trace gas emission (litter/topsoil OM; dark); T_s
Soil-litter mixing	P: vegetation gap D: runoff, wind M: dry or disturbed soil, lowered soil stability	Buffering of litter moisture depletion, decreased light exposure	Microbial OM degradation, photochemical degradation	No known reports	••	••	↓	Litter mass loss, litter ash content
Mosaic-to-landscape scales, slow-responding								
Biological soil crust formation	P: increased aridity, vegetation gaps D: non-rainfall water availability M: soil properties, land use	Soil surface colonization by microbes/microphytes	Plant production, water flow, carbon and nutrient cycling, energy budget, soil stabilization	Temperate, subtropical; dry sites	••	•••	↓	Presence of groups of soil crust organisms
Self-organization of vegetation patchiness	P: increased aridity D: lateral water redistribution M: plant growth, water infiltration	Vegetation patchiness, bare-soil gaps	Plant production, water and nutrient budgets	No cases caused by drought	•	•••	↑↓	Vegetation cover and continuity
Wind- and water-driven horizontal resource redistribution	P: increased aridity, vegetation gaps D: water, wind	Concentration of resources	Water, carbon and nutrient budgets, vegetation development	Tundra	••	•••	↑	Aboveground water flow, wind speed
Decoupling of soil biogeochemical cycles	P: increased aridity D: element input and loss, element cycling	Reduction in soil OM and/or nitrogen, increase in phosphorus	Plant production, respiration, OM decay	Global	•	••	↑	Total soil nitrogen and phosphorus, soil organic carbon
Canopy convector effect	P: low aerodynamic resistance to heat transfer D: increased aridity M: sparse vegetation cover	Lower surface temperature	Energy budget, plant production, boundary layer dynamics, secondary circulations	Temperate	•	•••	↓	Sensible heat flux

Likelihood of mechanisms emerging in non-dryland regions was estimated on the basis of the breadth of reports in these regions, the number of preconditions, drivers and modulators, and known activation thresholds (Supplementary Table 2). Importance signifies the potential influence of dryland mechanisms on ecosystem functioning outside drylands, based on the scope of affected functions, and reports in non-dryland regions. Direction means amplification (↑) or buffering (↓) of other impacts of climate change by the mechanisms. Metrics to monitor dryland mechanisms refer to direct and feasible measures of the operation of the mechanism. Spatial scales: patch (relatively homogeneous area of <1–10 m² covered by vegetation/rock/soil, experiencing distinct microclimatic conditions), mosaic (area of <0.01–1 km² containing several patches) and landscape (area of >1 km² containing several mosaics)²⁸; temporal scales: fast (weeks to years), slow (decades). 'Moisture' is used as a general term for available water. ● low, ●● intermediate, ●●● high. OM, organic matter (soil, plant litter); RH, relative air humidity; ROS, reactive oxygen species; T_a, air temperature; T_s, soil temperature.

steep water potential gradients. While the mechanisms are concentrated in drylands, some also occur outside drylands (Fig. 1a) where they primarily operate at xeric sites (low soil water buffering against short-term droughts) or in regions with a distinct dry season. However, for most mechanisms we have very limited knowledge on the extent of their past emergence outside drylands. We use the term emergence here in its broad sense, encompassing both the activation of a mechanism and the shift from a marginal to a substantial contribution to an ecosystem process.

We organize the dryland mechanisms into those that are fast-responding and active on relatively small patch-to-mosaic scales, and those that are slow-responding and active on relatively large mosaic-to-landscape scales (see definitions in Table 1). Each of the 12 mechanisms is summarized by answering the following questions: (1) What processes define the mechanism and under which conditions is the mechanism activated? (2) For which biomes outside drylands is there evidence for the operation of the mechanism? (3) What is the potential importance of the mechanism, that is, what would the mechanism imply for the functioning of historically non-water-limited ecosystems? (4) Is the operation of the mechanism amplifying or buffering other climate change impacts on ecosystem functioning?

A more in-depth description of each mechanism, including examples of interactions among mechanisms, is found in Supplementary Information ('Synopsis of dryland mechanisms of ecosystem functioning'). A comprehensive review of the dryland mechanisms is beyond the scope of this Perspective. Mechanisms other than the ones described here might also qualify as dryland mechanisms[28,29], although we sought to include as broad as possible a range of mechanisms predominantly active in drylands.

Fast-responding mechanisms at the patch-to-mosaic scales

Drying-wetting cycles. Drying of the topsoil facilitates the generation of drying-wetting cycles by discrete rainfall events (rain pulses) interspersed between dry periods, thus initiating ecological pulse responses (Supplementary Table 1). Small, medium and large rain pulses activate metabolism of soil microbial and biological soil crust organisms (see below), plants and soil invertebrates, respectively[30–32]. Little empirical evidence of ecological pulse responses is available for temperate and boreal-transition forests, temperate grasslands (see example in Supplementary Fig. 2) and wetlands[33–37], as non-drylands are historically less adapted to respond to rain pulses[38]. With projected increases in drought severity and duration, often combined with higher rainfall intensity, in many regions globally[1], ecological pulse responses to drying-wetting cycles are expected to become important for ecosystem functioning in non-dryland biomes. Drying-wetting cycles are expected to activate soil organisms and plants, increase resource supply to soil communities and vegetation, and enhance biotic and abiotic trace gas fluxes[30,39,40], thus partly buffering other drought effects on ecosystem functioning (Table 1).

Hydraulic redistribution. Hydraulic redistribution is the passive movement of soil water from moist to dry soil layers via the plant root system and fungal hyphae[41,42]. This mechanism requires that plant canopies do not compete for water with the rhizosphere of dry soil layers, limiting hydraulic redistribution to periods when canopy conductance is at or near zero, for example, at night. Hydraulic redistribution has first been described in drylands[43,44], but has since been reported across a broad range of plant taxa (from old-growth conifers to C_3 grasses) and ecosystems (for example, tropical and temperate forests)[41,42,45], which are mostly characterized by low soil water holding capacities (for example, well-drained sandy soils) or the presence of a dry season[46–49]. Hydraulic redistribution outside drylands has also been artificially induced by experimental rainfall exclusion[50]. Hydraulic redistribution increases plant gas exchange

and production by facilitating nutrient uptake in the relatively fertile topsoil, extending fine root lifespan and maintaining xylem hydraulic conductance[41,42,51]. An increased influence of hydraulic redistribution on ecosystem water balance could occur directly via increases in soil water potential gradients within the rooting profile, or indirectly over time via increased rooting depths[52] or decreased vulnerability to xylem cavitation[53]. Thus, hydraulic redistribution partly buffers deleterious effects of drought on plants and ecosystems.

Humidity-enhanced biotic activity. Humidity-enhanced biotic activity is initiated when living organisms, dead organic materials and surface soils absorb moisture from non-rainfall atmospheric water sources, such as dew and fog (Supplementary Table 1), during intervals between rainfall events. Non-rainfall moisture can be an important water source for plants, biological soil crusts and animals in drylands[54,55]. Furthermore, dry soil and plant litter adsorb dew and water vapour during periods of high humidity[56–58], thus enabling humidity-enhanced microbial degradation of organic materials leading to their decay[59,60]. Outside drylands, foliar and/or root uptake of moisture from dew and fog during dry periods is an important water source for trees, epiphytes and understory plants in tropical montane cloud and lowland forests[61–63]. Decomposition of dead plant material by humidity-enhanced microbial degradation has been reported in a temperate grassland, salt marsh and wetland[64–66]. With increasing heat and dryness, biotic activity enhanced by non-rainfall water is projected to gain importance for plant water relations and biogeochemical cycling in many ecosystems, as exemplified for the decay of the surface-litter layer in a temperate forest (Box 1). Non-rainfall water may partly buffer against desiccation, thus maintaining ecosystem functions and counteracting climate drying effects.

Soil hydrophobicity. Dryness and heat directly increase soil hydrophobicity (soil water repellency), which is caused by organic substances with low surface free energy[67,68]. Soil hydrophobicity reduces infiltration rates into the topsoil and creates preferential flow paths of water in the subsoil. Soil hydrophobicity further increases with hydrophobic organic compounds derived from microorganisms, aboveground vegetation and roots[68–70]. In temperate and tropical forests, grasslands and agricultural fields, soil hydrophobicity has been recorded primarily on dry sandy soils, in regions with a dry season and following fires[69–75]. Increased frequency and severity of climate extremes (drought, heatwaves) and drying-wetting cycles (see above) are expected to increase the prevalence of hydrophobicity outside drylands[76,77]. As a consequence, hydrophobicity-induced changes in surface moisture will decrease litter decomposition, nitrogen mineralization and plant productivity, and will increase soil erosion, leading to changes in microbial and plant community composition and dynamics[68,77,78]. Soil hydrophobicity is therefore expected to amplify the negative effects of climate change on ecosystem functioning.

Photochemical degradation. Intense solar irradiance induces photochemical degradation (photodegradation) of dead organic material, such as plant litter and surface soil organic matter[79,80,81]. Photodegradation leads to organic matter decomposition, and release of nutrients and trace gases, either directly or indirectly by facilitating microbial degradation in subsequent wet periods[82,83]. Photodegradation of leaf litter and wood outside drylands has been reported in temperate grasslands[84], tropical and temperate forests[85–88], and a temperate bog undergoing peat mining[89]. Higher temperatures and reduced precipitation, particularly at low vegetation cover, may considerably increase the importance of photodegradation in temperate forests (Box 1 and Fig. 2). Highly energetic ultraviolet irradiance is projected to increase in the tropics over the

Box 1 | Illustration of dryland biotic and abiotic decomposition mechanisms in a temperate forest

Simulations of a published, process-based soil model indicate that under the current climate, humidity-enhanced microbial degradation induced by dew contributes 5.5% and photodegradation contributes 7% to annual surface-litter decomposition in a temperate forest with 75% canopy cover (figure in Box 1, c,e). Without canopy cover, the relative effect of photodegradation increases to 25% (figure in Box 1, f). The contribution of humidity-enhanced microbial degradation under the canopy rises significantly ($P \leq 0.05$, Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon test) to 11.5% at a 10% decrease in precipitation and a temperature increase of 4 °C. When we simulated extreme drought and warming, we found a sharp decline in litter decomposition (figure in Box 1, a,b), but remaining decay was largely due to humidity-enhanced microbial degradation under the canopy and to photodegradation in open areas (figure in Box 1, c,f).

Fig. a | Changes in plant litter decomposition and the relative importance of dryland decay mechanisms under simulated precipitation and temperature changes. Simulations were conducted for a humid forest at 75% canopy cover (left panels) and 0% cover (right panels) by applying the model to data from a pine forest in Belgium (for detailed methods, see Supplementary Information, Soil model). **a,b,** Total annual litter decomposition in the top-litter layer. **c,d,** Contribution of humidity-enhanced microbial degradation induced by dew to total annual litter decomposition in the top-litter layer (dew is defined as non-rainfall water source, Supplementary Table 1). **e,f,** Contribution of photochemical degradation induced by solar radiation to total annual litter decomposition in the top-litter layer. Climate simulations include the change in mean annual precipitation amounts and the change in mean annual litter temperature.
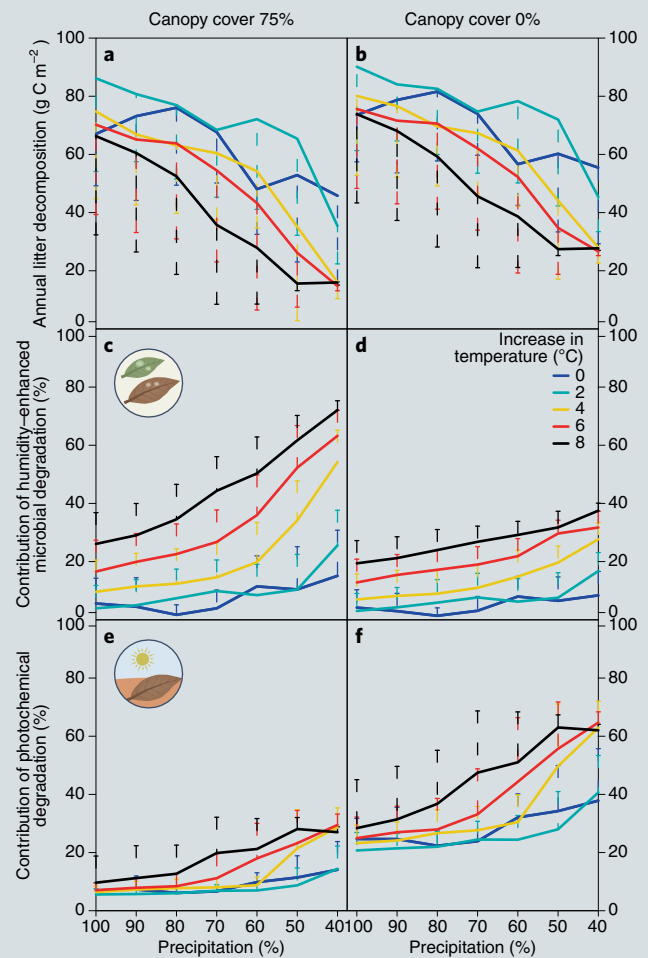
twenty-first century, which will also enhance the importance of photochemical processes[90]. Therefore, photodegradation is expected to become an important global mechanism for organic matter decomposition in the future[91,92], partly buffering climate change-induced slowing down of biotically-driven decomposition of organic matter.

Thermal degradation. Soil surface temperatures are high in many drylands, reaching >70 °C[93], which induces thermal degradation of organic and inorganic materials, and leads to trace gas emissions[93–96]. Thermal degradation is promoted by reduced vegetation cover and associated decreased shading (Fig. 2), and interacts with photochemical degradation (see above)[94,97]. While this mechanism has not been reported so far outside drylands, thermal degradation will probably also become important in regions that currently undergo climate warming and increasing exposure of soil and litter to heating by solar radiation. Thermal degradation partly buffers climate change-induced reductions in biotically-driven processes.

Soil-litter mixing. In dry landscapes characterized by bare-soil patches and discontinuous vegetation cover, erosion by water (runoff) and wind deposits soil particles on plant litter, inducing soil-litter mixing. In addition, aboveground transport of detached litter by runoff and wind results in heterogeneous spatial distribution of plant litter and partial or complete litter burial by soil particles[98,99]. Mixtures of soil and litter can hold moisture over longer periods of time compared with litter alone, and create favourable conditions

for microbial activity and litter decomposition by forming soil films on organic materials that consist of soil particles, fungal hyphae and microbial exudates[100,101]. On the other hand, soil-litter mixing can inhibit photochemical degradation (see above)[101]. Soil-litter mixing has not been described so far outside drylands, but its contribution to decomposition is expected to increase with decreasing precipitation[102] wherever discontinuous vegetation cover leads to soil erosion and mixing with litter[98]. Soil-litter mixing partly buffers drought effects on decomposition by enhancing microbial degradation.

Slow-responding mechanisms at the mosaic-to-landscape scales

Biological soil crusts. Soil surfaces not covered by vascular plants due to abiotic constraints are generally colonized by biological soil crusts (biocrusts), a community of poikilohydric organisms that include cyanobacteria, lichens, algae, bryophytes, bacteria and fungi. These organisms are desiccation tolerant and do not actively regulate their water status[103]. Biocrusts currently cover ~12% of the global land area, mainly in drylands[29,103–107], but can also be found in temperate and subtropical settings where soil moisture and/or fertility limits vascular plants, for example, pine barrens, terminal moraines, short-grass savannas, sand ridges/dunes, dry acidic grasslands and xeric shrublands[108–114]. Biocrust organisms stabilize soils by actively secreting polymeric substances that bind soil particles together. They can also regulate major ecosystem functions, including hydrological processes, carbon and nutrient cycling (especially
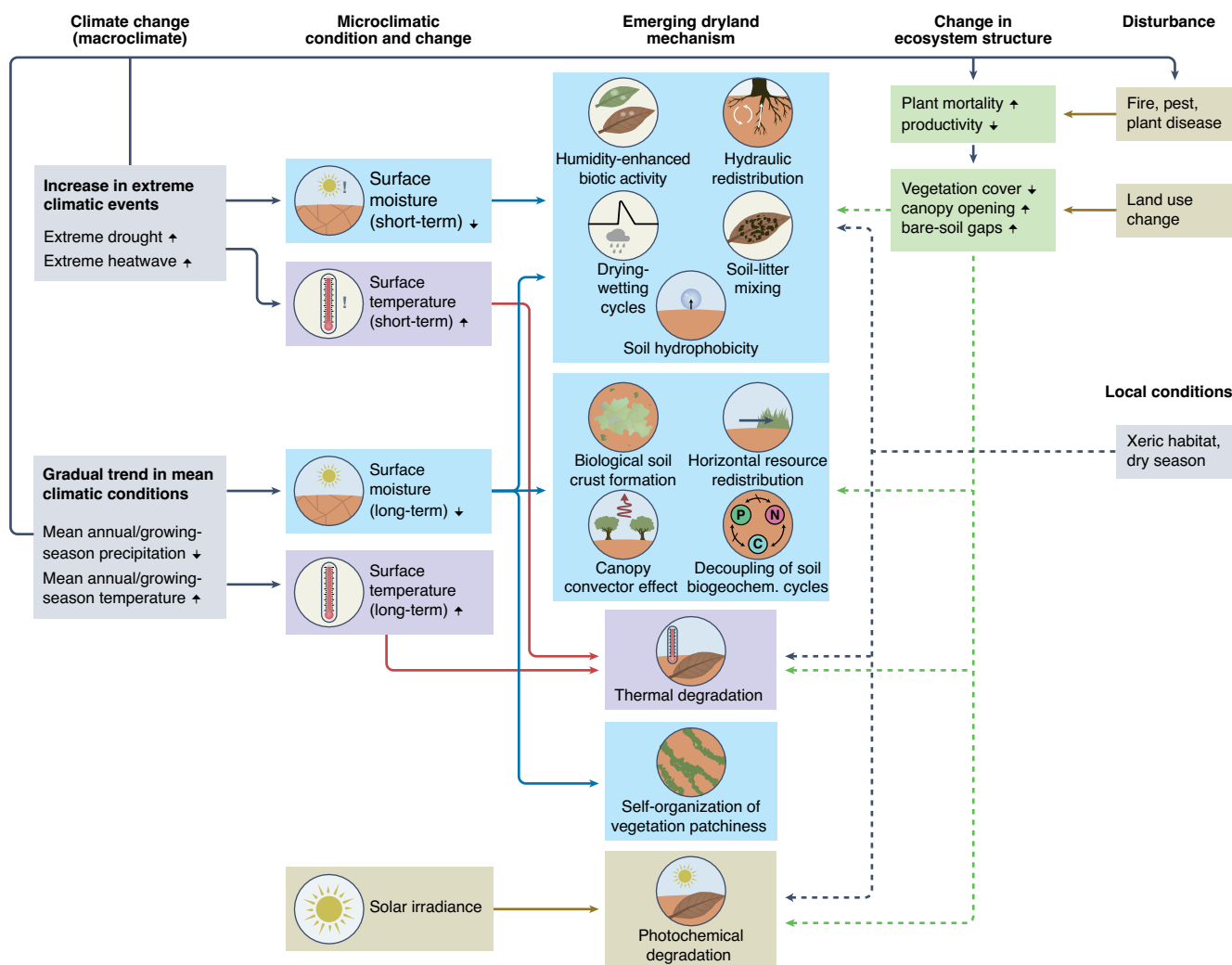
Fig. 2 | Conceptual model for the potential enhancement of dryland mechanisms of ecosystem functioning by climate change in non-dryland regions. 'Surface' (moisture and temperature) is used here as a generic term for the conditions in the soil and near-ground surface. Potential coupling of and interactions among mechanisms were omitted for clarity. Full arrows designate direct impacts; dashed arrows designate indirectly enhancing effects.

through inputs of newly fixed carbon and nitrogen), and ecosystem energy balance[115–119]. Thus, biocrusts may play a critical role in the functioning of non-dryland ecosystems under increased aridity and help buffer the negative effects of climate change.

Self-organization of vegetation patchiness. Self-organization of vegetation patchiness induced by aridity is a dryland mechanism of vegetation pattern formation[120,121] (Box 2). It is generated by a positive feedback between localized vegetation growth and lateral redistribution of water[122], and is modulated by divergent rates of water infiltration[123]. While most prominent in drylands[124], self-organization of vegetation patchiness has also been observed outside drylands in tropical savannas, temperate and boreal peatlands, temperate rainforests and salt and freshwater marshes, and cold temperate ribbon forests[125–131]. In these ecosystems, patch formation is caused by limitations in resources such as nutrients and light, rather than water[130,132]. Self-organization of vegetation patchiness caused by aridity can reduce ecosystem plant biomass (Box 2), and increase water fluxes and nutrient cycling in vegetation patches[133]. For shallow-rooted plant species adapted to mesic conditions, self-organization of vegetation patchiness amplifies degradative climate change effects, while transition to deep-rooted, drought-adapted species buffers against such effects (Box 2)[134].

Wind- and water-driven horizontal resource redistribution. Drylands are typically composed of mosaics of densely vegetated patches interspersed with interpatch areas with sparse vegetation, biological soil crusts (see above) or bare soil. The spatial connectivity of interpatch areas promotes wind- and water-driven horizontal resource redistribution whereby water (both a driver and a resource), soil particles, organic materials, nutrients and plant propagules are transported towards sinks of densely vegetated patches (often termed 'islands of fertility')[135–138]. Outside drylands, horizontal transport of plant litter by wind and snow drift has been observed in the Arctic tundra where it caused nutrient translocation and changed the carbon-neutral system to a carbon source[139]. Wind- and water-driven horizontal redistribution of resources is of potentially high importance under climate change because it increases the spatial heterogeneity of multiple ecosystem functions, including vegetation development, hydrological processes, carbon and nutrient cycling, and animal habitat suitability. Increased spatial heterogeneity and connectivity are expected to amplify adverse climate change impacts through losses of water, organic matter and nutrients, ultimately resulting in reduced productivity and altered species composition[140,141].

Decoupling of soil biogeochemical cycles. The composition of the elements and their quantitative (stoichiometric) relationships

Box 2 | Illustration of self-organization of vegetation patchiness in a drying climate

Simulations using a published model of reductions in long-term annual precipitation (P) showed that spatially uniform cover of vegetation was broken into patches of vegetation interspersed by bare soil, ranging from gaps, to labyrinths and spots (figure in Box 2). The threshold level of P beyond which self-organization of vegetation patchiness occurred was much higher for shallow-rooted plants than for deep-rooted, drought-resistant plants capable of extracting water from deep soil layers. The shallow-rooted plants represent species from mesic ecosystems that are not adapted to drought. Consequently, the threshold of P/potential evapotranspiration (PET) for the emergence of this mechanism in

regions with drought-adapted plant types (Supplementary Table 2) will probably be higher for regions with unadapted plants. The simulations also showed that following further reduction in P, vegetation patterns ultimately collapsed to bare soil, which again occurred at much higher P for shallow- than for deep-rooted plant species. The implications of this mechanism for ecosystem functioning are profound, considering the influence of a small decline in P (for example, from 650 to 600 mm/yr) on total biomass per area, which is much more pronounced in shallow-rooted species (35%) than in deep-rooted species (11%; Supplementary Table 3).
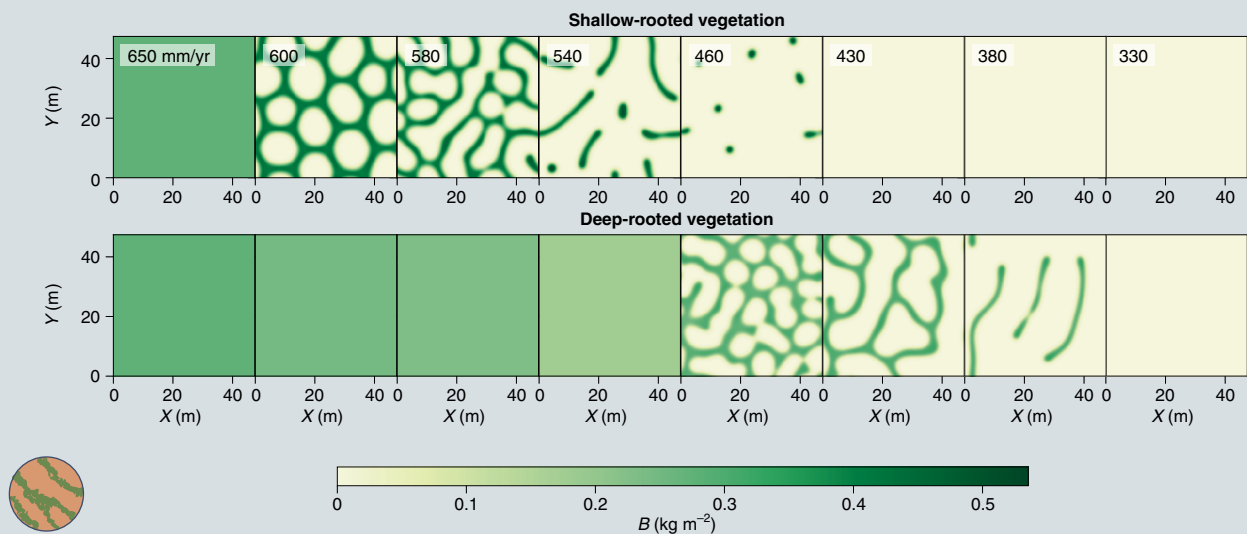

Fig. b | Responses to a gradual precipitation decrease (aridity increase) in shallow-rooted vs deep-rooted plant community types as simulated by a vegetation model (for detailed methods, see Supplementary Information, Vegetation model). The shallow-rooted type is typical of non-dryland species that compete for light and grow fast, while the drought-resistant, deep-rooted type is typical of dryland plants that compete for water at depth. Shown are spatial distributions of biomass density (B) of each vegetation type at decreasing long-term annual precipitation rates (values varying from 650 to 330 mm/yr in the top row also apply to the bottom row) on square domains of 47 m × 47 m, with a spatial extent indicated by Y and X dimensions.

are well conserved in organisms. Thus, biogeochemical cycles regulated by plants, microbes and animals are tightly coupled in terrestrial ecosystems[142]. However, concentrations of soil elements and their stoichiometric relations may change in different directions and magnitudes with increasing aridity, thus causing an imbalance in elemental relationships[143–147]. Such decoupling of soil biogeochemical cycles implies that the use of some element(s) in a system may become independent of the level of other element(s). Decoupling under more arid conditions in drylands results from a more pronounced reduction in soil carbon and nitrogen contents relative to soil phosphorus contents[144–146]. A global analysis of datasets from drylands and non-drylands showed a decrease in the nitrogen:phosphorus ratio in plants under experimental warming and drying, indicating decoupling of these nutrients in plants across a broad climatic range[148]. Soil carbon and/or nitrogen responded differently from soil phosphorus to experimental drying or warming in several non-dryland biomes, such as wetlands, and temperate forests and grasslands[143]. We expect this mechanism to have large future implications for ecosystem functioning, including decreased primary production, decomposition and carbon sequestration, and larger restrictions for biological activity and diversity[142,145,146], thus amplifying adverse climate change effects on ecosystems.

Canopy convector effect. Low water availability in dry forests and woodlands results in reduced tree density and modified canopy structure, commonly increasing surface roughness and decreasing the aerodynamic resistance to heat transfer relative to wetter systems. The combination of low tree density and low aerodynamic resistance provides the physical basis for the canopy convector effect, which increases the efficiency of air-cooling through convective heat flux in dry forests and woodlands, in contrast to water-cooling through evapotranspiration in more moist environments[149]. The convector effect exists to some extent in all forest canopies, and its relevance increases markedly with drying and decreasing canopy density, and it can be critically important during heatwaves[150]. Doubling of convective heat loss was observed in temperate European forests during the heatwave in summer 2003, leading to a much cooler land surface (a reduction in temperature up to 3.5 °C) than measured in adjacent grasslands that relied on evaporative cooling, despite dwindling soil water reserves[151]. Because water scarcity poses a challenge for canopy temperature control, further exacerbated by the low albedo and the high radiation load in many regions[152], the canopy convector effect is of potentially high importance for forest and woodland survival worldwide, thus buffering to some extent the adverse effects of a warmer and drier climate.
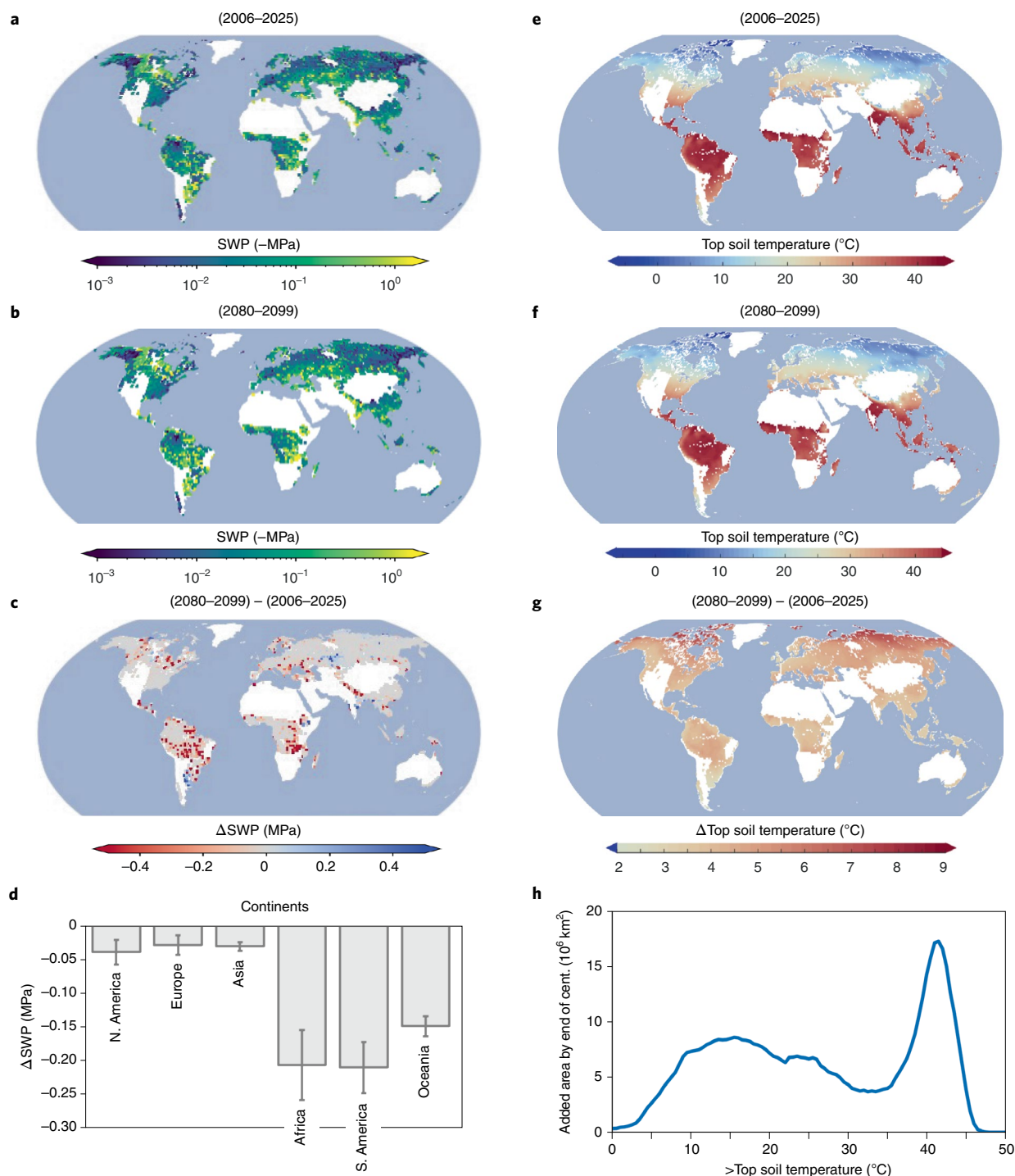
Fig. 3 | a–g, Current and projected changes in soil water potential (SWP) and topsoil temperature in non-dryland (mesic, temperate and cold) regions by the end of the twenty-first century. Shown are projections of annual mean SWP in the top 0.1 m of the soil profile and annual mean temperature at a depth of 0.01–0.05 m (depending on the model). **a,e,** Current conditions. **b,f,** Future conditions. **c,g,** Change from current to future conditions. **d,** Mean ± s.d. continental change in SWP for non-dryland regions. **h,** Added area by the end of the century, with a mean soil temperature of >0–50 °C. The more negative the SWP values, the drier the soil (darker colours in **a** and **b**); negative values illustrated by red colours in **c** indicate soil drying. Non-dryland areas do not include Greenland and Antarctica. For methods, see Supplementary Information, Climate model projections.

Reduced plant cover and the emergence of dryland mechanisms

Dryland mechanisms are activated directly by climate change-induced drying and warming, and indirectly through reduced veg-etation density and opening of canopy gaps. The latter are caused by decreased productivity and increased plant mortality, disturbance and land use change (Fig. 2). Reduced vegetation cover exposes soil and litter surfaces to increased solar irradiance, higher temperatures and soil drying[153], which are main preconditions and drivers of dry-land mechanisms (Table 1). For example, intense solar irradiance

can reach organic materials on the ground through gaps in vegetation, thus triggering photochemical degradation. This and other mechanisms are further enhanced by local conditions, particularly xeric microsites and dry seasons (Fig. 2).

At the global scale, analyses of satellite time series data revealed the trend of a net increase in vegetation density and leaf area during the past decades ('vegetation greening')[154,155] (Fig. 1b). However, in many regions, a 'browning' trend has been observed, and this trend has grown in importance over time[156,157]. Browning trends in mesic, humid and cold regions, including North American boreal forests and South American tropical forests, have been linked to increasing deforestation and fire frequency, and to higher atmospheric evaporative demand[158,159] that lead to plant biomass loss and decreased productivity[160]. In a drying climate, evergreen tree species may be replaced by deciduous species, thus seasonally creating vegetation gaps and sparse canopies[161]. More extreme drought events and heatwaves may override the greening effects of CO_2 and nitrogen fertilization[162], and lead to additional browning, as predicted by models that consider soil moisture deficits[163] (see also Supplementary Fig. 3).

Threshold-based concepts of emerging dryland mechanisms

Current and future climate change could prompt microclimatic drying and heating to an extent that would lead to the emergence of dryland mechanisms of ecosystem functioning in many mesic, humid and cold climatic zones (non-dryland regions). Severe droughts have already been observed in many historically non-water-limited regions in the last 70 years, and more drought events are expected to occur with continued warming[1]. Our climate model projections indicate that topsoil water potential, the soil water metric relevant for the operation of most dryland mechanisms, will decrease in non-dryland regions by the end of this century, i.e. soils will become drier (Fig. 3a–c). The greatest decreases of 0.15–0.20 MPa on average are projected for South America, Africa and Oceania, with considerable regional drying also in North America and Europe (Fig. 3d). Altogether, 74% of the global land area currently not classified as drylands are expected to experience reduced topsoil water potential. A global study projected that soil surface water content will decline on 70% of the total terrestrial area by the end of the century[164]. Additionally, our modelling results suggest that topsoil and surface air will warm globally (Fig. 3e–g and Supplementary Fig. 4). The total non-dryland area with mean topsoil temperature of >40 °C is estimated to increase by about 17 million km² (approximately equivalent to the sum of the total land area of the USA and Brazil) by the end of the century (Fig. 3h).

Extreme drought events and heatwaves leading to short-term soil drying and heating could induce the emergence of fast-responding dryland mechanisms operating on small spatial scales (patch-to-mosaic; Figs. 2 and 3). Mechanisms regulated by one dominant microclimatic driver could emerge once this driver is forced across a threshold. Hydraulic redistribution, and specifically hydraulic lift, is activated below a topsoil water potential threshold, provided that an adequate water potential gradient is created between surface and deeper soil layers (see examples of thresholds in Supplementary Table 2). Soil hydrophobicity is likewise activated below a soil water potential threshold, the exact value of which is modulated by the nature and amount of hydrophobic soil organic compounds. Notably, some of these critical thresholds of soil water potential are projected to be reached in many non-dryland regions by the end of the century (Fig. 3a–c). In addition, extreme heatwaves may induce thermal degradation, resulting in the emission of various trace gases from soils and litter once soil surface temperatures exceed critical values. Such temperature thresholds are expected to be reached in multiple locations in the future (Fig. 3e–g).

Emergence of some mechanisms depends on the combination of at least two factors (for example, a driver and a precondition; Table 1). Drying-wetting cycles induce ecological pulse responses,

which are driven by rain pulses, provided that antecedent soil moisture is below a water potential threshold (Supplementary Table 2). The thresholds for the rain pulses themselves differ substantially among ecological processes and functions, including primary production, microbial respiration and soil invertebrate activity. During drought periods, humidity-enhanced microbial degradation of organic materials, which constitute one aspect of humidity-enhanced biotic activity, is enabled above critical levels of litter moisture as determined by relative air humidity and litter characteristics. Some mechanisms might not have an activation threshold. Soil-litter mixing driven by runoff and wind can be enabled by dryness and/or heat to create preconditions, such as vegetation gaps and bare-soil surfaces. Photochemical degradation is assumed to operate continuously during daytime, even at low light levels and particularly in vegetation gaps (Box 1).

Long-term gradual trends of increasing aridity and warming will lead to continuing declines in soil moisture and increases in soil surface and air temperatures. In addition to the dryland mechanisms operating on the small scales, these trends may promote slow-responding mechanisms on large spatial scales (mosaic-to-landscape; Fig. 2). Self-organization of vegetation patchiness and decoupling of soil biogeochemical cycles increase in importance below critical P/PET values for their preconditions (Supplementary Table 2). These thresholds were assessed in drylands, but could be considerably higher in currently wetter regions due, for example, to vegetation being not adapted to drought (see simulations of shallow-rooted vs deep-rooted vegetation in Box 2).

Some mechanisms, such as wind- and water-driven horizontal resource redistribution and the canopy convector effect, exist to some extent under various conditions, but they are considerably enhanced and become important under increased aridity. For horizontal resource redistribution, water flow length above a critical threshold was linked to low vegetation cover level and led to possibly irreversible degradation of the system because of soil erosion (Supplementary Table 2). However, this example is not applicable to other regions because threshold values change with climate, geomorphology and soil properties[165]. Suitability for biological soil crust formation is favoured by low precipitation amounts during the warmest quarter of the year, low temperature during the driest quarter and high day-night temperature fluctuations, and is moderated by soil properties and land use, with no clear threshold values[107].

For most dryland mechanisms, activation thresholds are not well constrained because they are highly scale-, context- and process-specific[166,167]. Furthermore, dryland mechanisms operate along mostly unknown response curves relative to drivers, modulators and preconditions. For example, in our simulations, the contributions of humidity-enhanced microbial degradation and photochemical degradation to total litter decomposition increase linearly or exponentially with decreasing precipitation, with response trajectories being dependent on the temperature increase (Box 1). Thus, projecting the emergence of a mechanism requires additional information about activation thresholds and response trajectories in relation to the operation of other mechanisms acting on the same process.

Research needs and experimental approaches

We have presented existing empirical and experimental evidence as well as new model projections to illustrate conditions under which dryland mechanisms become relevant in environments historically not limited by water. However, to enhance our understanding of these mechanisms and their operation, we need fundamental knowledge regarding the likelihood of their emergence, the exact context-specific conditions at which they operate, their contribution and importance to ecosystem functioning in historically non-water-limited areas experiencing extreme climatic conditions,

and their direction of action in combination with other mechanisms subjected to climate change.

One way to gain insight into the operation of these mechanisms is through long-term research and monitoring networks[168], which could expand their focus to the mechanisms and metrics listed in Table 1. Coordinated distributed experiments that include a set of common measurements relevant to dryland mechanisms[169] could be used to identify overarching patterns and context-specific variation in mechanisms. Similar findings across regions would suggest a common mechanism driving the response, while differences would imply that local conditions (for example, soil type, species composition, land use history and so on) modify the underlying response[170]. These approaches would enable establishing baseline contributions of dryland mechanisms to ecosystem processes under current climate conditions (see, for example, simulations in Boxes 1 and 2 under present climate), gaining knowledge on fundamental changes in ecosystem functioning during and following extreme drought and heat events.

Research could focus on areas where recent vegetation browning and soil drying have been observed (Fig. 1b and Supplementary Fig. 3), in addition to regions where a drier and hotter climate is expected (Fig. 3 and Supplementary Fig. 4). Xeric sites and regions with a dry season, including temperate dry grasslands, steppes and forests, and tropical dry forests, probably already feature dryland mechanisms today. They can therefore serve as experimental grounds for studies on the future operation of such mechanisms outside drylands. Drought and heat experiments, including those imposing long-term recurrent drought, climatic gradients and environmental conditions beyond the current observational range[167,171–173], can be applied to improve our understanding of the biological processes underlying dryland mechanisms and to identify thresholds beyond which they emerge in various biomes.

Research in this context would greatly profit from synergies between scientists studying non-water-limited ecosystems and those investigating drylands. In addition, research projects involving both experimentalists and modellers would enable an iterative process of hypothesis testing by experiments and models on the influence of dryland mechanisms, which in turn could lead to new hypotheses[174]. Specifically, there is a need for a modelling framework combining dryland and other mechanisms to simulate ecosystem functions under a future climate. Such approaches could create flexible modes that shift between different dominant mechanisms, including dryland mechanisms, depending on current and projected environmental conditions.

Conclusions and broader implications

Climate change may alter not only process rates, but also the mechanisms underlying ecosystem functioning. It is expected that mechanisms observed in drylands will come into play in historically non-water-limited mesic, humid and cold regions. Some fast-responding mechanisms are activated once microclimatic thresholds are crossed, while the emergence of some of the slow-responding mechanisms depends on a combined set of climatic and local conditions. Dryland mechanisms affect fundamental ecosystem processes, including vegetation organization, water and energy flows, carbon and nutrient cycling, primary production and organic matter decomposition. The operation of dryland mechanisms can buffer or amplify other impacts of climate change on ecosystems (Table 1). Moreover, dryland mechanisms could act synergistically, thus increasing their importance and impacts, and may ultimately lead to regime shifts and alternative ecosystem states[175]. Traditional models based on continuous responses would miss such outcomes, unless dryland mechanisms and their interactions are incorporated.

Alterations of the mechanisms underlying ecosystem functioning have immediate consequences for ecosystem services, that is,

nature's contributions to people[176]. Some of the projected changes will occur in regions with large human populations, especially in subtropical and mid-latitudes, and thus will substantially affect the well-being of society in these regions. Research on ecosystem functioning under increasing frequency and severity of droughts and heatwaves will improve our understanding of the underlying emergent processes. The new insights can contribute to advancing the adaptive capacity of social-ecological systems to withstand such climate extremes and their impacts on nature and people[177]. This knowledge can be conveyed to stakeholders to inform and direct environmental policy in its efforts to adapt to consequences of climate change for humans and nature.

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Author contributions

J.M.G. conceptualized this Perspective, informed by discussions with H.J.D.B., A.R., M.J.S., M.B. and H.L.T. M.J.S. produced the NDVI and soil moisture maps. O.A. downloaded and analysed the climate model data. D.H. and Y.M. produced and analysed the soil water potential data. O.A., D.H. and Y.M. generated the temperature and soil water potential panels. G.D. and O.F. (Box 1) and E.M. and O.T. (Box 2) performed model analyses of the dryland mechanisms and produced the Box figures. J.M.G. drafted the manuscript, and H.J.D.B., A.R., M.J.S., O.A., M.B., J.B., G.D., S.C.D., D.G., D.H., K.R.H., L.L., E.M., E.S., H.L.T. and D.Y. contributed discussions to different draft versions. All authors gave their final approval for submission.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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Correspondence should be addressed to José M. Grünzweig.

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